

Special Edition of the St. Mark's Episcopal Church Newsletter, July 4th, 2014

More information about Deaconesses Katherine Phelps and Helen Hill, as provided by L. Teresa Di Biase, a librarian/historian at the University of Washington, and a member of St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Freeland, WA.

Rural Work in Olympia

From The Deaconess, August, 1936

Deaconess Phelps, after a year of rest and recuperation in the east (and in Caracas!), has returned to the Pacific Coast, driving her car alone across the continent, to take up work in the Diocese of Olympia. She writes from Aberdeen, Washington: "When I drove over the top of the Sierras I felt the thrill of home coming. My heart belongs in California. I know of no other place of such varied and appealing beauty....."

"I came North via the Redwood Highway, another favorite beauty spot, and reached Washington June 24th. After a conference with my new Bishop (Huston), he sent me here."

"Aberdeen is a fairly large lumber center, about 20,000, half way up the coast with no pretense to beauty except in mild weather; warranted never to be hot. I hear it is the rainiest spot in the US, but I don't mind rain. The landscape visible from the roads is largely cutover forest, full of ugly stumps, often blackened by fire. Here and there pioneer settlers have followed in the wake of the lumber men and carved out for themselves little farms where they raise dairy products, peas for the canneries and berries. It looks very 'frontierish', though many of the homes are modern and pretty with flower gardens adding a note of gaiety amidst the ugly stumps. I suppose one here gets used to stumps as some get used to oil wells in the front yard in California. I never do in either case."

"Aberdeen is well churched and St. Andrew's is a parish with which I do not expect to have much to do unless to help start an Auxiliary and interest the women in my work as well as missions in general. The same is the situation in Hoquiam, another lumber town and parish three miles to the west. Each parish has a mission about fifteen miles away (Montesano and Elma) with evening services and no Sunday Schools and not much pastoral visiting. I have begun to visit one of them (Montesano) and found fifteen of our children, most of them attending a good Methodist Sunday School. I think I shall have these children once a week for supplementary teaching. I hope to help them chiefly through their mothers however."

"A county map shows 30 schools outside the towns. These will be my chief concern as my experience in California showed me the desperate need of the rural children and the appreciation of their mothers for all help given. I had a delightful time two days ago at one of these places. There are perhaps thirty children in the two

teacher school. I saw nineteen of them, all uninstructed spiritually and all pleased at the promise of lessons in September....”

“I expect to spend August prospecting through the county and so be ready to start regular teaching in September. To make up for living in so prosaic a place as Aberdeen, my work takes me to such interesting sounding places as Humptulips, Montesano, and Wynoochie Valley. I only regret that Snohomish, Skykomish, and Snoqualmie are out of my district. They sound so fascinating.”

A Setting Apart

From The Deaconess, July, 1937

Deaconess Helen Hill—May 13, 1937, in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York; by the Bishop of New York, acting for Bishop Huston, Olympia.

Having entered the New York Training School in October, 1935, from Massachusetts, Miss Hill was transferred to the Diocese of Olympia, for service in rural missionary work with Deaconess Phelps. She is to take up her new duties on July first, with Montesano, Washington (Carr Apartments) as headquarters. The Setting Apart took place at the Commencement Service of the New York Training School, in St. Ansgarius Chapel of the Cathedral.

More Rural Ministry in Western Washington From The Deaconess, July, 1937

Deaconess Katherine Phelps writes from Montesano, Washington: “You see that I have changed my address once again—bot not entirely because of the more attractive name. Montesano is only ten miles East of Aberdeen, a much smaller place, but the County Seat. We have a mission church here, with an evening service by the Hoquiam rector, fourteen miles away. I have been coming here one afternoon a month for a children’s service, but it was not easy getting acquainted with them from such a distance. My country work can be handled as well from Montesano as from Aberdeen....”

My greatest satisfaction has been in getting a mission church in South Bend, neighboring County Seat, reopened after having been closed and apparently forgotten for years. People were so grateful. I have a children’s service one Sunday afternoon a month, to which many parents, including one father, come regularly. I prepared ten for confirmation by mail for 27 weeks. Now a fine young man, sixty miles away, goes there twice a month. Last week there were nine baptisms and five more soon and fourteen for the next confirmation class, as soon as one of us can get at it. Eighty present last Sunday. Every time some new person from miles away turns up, having just heard there are Episcopal services in the county. In July I hope to spend much time hunting for lost sheep of our own fold in Pacific County. There are probably many. I never saw a whiter field for harvest than this rural Northwest.

Deaconess Phelps Retired

From The Deaconess, June, 1947

Pacific Grove, California—"We leave June 2nd for a two month's motor trip to take in visits in Oregon and Washington and Glacier and Yellowstone Park and perhaps Estes in Colorado. I would rather drive a car than cook any day, so am looking forward to a vacation from housework. Motoring is now the only pleasure Louise (her sister) can enjoy on account of her crutches."

From Slums to Ghost Town--A Long and Varied Career Deaconess Helen Hill

From the New Braunfels Herald, Texas August 18th, 1953

The rancor of fear-ridden Indians in Nevada, illness in the slums of New York, and sub-zero winters in a Wisconsin ghost town were among the challenges of 20 years' service in the Episcopal Church recalled by Deaconess Helen Hill in the comfort of her tidy home in Landa Estates Friday. Her plans altered by an unexpected call to head a retreat house and home for retired deaconesses, the churchwoman will be leaving soon for St. Clair's House, Red Hook, NY.

Having earned her BA degree this year at Daniel Baker College, Brownwood, she came to visit Mrs. A.K. Metcalfe, former dean of women there and planned to make her home here.

The Deaconess, whose spirited manner belies the number of years in her varied career, was born in Arlington, Mass. Several years a registered nurse and 12 years a professional singer, her early years were spent in and around Boston where she attended Boston University and was soloist with the Handel and Haydn Society. She entered the New York Training School for Deaconesses in middle life and was ordained at the Church of St. John the Divine by Bishop Manning.

Asked "what is a deaconess?", she explained that the Episcopal Church has three orders, bishops, priests, and deacons and deaconesses. A deaconess, whose name derives from the Greek diakonos, meaning servant, makes a vow of service to her church and may not marry. Should she wish to marry she may withdraw from service. Widows are eligible to join the order. She is qualified to perform all services of a priest with the exception of the celebration of communion and the marriage ceremony.

Following services among the sick and shut-ins of New York's slums, and the conduct of a church school by mail in Washington state, Deaconess Hill was assigned to duty at missions in Nevada. It was at battle Mountain, Nev. that the deaconess suddenly lost her hard-won friendship with the local Indians. They began to spit upon her in the street and she was warned not to go about unprotected.

One of them, Charlie, had recently succumbed to pneumonia, and the deaconess had seen to it he had a proper Christian burial on the hillside under the sage. Charlie's ghost committed the indignity of returning, and friendly relations came to

a halt. Up until then Deaconess Hill had the Indians convinced that the White Man's God and Great Spirit were one and the same.

Charlie's friends and relations laid the trouble on the burial service, and to make peace it had to be repeated. The coffin was dug up, bound with huge chains and reassigned to the grave. With the words "ashes to ashes" the pallbearers rolled three tremendous boulders onto the coffin and the job was considered properly done.

The ghost had been conjured up by white children who frightened Charlie's young widow by mimicking his voice and tossing pebbles at her windows at night.

Within a radius of Battle Mountain were four mines, two silver and two turquoise, which the deaconess visited in turn, holding services for the miners as they came up from work. Many times her ancient car broke down on the desert while making the trip and she spent the night where she was. Blankets and a water jug were standard equipment.

In Yarrington, ranching country in Nevada, the mission was at the edge of town, near the dump and the railroad tracks. Coyotes paid their respects each evening, and the first night the deaconess was so startled she nearly yelled in reply. Tramps from a nearby "jungle" often dropped by to "borrow" food.

Sent to Wisconsin to establish a mission in what was once a thriving lumber town, she found two saloons and a school at the crossroads, six families instead of the advertised sixty, and not even a hole in the ground for a mission. In lieu of neighbors, she learned to cultivate cats. During the five long, lonely winters the temperature was usually 30 to 40 degrees below zero. She established the mission and even served the Methodist mission between ministers.

Recruited soldiers from Camp Hunter-Liggett helped her renovate a mission in Jolon, Cal. Four missions in the Conte Costa area of California were organized into a self-supporting parish through her efforts, and she served as counselor for students at Stanford University.

In South Dakota she taught at St. Mary's School for Indian Girls. Established in 1884, the school is the only accredited, private high school for Indian girls in the country. The students, many of the Sioux Nation, still speak the tribal language in their homes.

She looks forward to the challenge of her new duties and is a little amused at having just unpacked all her possessions for the first time in 20 years.