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1

ORIGINS

Twenty years of teaching provided the skills that propelled Helen Ring Robinson into the Colorado State Senate. She became a scholar, an excellent speaker, and a fine writer, and she developed a lifelong interest in the education of young people. Though she only attended Wellesley for one year, her studies there were impressive. In the early years of her career she taught in New York and at a private school in Cleveland before coming to Colorado to teach at Colorado College. Then she taught at two private girls' schools in Denver. When she married lawyer Ewing Robinson, her teaching career ended, but her writing career began. Drawn into a fight over a water company monopoly, she became involved in progressive political campaigns that led to her election to the state senate in 1912.

We do not have a clear picture of Helen Ring Robinson's birth and family or of her experiences as a child and young woman. Even her

birth date and her parents' exact identities are uncertain.¹ She was born Helen Margaret Ring in the early 1860s to Thomas Warren Ring and Mary Ring.² Two biographical references contemporary with Helen's rise to political office asserted that she was the daughter of Thomas and Mary (Prescott) Ring and was born in Eastport, Maine.³ Maine is also cited as Helen's birthplace in several census reports, including the 1870 census.

In the 1870 census, Helen is listed as the sixth child in a family of nine children, of ages ranging from twenty-one down to four, all living in Providence, Rhode Island, though several—including Helen—were born in Maine: Rebecca, Matilde, Etta (or Baronetta), Judson B., Eva A., Helen, Ellsworth, Gustavus, and Annie L. Helen's age is given as ten years old, putting her birth date at about 1860. From the children's birthplaces and ages, it appears that the family moved from Maine to Rhode Island sometime between 1864 and 1867. Helen's father's occupation is listed as "labor," and the value of his personal property was put at only \$300. Three of Helen's sisters, who were twenty-one, seventeen, and fifteen, worked in the cotton mill. Helen, age ten, and four of the other children were attending school.⁴

HELEN'S EDUCATION

Helen graduated from high school probably around 1877 or 1878. In a later visit to Providence, she acknowledged graduating from Providence High School but refused to give the date, and she claimed to have forgotten the name of the elementary school she had attended.⁵

By the time of the 1880 census, Mary Ring was a widow,⁶ and Helen was listed as a restaurant cashier. At some earlier time, though, she apparently taught school because records at Wellesley College verify that Helen attended Wellesley in the 1880–1881 school year as a "teacher special." This made her part of a program for women who were already teachers. The object of the program was to "aid teachers of ability who find their usefulness impaired and their salaries limited by the deficiencies in their education." They often needed courses in

ancient or modern languages or science, the course description says. The “teacher specials” were given flexibility in the courses they could take. Helen’s courses suggest her very impressive scholarly abilities: three terms of Latin, German, Bible (Sunday), French, botany (junior course), history (junior course), and English literature (junior course), first and second terms only.⁷

The tuition at Wellesley at the time was \$250 per year. Of the 372 students, 49 were teacher specials, but it is unclear whether Helen or the other teacher specials received any scholarship aid. As Mary Ring was by that time a widow with nine children living with her and her deceased husband had been a laborer, it is unlikely that the family could have paid for Helen’s education. The college has no record of her attendance in the following years, in 1881–1882 or 1882–1883, as claimed in a later Colorado College Bulletin.⁸ But in this period, any college education at all was remarkable for a woman of modest means.

Some sources assert that Helen also studied at Barnard and Oxford.⁹ However, there is no record of her matriculation between 1889, when Barnard opened, and 1893, when she journeyed west to Colorado Springs.¹⁰ Colorado College claimed she attended Columbia College Annex in 1886.¹¹ Just one source claims she studied in Paris.¹²

The details of Helen’s career and personal life between 1881 when she left Wellesley and 1890 when she was in Cleveland are yet to be discovered. She was said to have been a teacher for a number of years in Yonkers, New York. In the period 1890–1893 she was associate principal of the Hathaway-Brown School in Cleveland, just before her move to Colorado Springs.¹³ An 1891–1892 catalog from the Cleveland school lists her as “Miss Helen Margaret Ring, Natural Sciences, Direct supervision of instruction in Academic Department.” She traveled to Colorado for the summer of 1892, sending back letters to “inform her friends that she is enjoying the climate and life of Colorado.” She returned to Cleveland for the 1892–1893 school year, but moved to Colorado at the end of that school year.¹⁴

THE MOVE TO COLORADO

Helen's courage was clear in her decision to go west without the assistance of any relative, as far as we know.¹⁵ She apparently had not married by this time, her thirty-third year.¹⁶ She may have migrated in part seeking a suitable husband, since the proportion of single men to single women was very favorable in 1890; in Colorado it was 146.7 men for every 100 women, and in Denver there were 60,744 single men to 45,969 single women, or 1.3 men for every woman. From a woman's point of view, the Colorado numbers represented an excellent ratio.¹⁷

It is tempting to suggest that her motive for moving to Colorado was her interest in women gaining the right to vote, an issue that was to appear on the Colorado ballot in the fall of 1893, the very year she began teaching at Colorado College in Colorado Springs.¹⁸ However, she later claimed in a suffrage speech that when she "went from the East to the West I was an anti-suffragist and used to make anti-suffrage speeches." She was converted to the suffrage cause in Colorado, she said.¹⁹

A combination of factors probably drew Helen to Colorado Springs. The 1886 *Colorado College Catalogue* says the population of Colorado Springs was 5,000 "and that its society is largely made up of eastern people," so perhaps Helen had connections there. Seven years before Helen went there, the catalog boasted only one professor of English literature and no instructors.²⁰ From 1892 on, Colorado College offered a summer school of science, philosophy, and languages. For five summers it brought distinguished scholars to the campus, including the poet who wrote "America the Beautiful," Katherine Lee Bates, an English professor from Wellesley College who taught in the 1893 Colorado College summer session. Bates wrote the stirring poem that summer. It is possible that Helen knew her from her year at Wellesley. The following summer Woodrow Wilson, then a political science professor at Princeton University, gave a lecture course on American constitutional government at Colorado College.²¹

Helen was listed in the 1894 *Colorado Springs Directory* as "Helen Margaret Ring, Instructor in English and Elocution," one of

three instructors in English on the faculty at Colorado College.²² She apparently taught at the college only for the 1893–1894 school year. In the fall of 1894, she put an advertisement in the *Colorado Springs Gazette* offering herself as a tutor in “all English Branches” and in Latin and German. She gave her address as 112 E. San Rafael Street, which was across from an area called “College Reservation” in Colorado Springs.²³ Whether this tutoring of Colorado College or high school students provided her with enough income to support herself is unclear.²⁴ In any event, she was teaching in Denver by the following school year.

There were many ties between Colorado College and Denver. At the 1893 college commencement, just before Helen moved to Colorado Springs, the speaker was the Honorable Joel F. Vaile,²⁵ who later married Anna Wolcott—a 1881 Wellesley graduate, a teacher and principal at Wolfe Hall, and later the founder of the Miss Wolcott School, both in Denver. Anna, like Helen, was originally from Providence. After her move to Denver, Helen taught at both schools. In April 1894 the Reverend H. Martyn Hart, dean of St. John’s Cathedral in Denver where Helen was to become a member, spoke. Most intriguing for the possible influence on Helen was a series of lectures that year by Professor William M. Hall titled “Government in the United States.” These were the topics: the difference between the US Constitution and other laws, party organization, elections, and the organization of states. Although there is no certain evidence that Helen attended these lectures or the lecture course by Woodrow Wilson, it is possible that they may have spurred her interest in politics.²⁶

WOLFE HALL AND THE MISS WOLCOTT SCHOOL

Perhaps at the invitation of Anna Wolcott, Helen moved to Denver in 1895, where she became a teacher at Wolfe Hall, an Episcopalian girls’ school. She was listed as a member of the Episcopal St. John’s Cathedral for the years 1897–1898.²⁷ Wolfe Hall was a rather small finishing school that prepared girls for eastern colleges or local women’s colleges. In 1887 the school had 145 students of both elementary

and secondary age, of whom 30 were boarders; a faculty of 14; and a graduating class of 19.²⁸ Enrollment in the high school portion of the school where Helen later taught dropped from 8 in 1892 to 5 in 1893, the year the silver depression hit Colorado.²⁹

The elegant building of Wolfe Hall, called a Ladies Seminary in the city directory, was located on Clarkson Street between 13th and 14th Avenues in Denver, directly facing the block where St. John's Cathedral was to be built. Today, Morey Middle School sits on that site.

Helen taught at Wolfe Hall in the academic years 1895–1896, 1896–1897, and 1897–1898.³⁰ The 1896 school annual, *The Banner*, listed her as Helen Margaret Ring, one of four faculty members in the Academic Department. After her name, in parentheses, the book gives her college as Wellesley and then her subjects: English, history, and literature.³¹ The curriculum, at least in 1893–1894, two years before she came, indicated that English literature and composition were taught during each of the four years of high school. The annual names the history classes offered—ancient history and church history, both electives, and a special class called History of Art.³² Helen also sponsored a weekly current events discussion in her room and a semi-monthly Senior Literary Club that at one point was reading *The House of Seven Gables* by Nathaniel Hawthorne.³³ *The Banner* suggests a gift from Santa Claus for Miss Ring: a bottle of red ink, implying that Miss Ring was highly critical of the girls' compositions. She may have lived at the school part of the time, but in 1897–1898 her address on the St. John's Cathedral membership list was "The Belview," perhaps the translation of "The Belvoir," a "family hotel" at 737 E. 16th at Clarkson, just two blocks from Wolfe Hall.

Evidently a popular teacher, Helen was named an honorary member of the Wolfe Hall class of four girls in 1897. Among the students at Wolfe Hall was Fredericka LeFevre, whose parents, Judge and Mrs. Owen LeFevre, became close friends of Helen and her future husband.³⁴

The first evidence of Helen's lecturing career was a praised lecture she gave during her years at Wolfe Hall. A newspaper report of an

“Educational Afternoon” that featured a number of speakers declared that Helen “gave the cleverest talk of the day.” As the article reported, Helen said:

Knowledge was not power in itself; it was only power when it enabled a person to live, in the highest sense of the word. It was not what Christ knew, but what He was which drew all men unto him. Whatever trained the faculties of the child so that he became a fully developed being, was the thing he should study. It might be that mathematics would do this; but the world had long since abandoned the opinion that there was any means of grace in the multiplication table.

The way to train the faculties of the child, she suggested, was to have him study literature, thus stressing the importance of human connections and concern for the suffering of others demonstrated later in her preface to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. She added: “Literature was the only continuity in history; the only thing that made history mean anything more than a list of wars and conquests, and statistics showed that seventy-five per cent of children left school absolutely without the ability to distinguish between good literature and bad; between Roman candles and stars.”³⁵

Mae Bradley, a reporter who interviewed Helen later in her career, wrote an anecdote about her teaching days. According to Bradley, when Wolfe Hall was threatened by a nighttime fire, “a girl knocked timidly at the sleeper’s door and announced politely, ‘I beg your pardon for disturbing you, Mrs. Robinson, but the school is on fire.’”³⁶ The story is suspicious because Helen was not “Mrs. Robinson” until four years after she left Wolfe Hall, but the characterization of Helen as a stickler for manners rings true.

In 1898 Anna Wolcott left Wolfe Hall, which was having financial difficulties, to found her own school. She took faculty members with her, including Helen Ring,³⁷ and a who’s who of trustees. The first board consisted of Mrs. C. B. Kountze, Mrs. D. H. Moffat, Mrs. W. S. Cheesman, Mr. A. Coors, Mr. H. R. Wolcott, Mr. J. F. Campion, and Mr. F. O. Vaile.³⁸ Charles Kountze, a banker, owned large tracts of real

estate; David Moffat, another banker, was one of the investors in the Denver Pacific Railroad; Walter Cheesman also owned real estate and was another founder of the Denver Pacific Railroad; Adolph Coors founded Coors Brewery; Henry Wolcott, a lawyer, was the brother of Senator Edward O. Wolcott and founded the city's first golf course, Overland; John Champion held silver mines; and F. O. Vaile, later the general counsel of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, was a law partner of Senator Edward O. Wolcott. Among the students at the Miss Wolcott School was Helen Brown, daughter of Margaret "Molly" Brown.³⁹ A new school building at 1410–1414 Marion, which still stands today, was finished just in time for the 1898–1899 school year.⁴⁰ Miss Wolcott was principal until 1913, when she married Joel Vaile, a law partner of her brother Edward O. Wolcott.⁴¹

Miss Helen Margaret Ring was named head of the high school's Academic Department. One hundred pupils were enrolled, while only forty remained at Wolfe Hall. There were about five graduates a year from the new school until 1903, when the number jumped to sixteen, and 1904, when there were twenty-three.⁴² While she was teaching at the Miss Wolcott School, Helen gained membership in Denver society circles, at least at the lower levels. She was listed in the less exclusive list in *The Social Year-Book* in 1898.⁴³ She was not yet a member of the Artists' Club, which she joined later, and the Wellesley Club was not formed until the next year.

Helen probably quit teaching at the Wolcott School when she married in February 1902, in part because married women were not often teachers in that era. At least, she was not listed in the school's 1904 annual.⁴⁴ An article about her marriage reported that she had been an instructor within the past year, first at Wolfe Hall and then at the Miss Wolcott School.⁴⁵ In the Wellesley Club listing in the *Social Year-Book* for 1901–1902, Helen's address is the Miss Wolcott School, where she was teaching, at least until her marriage. In any event, her marriage allowed her the financial independence to write for newspapers and magazines and to play an active role in campaigns to advance the cause of woman suffrage and economic and social justice for women.

EWING ROBINSON

Being thrown from her horse and breaking a rib led to Helen's meeting Ewing Robinson while she was convalescing, according to a newspaper article. Helen, who loved horseback riding, was in the southwestern United States studying the Indians of Arizona and New Mexico.⁴⁶ Ewing, a widower, may have been drawn to Colorado to join his cousin, Roy Robinson, who for a time was a journalist in Silverton.⁴⁷

Ewing was a widower whose first wife, Cora M. Ballard, died of typhoid in 1897 after they had been married just two years and when their daughter, Alcyon, was only sixteen months old.⁴⁸ This must have been a heartbreaking experience for Ewing, which might explain his carelessness in handling the probate of Cora's estate. In January 1900 the National Surety Company asked to be released from liability for its bond because Ewing, the administrator of Cora's estate, had not obtained or filed a proper receipt for his daughter's share of the estate.⁴⁹ He may have been preoccupied with the care of a toddler, and he may not have considered the small amount of money Cora left to their infant daughter very significant.

(George) Ewing Robinson, born in January 1857, was the son of a Washington County, Ohio, attorney, Samuel Bushfield Robinson, born about 1815, and Collina or Caroline Robinson, born about 1826. Ewing's father was relatively prosperous, with property valued at \$15,000.⁵⁰

In 1880, Ewing, about twenty-three years old, was a telegraph operator in Creston, Iowa.⁵¹ According to his obituary, he graduated from the Law School at Iowa State University.⁵² By 1890 he had migrated to the West, because he was admitted to practice law in Colorado on August 29 of that year.⁵³ In 1901 and 1902, Ewing practiced with Frank L. Grant under the firm name Robinson and Grant.⁵⁴

There are several ways Helen and Ewing might have met if the story of Helen's falling off a horse is apocryphal. They both seemed to be in the second tier of the social set. In the 1899 *Social Year-Book*, Helen was in the Artists' Club, but Ewing had not yet joined.⁵⁵ By 1901–1902 both Ewing and Helen were associate members of the

Artists' Club, which may have been how they met.⁵⁶ However, Denver in those days was a small enough town that they could have met in many social settings.

When Ewing met Helen, he was probably still living with his daughter, Alcyon, and Nellie B. Graham, his first wife's sister, in a house he owned at 2535 Vine Street.⁵⁷ Alcyon, whose birthday was March 15, would have been almost six years old when Helen and Ewing were married in 1902.

The flowery articles about the February 13, 1902, wedding praised Ewing: "Mr. Robinson is a lawyer, who has been in the practice of his profession in this city for some years where he has many admirers and friends," though his role in Helen's life remains somewhat of a mystery. The description of Helen was even more embellished: "Mrs. Robinson is a woman of splendid mental achievements, a deep thinker, a profound and thoughtful student, and a companion who cannot fail to prove an inspiration along intellectual lines to the man who was fortunate enough to gain her for his bride."⁵⁸

The marriage was consecrated by the Episcopalian Reverend Frederick W. Oakes, the director of Oakes Home for tubercular patients,⁵⁹ in the home of Owen and Eva LeFevre, who were also the witnesses on the marriage certificate. Owen Edgar LeFevre was elected district judge in 1894 with American Protective Association (APA) support. The APA was an anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic Republican group, according to Phil Goodstein and Robert Riegel.⁶⁰ The bride was given away by her brother, Mr. Judson Ring, who apparently came west for the wedding.⁶¹ According to the newspaper, the couple "went to housekeeping" at 912 13th Avenue.

By the following year, Helen had apparently persuaded her husband to become an Episcopalian, even though Ewing's previous marriage had been presided over by a minister of Central Presbyterian Church. He was confirmed at the old St. John's Cathedral on April 5, 1903.⁶²

Ewing Robinson remains something of a mystery because Helen seldom mentions him in her writing and the newspapers do not report on his activities. He had to have been a fairly progressive man to accept,

some years later, the idea of his wife becoming a legislator. Ewing's daughter, Alcyon, whom Helen treated as her own, was referred to frequently in articles, and Helen dedicated her children's version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to her.⁶³ Helen's influence on her stepdaughter is clear in Alcyon's career path. She graduated from the University of Colorado with a degree in journalism. At some time she worked for her stepmother when Helen had an appointment from President Woodrow Wilson at the League of Nations. Their close relationship is also suggested by the fact that Helen went to stay with her in California during her final illness, and, when Helen died, she left most of her household goods to Alcyon.⁶⁴

One of the few references to Ewing in the newspapers, other than his obituary, reported the unhappy news that ethics charges had been filed against him by the Colorado Bar Association.⁶⁵ What a shock it must have been to the newlyweds just a year after their marriage to have Ewing accused of taking all of a client's property and selling it. In his defense Robinson claimed he had to sell it to secure bonds for his client, Peter Johnston.⁶⁶ The attorneys for the relator were Mr. N. C. Miller, attorney general, and Mr. George L. Hodges. For the respondent Robinson they were Mr. O. E. LeFevre, Mr. H. B. Babb, and Messrs. Morrison and DeSoto. The court did not find grounds for disbarment, though it did not entirely approve of Robinson's actions. This is a summary of the findings in regard to Johnston and two other clients:

1. The fact that an attorney owes balance of account when disputed is not grounds for disbarment. (This refers to a different client, Mrs. Buffington.)
2. Failing to return an abstract of title is not grounds when evidence suggests all her papers were returned. (Mrs. Buffington.)
3. Raising the amount of a note must be clearly proven. (Client, Mr. Ames.)
4. A misstatement to a client is not grounds if the attorney is not defrauding or deceiving. (Mr. Ames.)

5. Assisting a client to avoid attachment is all right if it is reasonable to assume the client innocent. (Peter Johnston.)
6. The amount of fees is not grounds [for disbarment].
7. The fact that the attorney foreclosed on Johnston's house and furniture for professional services is not grounds for disbarment.
8. Attorney trying to establish a liability on an injunction bond four to five years ago and where, when facts brought to court and all made public and published in the press—not sufficient for disbarment after all this time (but his actions are not totally approved).

In fact, the court was quite critical of Ewing's actions in this matter. It said:

There can be no doubt but that respondent [Ewing] was guilty of improper conduct in attempting to establish a liability on an injunction bond . . . The acts complained of occurred between four and five years before the information was filed. Respondent, when the facts in connection with the affair were brought out in court, realized he had done wrong, and promptly admitted his mistake. No one was substantially injured by his action. The whole matter was made public and published in the daily press. This publicity has, in our judgment, after the lapse of so long a period, been a sufficient punishment for respondent; and in view of the fact he has so promptly admitted his wrong and made such reparations as he could, we do not believe that any beneficial end would be accomplished by inflicting a punishment at this time, even if justified originally . . . The record with respect to some of the charges certainly discloses a state of affairs which fully warranted the relator [the Colorado Bar Association] in taking the steps it did.

The court added that it was not justified in saying the attorney was “fully exonerated.” The most serious of the charges related to events that took place before Helen and Ewing were married, but these accusations probably shook Helen's faith in her husband. Fortunately for

the newlyweds, Ewing was not disbarred or even censured; rather, he continued to practice law for many years.

In spite of the unpleasantness of the disbarment hearing, Helen's marriage to Ewing Robinson established her as a permanent, economically comfortable resident of Denver. While it ended her teaching career, it opened up new possibilities. Helen's newfound financial security allowed her to devote her time to writing, politics, and, eventually, public office. But first she had to be transformed from a private person into a well-known public figure.