

**Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**“The Legacy of Helena’s First Unitarians”**  
**By Joyce Kronholm**  
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Forestvale Cemetery in the Helena Valley is a peaceful place. I enjoy going there, and to one special place in particular. There’s a stone bench where I’ll sit and enjoy the silence. On that bench is carved these words –“All that I know, I know because I have loved.” I’m intrigued by those words. It’s where Adelaide Dean Child is buried along with her family. Adelaide was a member of the First Unitarian Society of Helena.

Forestvale is the final resting place of many of Helena’s founding families and many of them were Unitarians. I want to share with you today the history of our church in Helena and tell you about some of those early Unitarians.

Let me begin with Adelaide. She was a graduate of the University of Wisconsin and she was married to a millionaire and she lived and died here in Helena. I know quite a bit about her and her husband Harry and their family. Harry was very frugal, while Adelaide was generous, always ready to help people with a new roof or furnace or money to go to school.

If you go to the Grandstreet Theatre you’ve seen the Tiffany window there. Adelaide commissioned that window. If you golf, you may have played at the Green Meadow Country Club. Adelaide donated the land for that golf course. It had been part of their Green Meadow Ranch. Have you played tennis at the Civic Center? Adelaide built those courts and those in E. Helena too.

If you were a child during the Depression and lived in the Sixth Ward, a working class side of Helena, on hot summer days you played in the wading pool she had built in Beattie Park. And if you were poor and couldn’t pay your hospital bills, they were paid by the Dr. Maria Dean Foundation, which Adelaide help found and fund. Maria Dean was Adelaide’s sister.

Have you gone to a Unitarian weekend at Camp Child near Elliston? Thank Adelaide. She donated the money to have it built, and it is named after her family, not after a symbolic ‘child.’ When I first moved to Helena I went to the public library across the street from the City County Building. It had been the Unitarian church. Adelaide paid to have it converted to a library when the Unitarian Society donated their church to Helena in 1933.

Helena’s First Unitarian Society was founded early in 1891. Three men -- a lawyer, the Helena high school principal and a realtor -- met to discuss founding a Unitarian society here. They put out the word, and soon they had a group of interested, like-minded people. A St. Paul, MN minister was invited to give three sermons that summer and nearly 150 people showed up for those services. They were able to hire their first minister that year, and that was the beginning of the Unitarians in Helena.

In those early days they held services at the Grand Army of the Republic Hall and the Electric Building which both once stood on Park Avenue, and at the Ming Theatre on Jackson Street, which still stands. You may know it better as the Shrine Consistory Temple.

It was due to mainly to the efforts of Rev. Leslie Willis Sprague, whose ministry of the Unitarian congregation began in 1897, that the funds were raised to build a church.

One member of the board of trustees that approved the building was Henry Sieben. You may recognize his name. He was a founding member of the Unitarian Society, and he became one of the prominent stockmen in Montana. For an uneducated orphan, he did quite well. His ranches north of Helena and near Cascade are still in the Sieben family, managed by his two great-grandsons. His Helena home is still standing at the corner of Power and Harrison Streets.

There's a picture of Henry Sieben that I love. You'll see it downstairs at coffee. It was taken when he was an old man. He's holding a lamb, and his granddaughter Jean is sitting on a blanket beside him. Jean, of course, is now Jean Baucus, the mother of our senior senator, and author of four books about Helena history, and she still lives down the street from her grandfather's house.

In the picture, I think Henry has a kindly face, and from all accounts that's an accurate description. Henry was well-liked. He was known for his honesty and integrity and for being a good man to work for. He had one cause that was especially close to his heart -- that of orphaned children Henry never forgot his own past as an orphan. He and his wife Alberta founded Montana's first orphanage, the Montana Children's Society here in Helena, and Henry funded it for 25 years.

The owner of a ranch that borders the Sieben ranch north of Helena told me this true story. It's an example of Henry's generosity. The prior owner of her ranch fell on hard times and he approached Henry about buying his ranch, which Henry did. Years later, the ranch owner was able to recoup his losses and approached Henry again, this time about buying back his family ranch. Henry sold it back to him for the exact same amount that he paid for it years earlier. He didn't even ask for interest. That's practically unheard of.

By 1901 enough funds were raised to build the church, and that year the cornerstone was laid for the First Unitarian Church. There was a full Masonic ceremony. The Masons were a large and influential fraternal organization, and the majority of Helena's movers and shakers were members. Supreme Court Chief Justice Theodore Brantley led the ceremony. Senator Wilbur Fisk Sanders gave the address. The choir sang "Nearer My God to Thee," "Give Unto the Lord" and "Blessed Are They That Dwell in Thy House." The Unitarian Society had a definite theistic bent then. The following year the congregation moved into its new church, which still stands today at the corner of Park and Lawrence Streets. It's now known as the Grandstreet Theatre.

I want to add that it must have been quite a leap of faith for those early Unitarians to build at that time. The church cost \$20,000. Multiply that by 20 to get the cost in today's dollars. Economic times in Helena were still shaky because of the 1893 Silver Panic and the resulting depression. Entire fortunes had been lost, banks closed, jobs were lost, and Helena began losing population. Virtually everyone suffered financially. So many people left Helena that it wasn't until 1940 that Helena's population again equaled its 1890 population of 14,000.

Our early forefathers and mothers built not only a church, but "for anything that builds up a better life." The church was designed so lectures, club meetings, social events, plays, recitals, and dances could take place there. It was a very busy place.

Even before the church was built, our early Unitarians had a lot going on. Sunday evenings there were free lectures open to everyone. There were topics such as Darwin

and Evolution, Who Wrote the Bible, and the Development of Religions in India. There was a sociology club that studied church and social problems.

The Unity Club met twice a month to study the men who made the nation, giving special attention to the religious and cultural interests of the nation's builders. There was a Bible study group, a travel club that studied foreign countries, and a philosophy group that met once a week. All were attended by Unitarians and non Unitarians alike.

Church services were held at 11 am. Here's one month's sermons: Bible Worship—the Modern Survival of Idolatry, The New Universe –Reducing Religion to its Lowest Terms. I'd like to have heard that one. And a three sermon course on Life's Problems: Suffering, Crime, and Heredity.

Sermons were given by Unitarian ministers, of course, but also by guest speakers. On more than one occasion Charles Elliot, the President of Harvard University and a Unitarian, gave the sermon. So did Rabbi Meilziner of Temple Emmanuel, the synogauge in Helena.

There were liberal Jews who were members of the Unitarian Society. Herman Solomon Hepner was one. Sol served in the legislature and as an attorney for the city and county. His wife Josephine Isreal was not a member, but she occasionally served as a reader for services. She even joined Sol acting in a play sponsored by the Unitarian women to raise funds for the church. Both were well known in Helena for their civic involvement. Sol with the Masons, the YMCA and the Red Cross. Josephine served on the board of the Montana Children's Home and Hospital for 61 years and was instrumental in the establishment of Shodair Hospital for Crippled Children. She and Sol are buried together at the Home of Peace Cemetery next to Capital High School.

There was an active and well attended Sunday school of 75 children. Here are three lessons taught in Rev. Sprague's class: The Ascetic Spirit, Constantine the Great, and the Final Review of the Life of Jesus. Challenging topics!

The women had a sewing group, just as we have a knitting group. There was the Young Women's League. It founded the first free kindergarten in Helena and most likely the first one in Montana.

There was a Women's Alliance that raised money to furnish the church and for charitable causes. One of the members was Elizabeth Fisk. She and her husband came to Helena in 1867 where he would become editor of the Helena Herald for 35 years. Along with being the mother of six children, she devoted her time to church and civic improvement. . She started a private school in Helena before there was a public one. She was a diligent and faithful worker for the Associated Charities of Helena and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. She even lobbied the territorial legislature on issues important to women and families.

What I think is so very special about Elizabeth is that much of what we know about early day Helena is due to her. Over the years she wrote hundreds of letters to her family in the East detailing Helena life, and her thoughts and feelings about being a mother and a woman at that time in history. You can read her letters today, because they were saved by her family and donated to the Montana Historical Society.

By the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century 200 plus people were attending the Unitarian Church. By the second decade, however, membership began to fall. It was a combination of things. There was a high turnover of ministers and frequently no minister

at all. There were conflicts about the purpose of the society and the qualities desired in a minister.

In 1913 when Helena was again without a minister, one of the trustees stated that the board desired no smokers or socialists. You'll recall that was the time of the Wobbly movement in Montana. One departing minister indicated a rift between the theistic and non-theistic members. Financial discouragement was a major concern.

The 1920s brought more hard times with drought. By the stock market crash the membership was less than 60. In 1933 the few remaining members voted to donate their church to the city of Helena to be used as a library, and the Unitarian church ceased to exist in Helena. By the mid 1930s all the Unitarian congregations in Montana were gone.

The 1950s brought a renewed interest in Unitarianism and several fellowships were formed in Montana. Helena's in 1963 but it dissolved three years later. Our present fellowship was founded in 1983. Today Lowell and Ruth Luke are our longest members having joined the fellowship in 1983.

A circuit riding ministry for three years in the 1980s was one attempt of the fellowships to have a minister. Bill Elliott, Jeanne's husband, who was a founder of this fellowship as well as the one in Kalispell, was active in this project. Rev. Mary Scriver, the first Unitarian minister to be ordained in Montana, was the minister, and she split her time between Helena, Great Falls, Bozeman, and Missoula. Mary is now retired and living in Montana although she no longer preaches.

Today we have five fellowships in Montana: Bozeman, Missoula, Billings, and Kalispell all have part time ministers. Our Helena fellowship is lay-led and the smallest of the five.

Next year we celebrate our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Helena. While our fellowship is not the same church that existed a century ago, those early day Unitarian pioneers set a high standard for us to match – but not an impossible one.

Today, I look out on this congregation and I see the faces of people who have the same commitment to our fellowship, and to our community as that of those first Unitarians. A hundred years from now, perhaps Helena's Unitarian Universalists will look back at our efforts and our accomplishments. And I hope and believe that they will consider what we have done to be a legacy that we have left for them.