



Helen Schrader ca. 1910

Photo courtesy Local History Room, Saskatoon Public library

HELEN SCHRADER—SASKATOON POET & PHOTOGRAPHER

Brock V. Silversides

Née en 1881, Helen Mallory reçut une éducation générale peu orthodoxe, en musique, dessin, théâtre et littérature; elle écrivit sa thèse de maîtrise sur Henrik Ibsen. En 1907, elle épousa Udo Schrader et quitta son Minnesota natal pour Saskatoon. Poétesse d'un talent incontestable, elle publia régulièrement ses oeuvres dans les magazines pour femmes.

Son intérêt pour la photographie s'accrût après son installation à Sask-

atoon. L'art du portrait la fascinait, mais la nature du sujet est remarquablement variée. Veuve en 1918, cinq enfants et une mère âgée à sa charge, elle dut réduire le temps qu'elle consacrait à la photographie. Elle mourut le 19 mai 1956 à l'âge de 74 ans.

One of early Saskatoon's most creative minds belonged to Helen Schrader, a citizen of that city from 1907 to 1956. She was born Helen Mallory, daughter of Edward T. Mallory and Leonora Vedder, on 4 November 1881 in

Red Wing, Minnesota. She came from an old English family that, many generations before, had produced Sir Thomas Mallory, author of *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

Her father was president of the Red Wing Union Stoneware Company and possessed considerable wealth. The family had numerous maids, which left the family time for genteel pursuits of the mind. Even so, she received a surprisingly unorthodox liberal-arts education which concentrated on music, drawing, painting, theatre, and lit-

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Marching Band at Exhibition ca. 1912

erature. She graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1904 with a master's thesis on the playwright Henrik Ibsen. According to her daughter, Mrs. P. McMeans, Mallory did not know how to cook, clean her house, or do laundry until well into her thirties.

Her creativity was expressed in two modes of thinking — the composing of poetry and the capturing of images on photographic film. She had greater confidence in her poetry, and perhaps it can be said that she was foremost a poet of indubitable talent. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, she contributed regularly to many of the women's magazines that included verse (*Good Housekeeping*, *Delineator*, *McCalls*).

In approximately 1910 she gathered together many of the loose works she had lying around and published them privately in a small booklet entitled *Christmas Morn and Other Verses* by Helen Mallory. It contained sixteen poems on topics ranging from tobogganing to a sonnet on Milton to the legend of the lily. According to her daughter,

she wrote them "... only for her own enjoyment, and it was what probably kept her sane throughout the years."

Considering the variation in subject matter, the collection as a whole succeeds as a unified expression of one woman's inner thoughts of the environment and people who directly affected her life. She was far more than a spectator; rather she observed and pondered deeply. Much of the time that keen observation was turned inward as well.

In one of the shorter poems, her acute awareness of the beauty of a silent winter evening can be sensed:

A Midwinter Madrigal

Crystal stars downdrifting
Fill the silent air
With a shadowy whiteness, far
more fair
Than summer sunshine sifting
Through dark woodland trees,
Trembling in the breath of
perfumed breeze

Dec. 17, 1903

Another work gives us both a hint of her eye for nature and her capacity to feel for another person:

Memories, A Sonnet

As long as misty shadows flee
before
The morning sun, revealing wave
on wave
Of shining grain, a sea of molten
gold;
As long as crimson branches
bending o'er
The placid stream, shall vaunt
their colours brave,
Bedecked for death, like captive
queens of old;
Long as the crescent moon and one
lone star
Shall guard the heavens and cast
their shrouded light
On woodlands filled with mystery
and gloom;
As long as level roads should
stretch out far
And farther, and as long as heavy
night
Shall crush the perfume from her
wayside bloom;
So long thy face shall haunt my
memory,
To bless and cheer me through
life's dreary way.

Oct. 10, 1906

Fortunately she was recognized by the odd fellow-writer as possessing a rare talent. J. MacRorie Hill, editor of *The Torch*, (a short-lived Saskatchewan literary monthly) put one of Schrader's poems on page one of the 1923 Christmas issue. This, appropriately, was "Christmas Morn," the title poem of her self-published collection. He would later write to her: "... I am no end obliged to you for your delightful poem. I was looking for something out of the ordinary for our Christmas number and your kind help is the more appreciated."

She was not solely concerned with profound or deep feelings, though they were important to her mentality. At the same time she had a pronounced streak of impetuosity which would allow her to enjoy, for instance, a spontaneous pony ride across the prairie:

Westward Ho!

Oh give me my swift little mare,
And give me the boundless plain,
And there's not a sorrow or pain,
There's not a grief nor a care,
That will not vanish into the air,
And never come back again.

The skies are as clear and as blue,
My love, as the eyes of you,
The plains are as wide and as
broad and free

As my love for you in the heart of
me.

So away with me o'er the grassy
plain,
Away from the world with its grief
and pain,
With a leap and a bound away!
Light of heart and conscience free,
Never a care in the world have we
We live but for to-day!

Jan. 31, 1906

In the best of her work the wording is sharp and concise; her imagery has a striking clarity. There is no confusion as to what is being described, no profusion of dramatic phrases. It is quickly accessible, much like prose without the filler material. It is evocative in a gentle manner, without the usual overstatement of amateur poets.

Another poem of hers, "The Little Boy Next Door," was included in *The American Album of Poetry*, compiled by Ted Malone in 1938. This project was initiated to gather the finest non-professional verse across the United States. In his introduction, Joseph Auslander (then director of poetry at the Library of Congress) metaphorically spoke of the book's poetry as if it were photography:

... here is a third, and new, kind of poetry book. It is an album. An album is an intimate collection in which each item has some personal association with the owner of the book. The Family Album of Photographs rightfully excludes classic reproductions in order to make room for the blurred and fading daguerreotypes of great-aunts and uncles. ... So in this book you will find scarcely any poems

which have been reproduced in the usual anthologies. ... Here it is, then, an unprofessional Snapshot Album of the Great American Family, casual, quick with life, never touched or prettified by the hand of the studio photographer — as immediate as a newspaper, as important as a parlor or an attic in the memory.

This is an almost exact description of Schrader's photographic work, which has the quality of coming from an album of personal moments in time that she wanted to retain. For her, photography was a natural extension of her need to record her environment. Poetry had its uses, drawing and painting had their strong points, and likewise the photographic image captured things for her in a way that only a camera could. Her finished products may not have been of superior technical quality, but it is her eye for a scene that is out of the ordinary. She made up with originality and a fresh artistic inclination what she lacked in camera and darkroom skills.

Her interest in photography was undoubtedly sparked by her ac-

quaintance with Wellington J. Phillips, a professional studio photographer operating out of Red Wing. Apparently she purchased her first camera, a retractable Kodak (using 10.7 cm x 8 cm glass negatives) at the turn of the century. She photographed extensively on her pre-marriage travels across the United States, documenting people and places. Many of these Edwardian scenes, along with a diary she kept of those years, are held by a granddaughter who is considering combining them and publishing them as a book in the near future.

On 18 August 1907 she married Udo F. Schrader of St. Paul, Minnesota, and in September of that year moved to Saskatoon, where she devoted more time to her photography. This was due to a number of reasons: she was fascinated by the wild and untampered terrain along the Saskatchewan River, and also she was somewhat homesick and wanted to send images of her new home and her family back to her friends. This affinity with nature and the appreciation of its beauty parallels the sensitivity that is in her poetry.

She originally photographed only landscapes and rural scenes, such



Self-portrait ca. 1910



The Spinning Wheel ca. 1908

as the Doukhobor village near Langham, Saskatchewan. Her husband, a real-estate agent and farmer, worked sections of land near Borden, and this provided endless subject matter for his wife's camera.

Slowly she started to work on portraits: farm hands, relatives, and friends, people with whom she felt comfortable. It was in her self-portraits, however, that she was most comfortable, and these are amongst her finest photographs. One reproduced here shows her sitting against a tree, her hair and dress covered with flowers, while the South Saskatchewan flows past behind her. It is reminiscent in spirit of H.L. Hime's masterpiece "Letitia: a Plain-Cree Half Breed," taken near the Red River Colony in September of 1858. The establishment of eye contact with the lens renders the same immediacy as there is in her poetry.

Her other subject matter is most impressive in its variety; it includes family shots, harness racing at the Exhibition, sports meets, parades, swimming holes, neigh-

bours' children, and city views. One other photograph deserves special mention — an exterior shot of her mother at the spinning wheel. The scene is backlit by the afternoon sun, and a soft wind is blurring the leaves on the trees. It is a rustic, almost idealized scene that would be at home in a Currier and Ives book.

Schrader did her own film processing as well as her own printing. A process that appealed very much to her artistic eye was the cyanotype, which used an iron-salts-based emulsion that resulted in a print with monochromatic blue tones. These images were easier to produce than the gelatine prints and were more permanent. One did not need an enlarger or trays of chemicals but could print them with the help of the sun and ordinary water. She owned several cameras, for in her collection of negatives there are glass plates (8.2 cm x 14 cm) and roll-film negatives (5.7 cm x 8.2 cm).

Schrader had a family of five, three girls and two boys, all of whom she was determined to put

through university. This was made more difficult by the death of her husband in 1918; she was in no sense wise in business or money matters.

She had to take the role of father as well as mother. One daughter remembers her doing children's drawings and making up nonsense rhymes one minute, and sternly disciplining a naughty child the next. In addition, her aged and widowed mother was living with her for long periods of time, so it is not surprising that her time for enjoying and recording the nature around her was increasingly curtailed.

Her outside interests included a forty-year membership in the Golden West chapter of the I.O.D.E., the local Council of Women, the University Women's Club, and the Writer's Club. She belonged to a sewing circle, sang in a choral group, and enjoyed the theatre immensely. As well, she taught Sunday school at St. John's Cathedral for twenty-five years and worked for the Red Cross during the two world wars.

Schrader died 19 May 1956 in Saskatoon at the age of 74 and was buried in her family plot at Red Wing.

Both her poetry and her photographs are products of a genuine, sensitive approach to the world around her. Though her education made her more articulate and her finances left her more time to pursue her activities than could other women of the period, she undoubtedly had a creative mind.

Schrader's poems and photographs did not have a noticeable impact on the fledgling Saskatchewan literary or artistic circles, but of course they were never intended to. These are purely personal expressions, about and meant for her, her family, and her friends, with no expectations and no pretensions.

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