



Rescuing the Past

by Clarence D. Stephenson

The death on September 23, 1980, of Frances Strong Helman, one of the founders of the Historical and Genealogical Society of Indiana County, left a very large gap in the continuing work of the Society. Her shoes are indeed hard to fill, but her example is an inspiration to the many volunteers who are carrying on the work to which she was so devoted. She leaves as her permanent memorial a record of forty-two years of labor advancing the cause of the Society.

Probably no one will dispute that she was the leader and chief promoter when the six founding members of the Society gathered in her home at 732 Locust Street, Indiana, to organize the Society on November 11, 1938; or that it is largely due to her persistence, persuasion, leadership, and wheeling and dealing over the years that the Society has developed to its present status. Now, nearly three years after her passing, it is time to make an attempt to evaluate and appreciate her life and accomplishments.

Frances Strong was born April 27, 1903, in Pitcairn, Pennsylvania, a daughter of Thomas Mardis and Jean (Everwine) Strong. Her great-grandfather, James Strong (1765-1837), was a co-founder of Strongstown. Frances was always proud of this fact and did a great deal to organize and promote the Strong Family reunions and the annual Strongstown Homecoming. She was also a descendant of John Lydick (1740-1803), a pioneer settler in Indiana County and Revolutionary soldier who is buried in Memorial Park, Indiana.

In 1922 Frances married Daniel Blaine Helman, an employee of the Indian County Street Railways, and later caretaker of the Oakland Cemetery. Blaine, as he was known, shared his wife's enthusiasm for genealogy and local history and was also one of the founding members of the Society. He served as curator for a number of years and, in connection with his cemetery work, liked to joke that he "had hundreds of people under him." They had three children: Edwin, born and died 1925; Sara Jean, born 1926; and Richard Blaine, born 1928. In 1965 Blaine died.

During the Depression years things were difficult for the Helmans, as well as for many others, but amidst the problems of making a living and raising a family the idea of a genealogical society was carefully nurtured. Sometime during this period Frances did her first genealogical research on her ancestor, John Lydick. Then some distant Strong relatives living in Utah began to correspond with her, seeking information regarding the Strong Family. Later she visited the Mormon genealogical society in Salt Lake City, and also the York County Historical Society, and was so inspired by what she saw that she determined to organize a society in Indiana County. The group was at first organized as a genealogical society but, upon the advice of Dr. Sylvester K. Stevens of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the word "Historical" was added to the title in January, 1939. The other founding members of the Society were Lawrence

Hicks, Vesta Craig Hicks, the Rev. Ira L. Kelly, and Mabel Wood McQuown. Mrs. McQuown is the only one still living.

More members were recruited until there were twenty-six by the time a public announcement was made in April, 1939, that a society had been organized. The Indiana Free Library granted a request for space to house the Society's collections, and on May 1, 1939, the Society's library was inaugurated with the placing of fourteen books and a few pamphlets on a shelf. The first two books in the collection had been purchased by Mr. Helman at Fiscus's used-furniture store for twenty-five cents each. Such were the humble beginnings.

In May, 1940, the Society was incorporated with 134 members. At the invitation of Dr. Leroy A. King, president of Indiana State Teachers College (1939-1942), the Society was invited to share a room in Wilson Hall, which was then the ISTC Library, and here the Society met and housed its collection until January, 1951, when permission was granted to use the Silas M. Clark House. On a snowy winter day the books were moved from Wilson Hall on a sled to an automobile, and then again from the automobile to the Clark House.

Mrs. Helman's knowledge and skills were self-taught – learning by doing – but she did attend some classes at IUP and Penn State. From 1939 to 1941 she wrote a genealogical column for *The Indiana Countian*. She was a member of the National Genealogical Society. In 1948, with Beulah Heffelfinger as publisher and business manager, she launched a genealogical quarterly, *Your Family Tree*, which was continued for eighteen years until 1966 when it was sold to Floyd G. Hoenstine of Hollidaysburg. Her genealogical research took her to many county courthouses, to the National Archives, the Library of Congress and the DAR Library in Washington, D.C., to Salt Lake City, and to numerous other places. For many years she conducted an annual genealogical workshop in the Clark House sponsored by the Historical Society.

Frances Helman had a talent for enlisting people to do various jobs for the Society, or to donate items for the Library and Museum. The museum was located in the basement of the Clark House. She herself would do anything that needed to be done; making contacts by phone or in person; taking reservations for tours, dinners, or other special events; writing articles for newspapers; clipping and filing, etc. She served as president of the Society in 1943, 1948-1950, and 1976. For years she conducted the annual installation ceremony for new officers. In 1955 she was made an honorary lifetime member.

Frances's zeal led her into numerous related activities. She was one of the organizers and officers of the James LeTort Chapter, Daughters of American Colonists, and of the Anne LeTort Chapter, Children of American Colonists. From 1968 to 1970 she was national President General of the CAC. She was one of the founders of the Armstrong-Kittanning Trail Society in 1956, and president emeritus until death. She was a member and later an honorary member of the Daughters of the American Revolution. She participated enthusiastically in the 1953 Indiana County Sesquicentennial and the 1966 Indiana Borough Sesquicentennial. Her "History of Indiana County" was published in the 1953 Souvenir Program, and for the 1966 program she contributed an article "Early Settlers and Important Personages."

Frances' and Blaine made many trips to local cemeteries, often with others, to make a complete record of tombstone inscriptions which were afterward typed and filed in the Historical Society Library. The Library contains many typed and written manuscripts prepared by Frances, some in cooperation with others, on such subjects as Strongstown and the old clay pike, Revolutionary soldiers, Newport, Courthouse records of wills and letters of administration, births and deaths, soldiers of 1812, church and cemetery records. The Helmans also spent many hours reading and extracting notes from the files of old newspapers which had been donated to the Historical Society.

Another interest was folklore. Frances delighted in telling stories of ghosts and strange happenings and was not above embellishing some of the stories with imaginary details. In 1963 she published a pamphlet, "That's What Happened," containing a number of these stories such as "The Ghosts of Watts Hill," "The Shadowing Hand," "Yank Brown," and others. She told these stories to children, Boy and Girl Scouts, Junior Historians, and other young folks in whom she was greatly interested. At the invitation of teachers and Scout leaders she often visited schools and other places to talk about local history. At her urging the District Scout leaders organized a Boy Scout relay march in 1956 over the route of the Kittanning Path from Fort Shirley in Huntingdon County to Kittanning. For years the Society sponsored an annual essay contest on the subject, "The Most Interesting Story in My Family." Many of these essays are in the Society Library. Members of the Junior Historian Clubs were invited to present programs at the Society's meetings. Frances was often heard to say, "As the twig is bent, so the oak will grow," and then she would add, "We do a lot of twig bending." She was a Cub Scout pack leader at one time. One of the Cub Scouts she influenced was Frank Hood who was persuaded by her in later years to write a historical pageant, "The McClurkin Story," telling the story of one of the county's early black families. She had no racial biases and eagerly sought information about the early black citizens which she would often publicize in newspaper articles. One of the black personages she was interested in was Sam Williams, whom she felt might have been the inspiration for some of Stephen Foster's songs, although research by Dr. Arthur F. Nicholson failed to verify this.

Still another interest was civil defense. Mrs. Helman was Director of the Indiana County Civil Defense program 1964-1972, and executive director after 1974, at which time she received the Richard S. Funck Memorial Award for excellence in civil preparedness. She was also one of the five founders of the Indiana County Tourist Bureau and was, if I am not mistaken, the inspiration for "Queen Evergreen" and "Little Miss Christmas." She particularly enjoyed Christmas time in a spirit of delight and wonder, her face shining as she carried a lighted candle during the Society's candlelight programs complete with old-fashioned Christmas tree and antique toys. She was a member of the Soroptimists, VFW Auxiliary, and Eagles Club.

Perhaps the best way to remember Frances Helman is to recall some of the incidents in which her wit and humor came out. One story she told concerned Hannah Strong, who was said to be fond of a swig of whiskey, but when it was learned the preacher was coming, her husband thought it best to hide the whiskey keg in the rafters of the barn. Feeling the need for a drink, Hannah began to look for the keg and found it. Not being able

to reach it, she got a rifle and shot a hole through it, placing a tub to catch the flow. After that, Mrs. Helman laughingly remarked, "Hannah was in no condition to greet the minister."

I recall of coming into the Clark House one hot summer day and remarking that the Library was cool and pleasant. Mrs. Helman's response was "Yes, summer and winter." On another occasion, after having served as vice-president of the Society and helping with numerous projects, Mrs. Helman urged me to take on more work by accepting the position of treasurer. With a twinkle in her eye, she said, "There's nothing like licking the horse that pulls!"

Other Society members no doubt can recall other examples of her humor. Another story I heard her tell was about the trip she and Blaine made returning to Indiana from one of the Society's annual dinners at a country church in November in the midst of a sudden snowstorm. Their car either ran out of gasoline or developed mechanical troubles. They were near a house where Blaine thought a lady whom he knew as "Annie" lived, so he knocked on the door and began calling, "Annie! Annie!" At this point in the story Mrs. Helman grinned and said, "I wonder what would have happened if some big bruiser opened the door and yelled, "Beat it! Annie don't live here no more!"

During her life Frances Helman was awarded the Degree of Honor in the Pennsylvania Junto of Washington, D.C. She served a term as president of the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies. On January 1, 1976, the Indiana County Commissioners names her "Indiana County Historian."

We should not overlook her series of "Sketches of Revolutionary Soldiers of Indiana County" which have been published in Indiana County Heritage. Her personal papers and books were contributed to the Society Library before her death and are catalogued as the "Helman Collection."

Frances Strong Helman has compiled her own memorial item by item during her life and it is inscribed "Historical and Genealogical Society of Indiana County." She will be remembered as long as the Society endures. It is our task to carry on.
(Indiana County Heritage, Winter, 1983-84, pp. 4-8)

(See: <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~paicgs/index.shtml>)

[Society Announces Naming of The Frances Strong Helman Library

In what some would say is about time, The Historical and Genealogical Society of Indiana County's President of the Board, Herb Gleditsch, made announcement of the naming of The Frances Strong Helman Library at the Society's seventy-first Annual Membership Meeting on October 16, 2008. (<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~paicgs/library.shtml>)

