A SMALL WORK: THE STORY OF HELENOR ALTER DAVISSON, METHODISM'S FIRST ORDAINED WOMAN

CHRISTOPHER M. SHOEMAKER

On July 25, 1863 the Fourth Quarterly Conference of the Bradford circuit of the Wabash Conference met in Medarysville, Indiana. At this meeting it was moved and approved that Mrs. Helenor Draper, "be recommended to the Annual Conference as a suitable person to preach the gospel or at least a small work." Her father, the Rev. John Alter, presided over the affirmative vote and the formal ministry of this true daughter of American Methodism began.

Helenor’s struggle for recognition and acceptance faded into obscurity, however, in the shadow of another heroine of American Methodism, Anna Howard Shaw. Although she was ordained four years after Helenor Davisson’s death, Shaw’s prominence and urban location drew considerably more attention than did the small town circuit rider from frontier Indiana. Davisson's story might have been lost entirely had it not been for the efforts of William T. Noll. In 1973, Noll, while a seminary student at Drew University, wrote a paper later published under the title, “Women as Clergy and Laity in the 19th Century Methodist Protestant Church.” With his groundbreaking research, Noll demonstrated that Helenor Davisson was the first female Methodist ordinand. Her story however, remained a mystery.

By her own account, Helenor was a bright and inquisitive child. She would often follow adults in their daily routines and ask questions about everything she saw. This earned her the endearing nickname “Little Pest” or, more often, just “Pest.” Helenor was born on January 24, 1823, about thirty miles northwest of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, near the Allegheny River. Her birthplace was very likely in Armstrong Country, perhaps just south of

1There are numerous misspellings of Helenor Davisson’s name. Her first name is recorded as “Helen,” “Elenor,” “Helona,” “Helnora,” and several other’s. Her last name has been spelled “Davidson” and “Davison.” However, “Helenor” is the most common and accepted spelling. She was apparently named after her grandmother, Helenor Sheetz Alter. Misspellings in the various references are corrected, except on her tombstone. It is not known if her middle initial “M” stands for a middle name or not. Her maiden name, Alter, is used in this article to establish her connection to the Alters, a respected Jasper County family today and part of Indiana Methodist Protestant history.


Kittanning. Her father was an established preacher of the gospel and considered a wise and godly man. Helenor was the first of Rev. John Alter's eighteen children, divided among three wives. Charity VanAusdall, Helenor's mother, gave birth to seven more children before her death in 1837: John Wesley, Isaac VanAusdall, David, Esther, Hannah, Jacob, and Benjamin. Her death profoundly shaped Helenor's future.

About 1873, Helenor began an autobiography that she was never to finish.⁴ Forty-five years later, someone recovered what was left of her writing and compiled it as a biography, adding some old family stories and memories to Helenor's recollections. This story became known simply as "The Little Pest." From "The Little Pest" we learn that young Helenor was inspired by the beauty of God's country and was "perplexed about living again after death"⁵ from an early age. It is from these writings that we have the only physical description of Helenor. According to the early editor(s) of "The Little Pest," she was "pretty with deep blue eyes and raven black hair."⁶

Helenor’s education was limited to the basics, mostly reading and writing. Her parents concentrated on their oldest daughter's moral and religious training, requiring it to be "as perfect as possible."⁷ Rev. Alter would fire workers for using profane or even questionable language. No one spoke badly about any preacher in front of Helenor and her home was frequently used for church services. At some point in her childhood, Helenor was convicted of her sin and desired the presence of the Holy Spirit in her life. She came to the altar during a revival led by her father and her uncle, Isaac VanAusdall.⁸

In 1834, Alter's father, John Sr., passed away, and the enthusiastic preacher decided to move his family west to Indiana. In 1835, they began the journey, their possessions loaded onto a flatboat. They settled in Greenfield, Indiana, just east of Indianapolis. Rev. John and his children would make Jasper Country their final destination, but Charity would stay forever in Hancock County. On March 1, 1837, Helenor's mother, losing ground to illness, said her last farewells to her family, each in turn, coming to "Pest" last. "Poor dear girl, you will have to take your mother’s place, and take good care of the baby, and be a good girl, and the Lord will take care of you."⁹ A few moments later, Charity VanAusdall Alter died.

¹The Little Pest or, The Lady Preacher, ed. Kerri Reese Shoemaker, unpublished, 3. Unfortunately, the original autobiographical writings have been lost. The surviving edition was discovered in the possession of the Alter family. It is possible that the early editor(s) were related to Helenor and likely female. As the ensuing version of the story was poorly compiled, it was necessary to edit and typeset The Little Pest again.
²Shoemaker, 3.
³Shoemaker, 5.
⁴Shoemaker, 6.
⁵Charity VanAusdall’s brother.
⁶Shoemaker, 18.
In an instant, Helenor became responsible for a home and seven siblings. She had just turned fourteen. She threw herself into her work, afraid of failing her mother's last request. Working through stress and sickness, Helenor ruined her own health. At one point, her father and the other children became very sick with typhoid fever, and Helenor nursed them through many sleepless nights. Her father had purchased a sawmill on Brandywine Creek, and Helenor was the only one healthy enough to run it. She was able to keep the mill operating by herself while caring for her sick family by running between the house and the mill.¹⁰

Before the rest of the Alters could recover, young Helenor contracted the fever and almost died. Her physician uncles, Ben and John, came to assist but could not get Helenor's mouth open to administer medicine. As a last resort, they reluctantly bled her, and she miraculously recovered, although very slowly.¹¹

Her father was to remarry twice. His second wife, Lucinda Jane Black, joined the family on September 23, 1843.¹² She gave birth to two daughters, Isabella Jane and Nancy Ann, before passing away on September 20, 1847. They had been together only three days short of four years. On January 24, 1849,¹³ John Alter married for the final time. Mary Ann Chamberlin, twenty-four years old, would provide Helenor with eight more siblings. Their names were: Joseph LeRoy, Lewis Simon, Catherin Louisa, Margaret L., Martha Demaris, James Leander, Lacy Elmer, and Mary Amanda Caroline. Mary Ann died on March 22, 1899, four days after her seventy-fourth birthday.

Helenor's biography does not include her travel to Jasper County. From this point, her story must be compiled from church, family, and local records. On February 22, 1842, Helenor married John Draper in Henry County, Indiana.¹⁴ She was 19; he was 20. About this part of Helenor's life, little is known. The 1850 Census shows John and Helenor living in Jasper County; probably on the Alter family farm. In fact, Isaac Alter may have been living with the Drapers at the time as the census shows an Isaac Draper, of the correct age, in the household of John and Helenor. On the same census, Isaac Alter was absent from the Alter home.¹⁵

It is in this period that we find the first reference to Helenor's being involved in the work of the church. A history of the United Methodist Church in Remington, Indiana, affords the following glimpse of her ministry:

¹⁰While the exact location of the sawmill is unknown, the closest possible route between the Alter homestead and the Brandywine River is about four miles.
¹¹Shoemaker, 28.
¹²Indiana Marriages Through 1850, Indiana State Library Genealogy Division. Alter family records show this date to be June 29, 1842.
¹³An alternate record shows January 4 instead of 24.
¹⁴Indiana Marriages Through 1850, Indiana State Library Genealogy Division.
¹⁵Robert E. Williamson, 1850 Census of Jasper County, Indiana (Washington: United States, National Archives and Records Administration, 1999), Jordan Township, lines 1-10.
In the 1840s two circuit riders in this locality lived and worked for the cause of Methodism. They were the Rev. John Alter and his daughter, Mrs. Helenor Draper, who lived on the Alter farm four-and-one-half miles northwest of Remington. They traveled on horseback through miles of open prairie, tall grass, ponds, and sloughs and stayed in an occasional hunter's cabin or settler's crude shanty. In 1849, they organized a Methodist Protestant Church at Alter's grove.16

"Alter's grove" refers to a large grove of walnut trees that stood at the rear of the Alter house. In recent years the trees were cut, sold, and replaced with a stand of poplar trees. A few of the original walnut trees are still there. It is not believed that a church was actually constructed here, rather that meetings were held in the open or under some kind of arbor.

As in Pennsylvania, the Alter home was the site of many church meetings and services. Helenor was ultimately ordained at an Annual Conference meeting held in her father's home. Helenor's brothers built a new family house in 1850. They used mules to haul building stone from a creek about one hundred yards away. Although renovated several times and recently undergoing an addition to the rear, the home remains very much the same as Helenor knew it. The grove is still just to the rear of the house and is being planted with walnut trees to restore it to its historical state. The Alter family cemetery rests on a small hill a few hundred yards from the house. Rev. John Alter is interred here, his grave marked by a modern granite memorial. The original tombstone deteriorated beyond repair many years ago. A bronze United Methodist "Circuit Rider" grave marker has been set next to his headstone. The house and farm remain in the Alter family to this day and are lovingly maintained.

In 1858, the worshipers established another congregation in the Barkley Township, northeast of Rensselaer, the Jasper County seat. Five or six years later, the congregations became an official charge known as the Grand Prairie Circuit. It is notable that both father and daughter are recorded as starting this charge together.11

It is very fortunate that some of the records of these churches remain. The "Register of the Grand Prairie Circuit" contains the minutes of the Quarterly Conferences and has been preserved in the original bound document. The first entry was made on April 28, 1860, and refers to the churches as the "Bradford Mission." Late in 1860 Wabash Annual Conference changed the name to the "Bradford Circuit." On October 3, 1862, Helenor Draper is first listed as a minister in the circuit, her name right below her father's. There are different classes in the record, some names are listed as "ministers," some "preachers," some "exhorters," and some "class leaders" and "stewards." In the "Preachers" category, the name of Moses Davisson is


17*History of the Town of Remington* (Logansport: Wilson, Humphreys & Co., 1894), 115.
also first listed. Moses or (M. E.) Davisson would eventually become Helenor’s father-in-law and she would be ordained with him.

Helenor’s name does not appear in the next conference transcript of January 31, 1863. On June 6, 1863, she was presented to be received and her license renewed. This motion carried. At the next conference, held at the Alter home on July 25, 1863, it was moved and approved to recommend Helenor to the Annual Conference “to preach the gospel or at least a small work.” Moses Davisson was also received into the Methodist Protestant Church from the Methodist Episcopal Church at this meeting. Helenor’s application was presented to the Annual Conference at their eighteenth session in 1863.

The only known account of the process leading to Helenor’s ordination is found in John C. Coons’ book, *The Methodist Protestant Church in Indiana, 1839-1939*. Coons was a Methodist Protestant pastor in the Indiana Conference. In 1931, he was elected Secretary of the Historical Society. With the imminent merging of the Methodist Protestant and Methodist Episcopal churches, a publication containing the historical highlights of the minutes of past Annual Conferences was compiled. This was done in time for the Centennial of the Methodist Protestant Church in Indiana in 1939.

This account, however, is not without error. Coons incorrectly identified Moses E. Davisson as Helenor’s husband. Moses E. Davisson was a prominent citizen of northwest Indiana whose life is well documented. He was married only once, to Mahala Earlywine, a union that lasted over fifty years. He was a merchant, sheriff, and Justice of the Peace in Jasper County, holding the latter position until he was at least seventy-one years of age. In 1840, he became a local preacher in the Methodist Episcopal denomination and joined the Methodist Protestant Church in the fall of 1866. His ministerial service included circuit riding for twelve years.

It was Thomas H., the son of Moses and Mahala, who married Helenor. The fate of John Draper, her first husband, is unknown. “The Register of the Grand Prairie Circuit,” the record of the Third Quarterly Conference, June 4, 1864, shows Helenor’s last name as Davisson for the first time. Thomas Davisson was born in 1836, making him thirteen years Helenor’s junior. He grew up a farmer and miller and fought for the Union as member of the Ninth Indiana Volunteer Infantry, Company G. A wound he received at the battle of Stone River, Tennessee, on December 31, 1862, permanently crippled him. He married Helenor on March 4, 1864. As with her marriage to John Draper, Helenor had no children. After Helenor’s death, Thomas mar-

---

19Coons, 42.
20*Counties of White and Pulaski, Indiana* (Chicago: F. A. Battery & Co., 1883), 725.
ried Nancy McColley. In 1883, he was serving as Justice of the Peace and Postmaster in Pleasant Ridge, Pulaski County. He is buried in the McColley family plot at Weston Cemetery, Rensselaer. His widow Nancy then married George W. Payne. Payne had joined one of Helenor’s churches in 1868 and became a Methodist pastor after marrying Nancy.

As Helenor was Payne’s pastor, it is possible that Helenor guided him in his call to the ministry. It was during Rev. Payne’s leadership that Jasper County’s Methodist Protestants built their first and only church. Today the building is the home of the Jasper County Historical Society. George W. Payne died February 5, 1910. Nancy lived until January 15, 1922, when she died after an illness in the home of John Wesley Alter, Helenor’s brother. Her funeral was also at the home and she was laid to rest with Thomas. It seems that the Paynes maintained a close relationship with the Alter family.

The “Register of the Grand Prairie Circuit” notes that Helenor Davisson was elected to Deacon’s orders at the Quarterly Meeting at Burnes Schoolhouse, July 29, 1865. It is interesting to note that in the prior business session, at Archer Neighborhood on April 22, 1865, Helenor actually chaired the Quarterly Conference meeting for the first time. She presided over her own election to Deacon’s orders and over the next meeting of December 9, 1866.

The Annual and General Conference record of Helenor’s service and ordination appears in the manuscript of the 21st Session of the Wabash Annual Conference. At this session, begun on Wednesday, August 22, 1866, at the Alter family home, H. M. Davisson was found favorable for Deacon’s orders. It was at this point that she became the first female ordinand in American Methodism.

It was only one year later that a recorded objection was made. At the 22nd Session of the Wabash Conference (renamed North Indiana during proceedings), Revs. T. H. Lancaster and A. H. Widney presented this resolution: “Resolved that the election of females to orders is incompatible with the teachings of Holy Scriptures, and not in accordance with our book of discipline.” It is interesting to note that two Methodist Episcopal pastors, C. W. Lynch and M. E. Curtis, were present at this session and had seats within the bar.

The Rev. J. H. Luse, who had been ordained with Helenor the previous year, moved to refer the matter to the next General Conference, and this was adopted. Rev. Lancaster, perhaps hearing or sensing that the opinion of the

22 “Found favorable” meant approved. This was Friday, August 24 at the 8:00 AM session.
23 A. H. Widney, Minutes of the 21st Session of the Wabash Annual Conference, Drew University Archives.
24 From the manuscript of A.H. Widney, Secretary. Wednesday, August 28, 1867.
conference was not in his favor, moved that Sister Davisson be allowed to carry on as a Deacon until the matter was decided by General Conference.

Later in the conference proceedings, Helenor is mentioned again with reference to the approval of her character and “she was left in the hands of the President at her own request.” The apparent meaning of this is that she did not officially seek reappointment but left her role in the conference up to the conference president. Toward the end of conference Helenor was listed by the Committee on Pastoral Relations as “reserve.”

The Committee on Statistics had reported H. M. Davisson as the pastor of the Grand Prairie charge (changed to circuit during proceedings) for the previous year. The charge is listed as having 100 members, 5 probationary members, 9 Methodist Recorder subscriptions, 4 Sabbath Schools, 170 Scholars (Sabbath School students), and a 180-volume library. At the concluding of conference, it was noted that the Conference Steward presented the Galloway Exhibit and that the Grand Prairie Circuit gave a $10 donation.

A newspaper article (probably a clipping from the Methodist Recorder) gives a report on the Wabash (North Indiana) Conference on August 31, 1867. In this report, a future meeting is set at the Alter home and H. M. Davisson is scheduled to “write, preach, or lecture” on foreign missions.

At the second session of the North Indiana Conference in October 1868, Helenor Davisson was mentioned without any unusual comments. She was listed among the ministerial members, her character was examined and approved, and she was again “left in the hands of the President,” along with her father. A. H. Widney was listed as the pastor of the Grand Prairie circuit and presumably succeeded Helenor.

Ultimately, the matter of Helenor’s ordination came before the Second General Conference of the Methodist Church (the northern division of the Methodist Protestant Church). The conference was held May 17-27, 1871, in Pittsburgh.

A study committee was formed and reports were brought before the assembly. The majority opinion supported the ordination of women, but a minority voice strongly opposed. In language reflective of the respective attitudes concerning this issue, the majority report was on “female ordination,” while the minority report referred to “the ordination of ladies.”

A motion was made and passed to adopt the minority report and it was approved by a vote of 46 to 17. Sister M. A. S. Bradford led the opening worship at the next session and then addressed the conference on the subject of the ordination of women. In doing so, Bradford may have become the first woman to address a General Conference.

\(^{25}\)Time unclear, but before 7:30 PM Friday, August 30.

\(^{26}\)Probably a missions exhibit or presentation.

\(^{27}\)Noll, 110.
Following Bradford's address, Rev. W.R. Parsons, one of those voting against the minority report, offered a resolution “that each Annual Conference shall have power to authorize females to preach the Gospel in the Methodist Church.” The published edition of the minutes does not indicate whether or not the resolution was adopted. Thus, the matter was apparently settled.

In last mention of Helenor's name in the “Register of the Grand Prairie Circuit” occurs on August 4, 1874. She is listed on the roll beneath her father's name, above the list of preachers. This is also the last time Rev. Alter's name appears.

Rev. Helenor Alter Davisson died on October 9, 1876. Rev. John Alter died seven days later. She is buried in Sandridge Cemetery, on the south side of County Road 250N, in Barkley Township of Jasper County, Indiana. Her grave is marked by a weathered marble obelisk, about four feet tall. Carved into it is an open book, certainly the Bible. She is interred next to her brother Isaac VanAusdall Alter, his wife Eliza, and their daughter Mary. Her inscription reads:

"Helenor M. 
dau. of 
Rev. John Alter 
& wife of 
T.H. Davisson 
Died 
Oct. 9, 1876 
Aged 
53 yrs. 8 mos. 
& 10 dys. 
--

The first ordained female in the United States"

No mention of the death of either Helenor or her father is made in the “Register of the Grand Prairie Circuit.” The minutes of the thirty-eighth Session of the Indiana Annual Conference, September 19-24, 1977, contains the following obituary:

H.M. Davisson

Helenor M. Davisson was born in Westmoreland county, Pennsylvania, A.D. 1824, and died in Jasper county, Indiana, October 9, A.D. 1876. Sister Davisson was ordained to ministry by the North Indiana Conference of the M.P. Church, in the year 1866, and traveled on Monon and Grand Prairie Circuits for three years, when her health failed; but she

---

28Minutes of the Second General Conference of The Methodist Church (Springfield: Methodist Book Concern, 1871), 34.
A Small Work: Methodist’s First Ordained Woman

continued to preach occasionally up to 1870, from which time until her decease she was confined to her room with bronchitis, etc. During all these years her sufferings were very great, but she was sustained by Divine grace, and passed away in Christian triumph; therefore, 29

Where as in the wisdom of God he hath seen fit to remove from our ranks Sister Helenor M. Davisson eldest daughter of Rev. John Alter. Therefore Resolved that we as an annual conference meekly bow to the will of Him that is too wise to err and too good to be unkind and that we tender out condolence to her surviving friends and suggest as a memorial service that we (sing) That appropriate hymn commencing ‘Sister thou wast mild and lovely’ and unite in pray.

Next, a substantial resolution for her father was read and fifteen minutes set aside “for remarks to his memory.” It is recorded that “After some touching remarks by various member[s] in reference to Father Alter & his oldest daughter H.M. Davisson Conference resumed business.” 31 Sadly, it is not known if Helenor left a record of her ministry. We know nothing of her theological convictions, her spiritual life, how she preached, or how far she rode on her circuit. But ride and preach she did, and for a woman in the 19th Century America, this was remarkable.

A few years ago, a United Methodist laywoman and Registered Nurse was asked about women serving as pastors. This is a portion of her reply:

Before women really took a significant place in the work force, the typical jobs that they occupied were teaching, nursing, charity, and child rearing. Society, somehow, decided that women were well suited for these jobs and even in times when women were really not “allowed” to take their place in the workforce, society allowed them to occupy these positions. If you look at the skills that are required to perform these jobs, aren’t they the same skills that are necessary to lead a congregation and minister to others? Communication, compassion, patience, nurturing, and attentiveness are all among the skills that are shared between these occupations. 32

Helenor Alter Davisson practiced those skills over a lifetime. The same faith and courage that enabled her to support her father’s family, sometimes through great sorrow, enabled her to travel the country lanes and trails, succeeding in what no Methodist woman had done before. In fact, Indiana’s next female Methodist Protestant was not ordained until 1926. 33 What the leadership of the Wabash Conference considered a small work on the Grand Prairie Circuit was, in fact, an echoing, triumphant accomplishment for women, Methodists, and Christians.

29This introductory paragraph is found only in the published edition of the minutes. The following portions in Italics are found only in the original manuscript.
30“Surviving”: the original text reads “sorrowing.”
31Pages 13-14 of the original manuscript.
32Christina Tipton Sikes, unpublished correspondence.
33Coons, 43.