

Who was Helen M. Stack?  
by  
Gary Dielman

Razzel Dazzle! Razzle Dazzle!  
Zip, Boom, Bah!  
Baker City High School!  
Rah, Rah, Rah!

The May 1899 issue of the *Nugget* has that enthusiastic yell on the first page under a photo of the large, three-story brick school building that once stood on the site of the present Middle School. Inside the issue is a photo of English teacher Miss Nellie M. Stack. Nellie was the nickname of Helen M. Stack, who two years later is listed in the 1901 *Nugget* as principal of Baker City High School, a position she retained until 1913. In recognition of her contribution to education in Baker City, students entering Baker Middle School are greeted by the following words in stone over the east entrance: "Helen M. Stack Junior High School."



*Central School, as seen from Broadway looking southwest  
(Present site of Baker Middle School)*

In the fall of 1935, the shiny, new halls of the Baker Junior High School echoed with the footsteps of its first students. And that was still the name of the school during the four years I attended (1950-1954), when it housed grades six through nine; today just seventh and eighth grades attend what is now called Baker Middle School.

With the school board's recent appointment of a committee to explore whether District 5J should build a new middle school, the spotlight has been focused on the present middle school with some asking, "Who was Helen M. Stack?" Most

of the thousands of us students who tramped the halls and warmed the seats of the school knew nothing about the school's namesake. Well, thanks to Milton Levy and a little research, I've come up with some interesting information about Miss Stack.



*Helen "Nellie" Stack in 1900*

Last year, Levy, who graduated from BHS in 1935 and presently lives in Danville, California, sent me information about the Fuchs/Levy families. Levy's grandfather, Mose Fuchs, and twin brother, Isidor Fuchs, emigrated from their native Germany to Baker City in the late 1880s at the request of their mother's brother, Sam Ottenheimer. Ottenheimer, one of Baker City's most successful Jewish merchants, needed help in his mercantile business. Although Mose and Isidor also engaged in business in western Idaho, their main base of activity was in Baker City until their deaths here in the 1940s. They are best remembered for two businesses: Sam-O-Springs Bottling Co., named for their uncle Sam Ottenheimer, which produced a soft drink, and Baker City's first swimming pool located near the site of a hot spring on the east edge of town not far from the present Sam-O municipal pool.

John Stack, one of Baker City's early builders, and wife, Helen Roddy Stack, brought their family to Baker City in 1875. Among their nine children were nine-year-old Helen and five-year-old Katherine. In 1898, Isidor Fuchs married Katherine "Katie" Stack. Their only child, Armand Fuchs, became an attorney and practiced law in Baker City until his death. Helen never married.

Helen was born June 13, 1866, in Boscobel, Wisconsin, on the Wisconsin River west of Madison. Nothing else is known about the Stacks before coming to Baker City, except that they also lived for a time in Missouri. One might presume that since Katie married Isidor, a Jew, that the Stack family was Jewish. But, if

that was the case, Katie and Helen converted to Christianity, since it appears from their obituaries that at the time of their deaths both were Catholic. In about 1884, Helen graduated from Notre Dame Academy, a Catholic boarding school for girls located in a large wooden structure where the YMCA gymnasium now stands on the grounds of the Catholic Church.



*Twins Isador and Mose Fuchs*

In 1899, after Helen had taught for several years in country schools in Malheur and Baker counties, she was hired by Baker City School District Superintendent J. A. Churchill to teach English at Central School, a three-story brick structure on the present site of Baker Middle School. In 1901 Superintendent Churchill promoted Helen to be principal of Central School, a position she held until she retired in 1913.

Central School, constructed in 1889, replaced the wooden two-story Baker City Academy, which had been built in 1869 as a private school. The public Central School housed all twelve grades, until neighborhood elementary schools were built in the early 1900s. Then in 1917, when the first high school was built across the street at Fifth and Washington streets, Central School served just junior high students, until it was demolished in 1934 to make room for the Helen M. Stack school.

When Helen resigned her position as principal of Central School in 1913, she apparently did so in order to go into private business. The 1914 city directory tax list shows that Helen M. Stack and Marguerite L. Bailey had assets of \$660. The

city directories do not reveal the nature of the business nor any further business connection between the two women after 1917, when their assets were listed as \$525. During World War I Helen went back to teaching until 1919, when she retired again but continued her profession by tutoring private students.



*Today called Baker Middle School  
(Fourth Street Entrance)*

In 1934 Central School was razed in order to begin construction of the new junior high school. During the 1934-35 academic year, students attended school in temporary quarters at North Baker, South Baker, and Brooklyn elementary schools. And some students were housed in the Carnegie library auditorium and the Shoemaker Building. The following fall the school district heaved a huge sigh of relief as Helen M. Stack Junior High School opened its doors for the first time, a state-of-the-art facility named in honor of Baker City's most celebrated educator of her day.

Helen, who remained unmarried her whole life, never had a home of her own, living instead in the various homes of her sister and brother-in-law, Katie and Isidor Fuchs. City directories show that from as early as 1901 until 1905 Helen and the Fuchs family lived on the southwest corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> and Estes. In 1910 (the next available city directory) they were residing in the impressive Victorian home just north across the street, property owned today by Richard and Lynne Langrell. They remained there until the middle 1920s, when they moved to 2405 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and then to the house next door at 2413 3<sup>rd</sup> in the late 1940s. Helen continued residing with the Fuchs family until her death on September 24, 1953. She is buried at Mt. Hope Cemetery, as is her sister Katie, who died in 1965.

(For an excellent and readable history of Baker County schools, read former Baker School District 5J Superintendent James R. Evans' book *Gold Dust and Chalk Dust*.)

© September 2004, Gary Dielman, Baker City, Oregon