

BIOGRAPHY OF AN INDIAN LATTER-DAY SAINT WOMAN

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Me and Mine: The Life Story of Helen Sekaquaptewa, as told to Louise Udall. Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1969. 262 pp. \$3.95.

Me and Mine ranks with the finest autobiographical accounts of Latter-day Saint women. Informative, interesting, and written simply but with a sense of drama, it is a fascinating book. Louise Udall, mother of Stewart Morris, explains in the Preface:

My friendship with Helen began when she was living in Phoenix, keeping a home for her children who were attending high school and college. Once every week she rode with me out southwest of Phoenix to the Maricopa Reservation where we spent the afternoon holding Relief Society meetings . . . with the Maricopa Indians. As we traveled we visited.

The many things she told me about her life prompted me to say, "You should write the story of your life for your children and grandchildren."

Her answer was, "I have thought of doing it, but didn't think I was capable."

I started writing the events as she told them. I visited her at the Ranch for weeks at a time, and the story grew and grew.

The Trader at Oraibi asked, "What is Mrs. Udall writing? I know she is writing something."

Helen replied, "I am talking. She is writing."

Helen was born in 1898 in Oraibi, a Hopi village, continuously inhabited for more than six hundred years. The early part of Helen's life was marked by conflict between two factions in the community — Hostiles or traditionalists, who opposed adaptation to the white man's way, and Friendlies or liberals, who favored such adaptation. Helen's parents were Hostiles, and one of the most fascinating parts of *Me and Mine* explains in charming detail the Hopi way of life and the imaginative ways in which the Hostiles sought to preserve it. Life revolved around the elemental provision of food and water. Oraibi was built at the end of a mesa, accessible by only one or two narrow trails, in order to provide the Hopis with protection from other tribes. But the only supply of water, except for snow and infrequent rainshowers, was a well about a mile away. It was the responsibility of the women to transport water from the well to the homes. Helen tells how they built and kept their homes, how they obtained and prepared their food (their "piki" sounds like a tasty delicacy), how they made their clothing, the trade and barter, the ceremonial festivals, and the inculcation of attitudes toward life and others. One of the traditional ceremonies — something like a baptism — took place when the children were about seven years old and proved to be quite an ordeal for Helen. Helen's story of the efforts of the family to hide her from the police and from school officials in order to keep her from going to the dreaded white man's school at the age of six is both entertaining and sad.

When Helen was seven years old, in September 1906, the long-standing feud between the Hostiles and Friendlies reached a climax. Rather than

battle it out in civil war, the two Hopi factions agreed that whichever side could push the other across a line would win the village. The Hostiles lost and thus were expelled from their ancestral home. They camped, Navajo style, near a spring called Hotevilla. All the 82 children who were of school age were forcibly taken to a government boarding school in Keams Canyon. The fathers who would not promise to support the government in this endeavor (72 in all, including Helen's father) were sent to prison. With only a handful of men, women, and little children, the exiled community barely survived hunger and exposure.

At the school Helen was one of the youngest children and suffered, not only because of the white attempts to "make her over," but also because the older Indian children took her food and excluded her from play. Because they knew her parents would seek to prevent her from coming back, white officials kept her at the school for four years. During all of these years, she was able to see her mother only twice. Nevertheless, Helen came to appreciate the school and what they tried to teach, and she liked the clothing and health habits. She worked hard and studied hard. Because of the misery and trauma of this experience Helen vowed never to be unkind to others, and to help others when she could.

Having become accustomed to the white man's life-style, Helen was uncomfortable when she returned home to learn what every Hopi girl should learn from her mother. Not until then did she realize how well she had been cared for. She returned to the Keam's school and finished all the grades. After a brief period at her village, she made up her mind to finish her education, and left without her parents' consent to attend a high school in Phoenix. There she supported herself by doing laundry work, sewing, and taking care of white people's homes. There she met Emory, also from a family of Hostiles, whose personal motivations and experiences were similar to hers. She had always considered herself an ugly duckling, and when this most responsible and sought-after young man started to court her, she felt like she had "turned into a swan."

After finishing high school she returned home, having been away for thirteen years. She would not wear the Hopi clothes her brothers had made for her, and instead gave them to her sister. During her first year home her mother and one of her brothers died during the flu epidemic. By Hopi custom Helen should have become the "mother" of the home, but her married sister, Verlie, still a Hostile, moved in and took over. Verlie made Helen's life miserable. When Emory realized Helen's situation, he proposed that they marry. Enmeshed in two cultures, they underwent two marriages — a traditional Hopi wedding and a licensed Christian marriage by a Mennonite missionary.

Helen and Emory went to Idaho for a year, but had most of their food production ruined during the long winter. They worked hard, however, and managed to accumulate enough to pay their fare back to Hotevilla. There they made their permanent home. Gradually building a bridge between Hopi and white culture, Emory has become a community leader and tribal judge. In many ways Helen and Emory have tried to quiet prejudice, set up programs for the good of all concerned, and convert enemies into friends.

The first child of Helen and Emory, named Joy, died of dysentery; a

baby son also died from injuries received in a fall. Eventually, however, Helen bore ten children and reared two foster children. Several of her children have attended Brigham Young University.

Helen's father had told her the traditional history of the Hopis, and this recitation included a prophecy that the true religion would some day be given to the Hopi people. When Helen first read the Book of Mormon it all sounded like the handed-down history and the fulfillment of the prophecy. In 1950, when her son Abbott was in the hospital afflicted with acute arthritis, he met Mormon Elders. The next year Emory, Helen, and Abbott were taught the Gospel. Helen was converted at once, became active in Relief Society, and became almost a legend among Latter-day Saints because of her goodness to neighbors and missionaries. Says Helen:

All my life I have liked to work, and I have accomplished a lot in my lifetime, raising food, making clothes for the children, nearly everything they had at first, and all the other tasks that go into the making of a home. . . . When I think upon my children and the kind of people they are, a feeling of joy and pride fills my heart, and I say to myself, "I have had a good life."

Let no one dismiss
Mormon autobiography
as an inferior
literary form; in
the end it may
outweigh in value all
the rest.

DALE MORGAN

Helen's father remained a Hostile, but before his death he told her: "You are a good daughter. You have good children. You raise a lot of food and take care of it and feed us good and never waste a thing. . . . I marvel at the way you stood up against people, and we have all lived better because of it."

By trial and error Helen and Emory have appropriated the best from the Hopi and white man's cultures and fashioned a practical, meaningful, and wholesome life for themselves and their children. Mrs. Udall concludes:

Helen always sings hymns softly as she works in the kitchen, even toward evening after a sixteen-hour day. Emory sits quietly waiting for the meal to be served; he also sings to himself — Hopi songs. The tone of voice used in their conversation with each other and the expression of their faces is beautiful to behold. They are at peace with each other and the world.