

# Helen Parkhurst, remembered today in her hometown

*Terry Mesch en René Berends*

Terry Mesch is de directeur van het Old Courthouse Museum in Pepin County, Wisconsin.

Op zoek naar archiefmateriaal voor het daltonlectoraat bezochten René Berends en Luuck Sanders in 2009 het plaatsje Durand in Pepin County, Wisconsin, in het middenwesten van de Verenigde Staten. Het plaatsje telt amper 2000 inwoners, maar was een bezoek meer dan waard. Het is de geboorteplaats van Helen Parkhurst. Hier deed zij haar eerste ervaringen op als onderwijzeres. De voorzitter van de plaatselijke historische vereniging, Terry Mesch, ontving

ons hartelijk. Wij logeerden bij hem thuis. De vriendschap die toen ontstond heeft al tot een wederbezoek in Nederland geleid.

Parkhurst was in Durand bijna vergeten. Maar de afgelopen jaren zijn vrijwilligers van de historische vereniging actief om deze 'grote dochter van Durand' te eren. In dit artikel laten we Mesch zelf hierover aan het woord.

## The Pepin County Historical Society

In the 1980's, a group of local residents interested in history formed the Pepin County Historical Society and began to research the city's and county's past. Most citizens, when asked about Helen Parkhurst, did not know who she was. But a few dedicated scholars rediscovered this world famous educator and have tried to help the community to recognize her importance to education.

Helen's father owned a hotel in the center of Durand. Across the street from the hotel was a large multi-purpose building standing in the middle of the village square; the type found in small towns all over the country at that time. It was the county courthouse and the county jail and sheriff's residence, which stood next to it. Nowadays the Old Courthouse Museum is housed in this former Pepin County Courthouse.

## Helen's birth

Members of the Historical Society did research in the archives and found differences about the exact date of Helen's birth. According to the certificate of birth filed in the Pepin County Register of Deeds Office in Durand,



*Parkhurst House in Mainstreet. During the winter of 2010, a fire destroyed the former hotel and the buildings on each side. Today, all that remains of Helen's birth-site is a vacant lot. Beeld: Archief Berends*



Wisconsin, Helen was born Monday, March 8, 1886. She is believed to have been born in her family's hotel called the Parkhurst House, which was located along Main Street in downtown Durand, Wisconsin. Birth certificates were not required in Wisconsin at the time of Helen's birth; however, her parents were conscientious and registered the births of Helen and her two brothers with the county recorder at the times of their births. A few details were overlooked in Helen's initial certificate of birth: her first name, her siblings' names, and the initial of her mother's middle name had not been included. In 1963 (77 years later) three corrections were made to Helen's birth certificate. In very large RED letters, the corrections to Helen's birth certificate were: on Line #1 - Full Name - 'Helen' Parkhurst; on Line #5 - Names of other issue [offspring or progeny] living - 'Wm. M and A. Alden Parkhurst'; and, on Line #7 - Name of Mother Before Marriage - Ida 'L.' Smalley. Why these details were ignored for nearly 80 years is curious. That her first name was left blank on her birth certificate for so many years is most surprising when you consider all the international traveling she did during the previous fifty years (1913 to 1963). Obviously, proof of one's birth place was not so important as it is today.

### The Old Courthouse Museum

The Old Courthouse Museum is located across the street from where Helen was born. Currently, the Old Courthouse Museum, which once served as the seat of government for Pepin County, has a small display devoted to Helen and features the recent biography of Helen by René Berends of Saxion University, Deventer, The Netherlands. Unfortunately, the biography has not yet been translated into English. The Museum also has a small archive of photos and documents related to Helen's life.



*Waterville School District #5, Pepin County, Wisconsin, also known as Black School and later as Big Arkansaw School, circa 1906.  
Beeld: Archief Berends*

### The bell tower

Another memorial to Helen is the bell tower from the one room school where she taught during the school year 1904-1905. The schoolhouse bell tower from the Waterville School District No. 5, Pepin County, Wisconsin, now stands in front of the Arkansaw Elementary School in the small village of Arkansaw, Wisconsin, within four miles of where it once held the school bell atop the original school.

The Pepin County Historical Society had the tower removed from the original building, which stopped being used as a school about fifty years ago, and, today is in serious disrepair. Most recently it has been used for storage and as a machine and automotive repair shop. The bell tower was rebuilt and installed on a permanent concrete pad. The walkway which leads to the tower is lined with bricks imprinted with the names of teachers and mentors from Pepin County who also impacted the lives of children. There is also a plaque on the front of the bell tower with names of children taught by Helen.

### A memorial plaza dedicated to Helen

Some local citizens in her birth city who are aware of Helen's important contributions to education and to the lives of children around the world are interested in transforming Helen's birth-site (now a vacant lot) into a memorial plaza dedicated to Helen. This effort is in the beginning stages with volunteers developing architectural drawings, cost estimates and other preliminary activities. Purchase of the vacant lots alone will be a formidable task for the small group of 'Parkie' fans in Durand and Pepin County.

The majority of residents in Pepin County and throughout the entire United States do not remember Helen Parkhurst, despite the honors, awards and recognition given to her during her lifetime. A goal of the Pepin County Historical Society is to bring Helen and her contributions to education once again into prominence and to demonstrate the respect she deserves.



*The restored bell tower with the original bell now stands in front of the Arkansaw Elementary School.  
Beeld: Archief Berends*