

Faced Toward the Future

May 9, 2022
Kansas City, Missouri

Bear has been looking forward to this day for a very long time. We spent May 9 in Kansas City, walking in the footsteps of her much-loved grandmother, Helen.



Helen Elizabeth Shepherd (nee Banks).
December 1, 1899 - June 1, 1986.
Born in Newton, Kansas to John and Mary Banks.
Siblings; Vera, Esther, Harold, *Helen*, and Arthur.

Helen (Banks) Shepherd (21), pictured at a Consul, Saskatchewan service station in about 1921.

In 1967, when Grandma Helen was 67, she wrote a letter to her family recording her life story. Bear is fortunate to have a copy. Today, we extracted some of Helen's words from the letter, visited the places she mentions from her youth, took photos of what remains, and recorded thoughts and feelings in remembrance of Helen.

Excerpts from Helen Shepherd's Letter to the Family - 1967

"When I was a child, my family used to tease me and claim it couldn't be when I said I could remember things that happened when I was quite small.... I was not yet two years old when we moved from Newton Kansas, where I was born, but I do remember some things that happened in our home there."

Newton, Kansas
- circa 1899





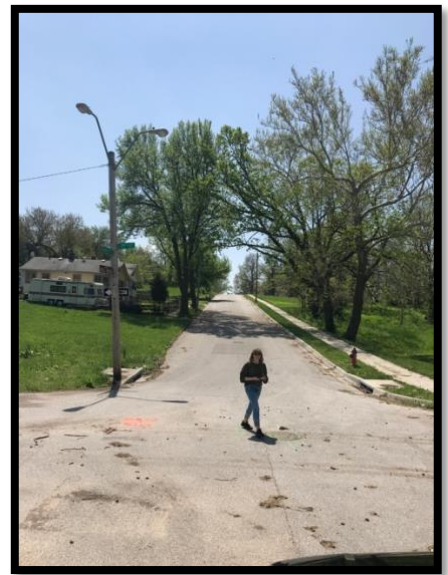
“My father was a telegraph operator with Western Union...”

Colourized photo of Western Union Telegraph Company office in Kansas City – circa 1905

“We lived in various homes over the years in Kansas City, and each one in sequence holds special memories”.

Helen lived in two different houses on Norton Street between 1903 and 1905. Without the benefit of street numbers, we only had Helen’s description below to guide us. We think this is the area where the houses were located.

“... long sloping street with a streetcar line at the bottom and we had a good view down the sidewalk from the dining room window.”



“Harold started to school here and on his first day became lost on the way home. Either Vera or Esther was to have met him at the school, but something happened. He started out alone, ending up as a lost child at the police station. I can still see him walking triumphantly home up the long street beside my father with a smile on his tear-streaked face and carrying a small drum which the men at the station had given him”.

Kansas City Police Station #6

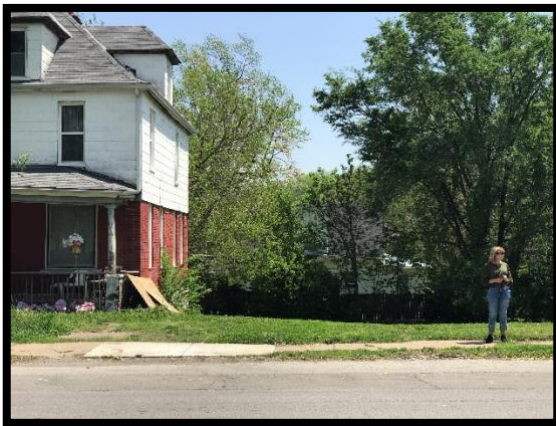
When Helen was about 7 the family moved to a home at 1014 Olive Street.

“...it was a two and a half story flat, with a semi-basement where we had the kitchen and dining room and furnace and coal rooms. A long flight of stairs led up to the main floor and another long flight up to the third floor where the bathroom was situated (and the roomers lived).”

Helen spent her eighth to tenth birthdays on Olive Street. The house is gone, except for the memories.



Helen’s father developed a drinking problem while the family lived in Kansas City. Helen and the two youngest children were sent to live with an aunt and uncle in Wellington, Kansas for three weeks, while John and Mary Banks sorted out marital differences.



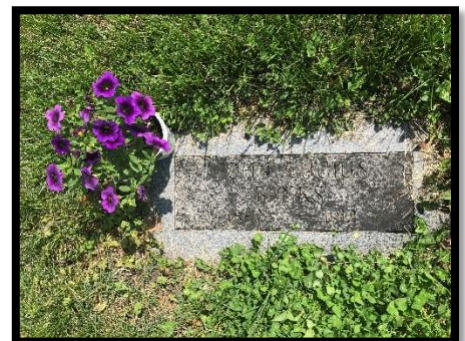
“When we returned to Kansas City changes had been made, for mother and Vera were both working and father was to be home less and less until there was a final break and he only looked us up at widely spaced intervals”.

Helen’s mother and the two eldest children worked, and the family took in boarders to get by.

The family lived at 2403 Indiana Avenue by this time. Again, the house is gone but that didn’t stop Bear from taking a close look.

“My father was persuaded to tell us a story, which he was very good at, with bear stories his specialty. Neighbourhood children as well as our family gathered round him in our living room, and everyone was tense with interest and excitement. I don’t remember the story, or stories, but I’m sure my father enjoyed himself immensely, as everyone else did. It was a fairly long session it is one of the happiest memories I have of my father.”

Helen’s father died Sept 15, 1912, of pneumonia in a rooming house in the downtown area. Helen was 12.



John Culver Banks 1862 - 1912

Helen dropped out of high school two years after her father died.

“I had completed two years of high school but didn’t want to go back for more for it would have been a strain on the others to put me through”.



“I went to work (at 16) in a tin shop several blocks from home, where I painted large cream cans, and operated crimping and cutting machines to make top stove ovens”.

A metal fabricating shop still stands three blocks from the Banks home on Indiana Avenue.

By a strange twist of fate, Bear and I recently purchased this antique stove-top oven. We use it as a cabinet beside the barbeque. The minute we get home, I am going to check and see where it was manufactured, and dust it for Helen’s fingerprints.



“My first week’s pay (at 75 cents per day) was a thrill for me and when I turned it over to mother it was a proud moment.”



“By then, my hands were a sight, and I remarked that I was ashamed of them and wished I had nice hands like some of my friends. (Mother) took my hands into her own and inspected them carefully. Then said “don’t ever be ashamed of your hands, they are capable and strong and willing... ..and mother DID get me a special lotion for my hands.

Bear, following in Grandma Helen’s foot (and hand) prints.

“The only boyfriend I did regret losing in those years was “Slim” Henderson, who took me to basketball games, etc and we had a really wonderful time together. He was older than the others and I felt a special person when with him, but unfortunately Vera let it slip out one evening that I was only 14. I still see the shocked look on his face to think he had been dating such a young girl.”

“When we moved to our home on Indiana Avenue, we had a different group of friends and a different church. Harold was to join the Navy from here, Vera to marry and move to Canada, and my special friend Art entered the army and was away for two years, while I wore his official engagement ring and wrote him numerous letters. But the relationship was dissolved some time after his return from overseas for he had changed and I had changed, and marriage plans were not desirable”.



“...in the job department after working in an insurance company and a bank, I had worked myself to a one-girl office job and earning above average wages for that time. I was with Mr Kerr for two years when he gave me a month’s vacation with full pay from the middle May 1920”.

Not Helen, but it could be.

Helen’s sister Vera met a man from southwestern Saskatchewan and moved to Canada to marry him. Vera wrote to Helen and encouraged her to come up for a visit and meet the many eligible bachelors.

Helen followed Vera’s advice and went for a visit. She had taken a one month leave but ended up staying for several months. Helen met *“the Shepherd’s of the Hills”*, as Vera called the Shepherd family, who lived at Battle Creek Ranch in Saskatchewan. Helen and Charlie Shepherd became engaged.

“Still... If I had gone back when I was supposed to, I would have had no life in Canada and wouldn’t be sitting here writing this over-long letter, so I’m glad I stayed”.

“When mother and I returned to Kansas City in September I had enough money to stock the basement with coal to last the winter (always a heavy expense) and not much over so I went job hunting and took one out at Montgomery-Ward as I couldn’t honestly try for a better one when leaving so soon”.

“Charlie arrived around the middle of December, and I stayed on with the job another week, so he came out each day and we had lunch together. He felt a bit lost in the big city and was anxious to be married and get back home.”

“Charlie and I married on New Year’s Day in our living room at home, ...”

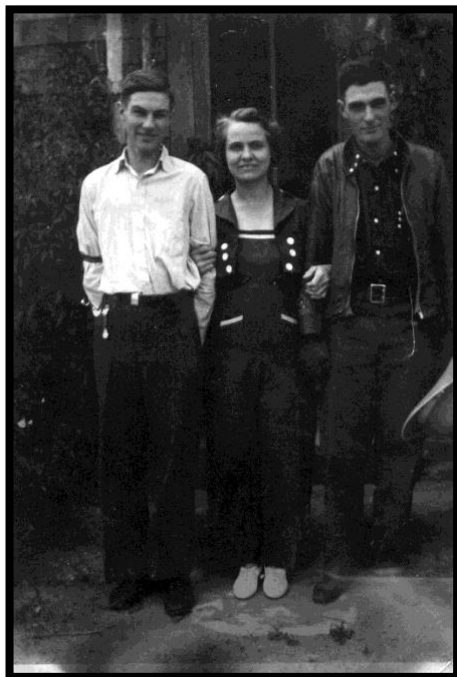
The couple enjoyed a three-day honeymoon at Excelsior Springs. *“... I had been at the springs on other occasions and knew the terrible taste of the water, which people came from near and far and paid money to drink. I had planned to persuade Charlie to try it and watched closely as he took a sip, and his reaction was supremely satisfying. One sip was enough, and the rest was poured down the drain”.*

“Our short honeymoon over my, cedar chest was crated, and other belongings packed into a large, heavy carton for shipment to Canada...”

“I can still see my mother standing on the porch waving as we were driven up the steep street opposite. I watched as long as she was in sight then...”

... faced toward the future”.

Charlie and Helen, happy times at Battle Creek Ranch in about 1922.



Helen with sons Jack and Charlie Jr, as children (below) and young adults (left)



“It was difficult for me to leave my family and home with the knowledge that it would be quite a while before seeing them again, and providential that I could not foresee what the future held for I was not to see Mother or Esther again. Mother was to die of cancer on May 5th and I could not make it back to see her. Time does heal to a certain extent but even now, after almost 50 years, the tears and the choking lump in my throat comes easily when I remember....”



Bear visited Mary and Esther's graves today, on Helen's behalf.

