

**HELEN
ELIZABETH
HECKMAN
1898-1975**



**“WONDER
GIRL”
OF
OKLAHOMA**

Helen Heckman won second place in a 1922 national contest of “beauty of face and figure”. She was complemented for “perfect makeup” by contest organizer Carl Easton Williams. Her triumph was doubly interesting because she was totally deaf. Her life story is full of hope and inspiration, for it shows how she overcame the handicap of a physical affliction to become an internationally-known dancer.

Helen Elizabeth Heckman was born in Manito, Illinois in December 1898 and raised in Muskogee, with summers in Ithaca, New York. She was a normal baby until eleven months old, when she suffered an attack of spinal meningitis which caused deafness. In September 1906 at age eight, she was placed in an institution in Switzerland with several hundred other deaf-mutes. Her mother died in June 1908.

When her father married music teacher Vina Janet French two years later, it was planned that Helen should continue in the institutional school, spending her summers at home, but after she came home for her first summer with her new stepmother, Helen was never sent back to the school. Perhaps inspired by the story of Helen Keller, Janet was determined to give Helen a real chance to approximate normal development if it were within her power to do so.

At thirteen, Helen’s only means of communication was by sign language, and by writing, in which her vocabulary was limited to about fifty words. Janet began to teach Helen to understand written words. Due to Janet’s originality, resourcefulness, determination, and perseverance, Helen was taught to talk at the late age of thirteen, by developing her speech muscles and correcting her breathing.

In order to stimulate her interest in her surroundings and develop her sense of responsibility, Janet began teaching Helen simple household tasks. Slowly Helen learned that she had certain duties to perform, names of everything in the house, and to take notice of her surroundings. The same method of instruction was carried to the outdoors – playing in the yard and walking along the street.

In addition, Janet taught Helen music and dance, using bodily movements to establish rhythm. Helen was taught inflection by having her walk up a step when her voice should be raised and stepping back when it should be lowered. Janet placed her hands on Helen’s arms to press upward in varying degrees to suggest variations of musical pitch. Helen soon learned to interpret the meaning of this bodily contact.

Over a decade later, Helen had a pleasant speaking and singing voice, played the piano artistically, and was a successful dancer, although she couldn’t hear the music to which she danced. Using lip-reading and voice modulation, Helen became quite well-known in the deaf world in the 1920s, appearing on the cover of the national magazine *The Silent Worker*. She toured the United States and Europe, often in elaborate costumes, where she performed various thematic dances with her sister Mildred, a violin virtuoso.

Her 1928 book “My Life Transformed” described the amazing things Helen accomplished, with her stepmother’s training. She learned to speak with clearness and to sing with fidelity to tone and in perfect rhythm, and became a wonderful dancer, keeping perfect time to music. Without knowledge of her deafness, one could never discover it from her conversation.

Helen married late in life to Janet’s younger brother Erwin Dingley French in 1956. She died in April 1975 at age 76. The *Art Magazine* of the 1920s praised the impact of Janet’s education that turned Helen into a beautiful, graceful, and accomplished young woman, a veritable “Wonder Girl”, far superior to ordinary girls who possess all of their normal facilities.