



## Helen May Martin—Her Book of Life

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THE DREAMER  
Helen in 1928

Courtesy The Etude



Courtesy Davart

HELEN MAY MARTIN AND HER MOTHER — 1940

Photo by Bob Davis

# Helen May Martin - Her Book of Life

LORAIN FERRIS

*Editorial:* Nebraska is justly proud of the remarkable people who were born in the state or who became Nebraskans by virtue of long residence here. One of the finest sections of Nebraska history is the section which deals with Nebraska genius and Nebraska talent in all of its many manifestations.

One of the greatest privileges and purposes of the Nebraska State Historical Society is to put in popular form the stories of these remarkable Nebraska people who have made the name of our state known all around the world. The roll of Nebraska's statesmen, soldiers, orators, authors, artists, educators, champions of human rights, leaders in great causes and lofty achievements, is one which every Nebraska child and Nebraska citizen should know. They are the inspiration for a future state which shall excel the state in which we live today.

Among these remarkable Nebraskans of genius not yet fully known in the state of her birth is Miss Helen May Martin, born in Lincoln in 1893, now living in New York City, a musician-artist with a rare personality and a mind of literary as well as musical attainment. This article presents a story (inadequate) of Miss Martin's achievements. The State Historical Society hopes to present her to the people of Nebraska in person at a future time.

Companion to the story of Miss Martin is a thumbnail sketch of another Nebraska genius, Bob Davis, columnist and author in New York City, who has risen to international fame in the field of literature and photography.

The editor is indebted to Mrs. Martin for personal letters and clippings from her private file, some of which will remain in the Historical Society library; and for the loan of *Etude*, September, 1928. Quotations herein are also taken from the following sources:

Bob Davis, in the *New York Sun*, November 14, 1939.

A. B. Macdonald, *Kansas City Star*, Sunday, April 9, 1933.

Fred Lewis in *Sioux City Sunday Journal*, October 11, 1936.

Unsigned article in *Kansas City Kansan*, August 4, 1935.

Hazel Birch in *The Macon Telegraph and News* (Georgia), reporting an interview with Harry Stillwell Edwards on July 18, 1937.

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This magazine is dedicated to the history of pioneer days. The following pages are given to the story of a Nebraska pioneer of a rare and different kind — one who stands alone. It is the story of Helen May Martin, whom Jan Paderewski pronounced "the most wonderful musician in the world." And even greater is the wonder of her womanhood.

Lincoln has a claim to renown that is comparatively unrecognized as yet, for here was born the little Helen in a three-story

brick building on O Street facing the capitol, "and many days have I sat at the window and watched friends on the tower of the old building," wrote her mother. Brownville, however, is the home of her heart. Helen loves it because of its great scenic beauty, and because of the old stone farmhouse built by her grandfather, J. Q. A. Smith, and still in possession of the family who bought it of them, and in Brownville she hopes to retire.

But Helen, who loves the beauty of the bluffs and all the exquisiteness of form and color in snowflake or anemone; who thrills to the thunder and the thrumming of rain upon her attic roof, to the great classics of music played by a master's hand — Helen "lives in what to us would be a world of profound darkness and silence, into which no sound or ray of light ever comes."<sup>1</sup>

It is a miracle. To accept it, to understand it unless you are acquainted with the family, it is necessary to read a score or more of articles and editorials stating the facts in detail. This we have done, drawing therefrom the brief account which follows.

Helen's father was J. H. Martin, traveling salesman for a farm implement company. He delighted to play the piano and to sing. His father and grandfather were musicians of some note. Helen's mother was a school teacher, and to her care was entrusted one of the most remarkable pupils who has ever come to earth. She accepted a charge that would have appalled most women, consecrating to it all the great riches of her heart and mind. "One must pay tribute to the devoted and tireless efforts of her mother and father and sister,"<sup>2</sup> wrote a reporter, and another gives us this significant passage:

"I said to her mother that she must have exercised marvelous patience in teaching Helen so many things.

"'It has been a wonderful privilege and pleasure to live in close contact with Helen,' she said. 'It has taught us goodness, compassion, tenderness, patience. She lives in such a beautiful world of purity and perfect happiness. Always; as we walk along the country lanes or on city streets, she keeps asking: "Tell me what you see that is beautiful." When she was a child we began to build up in her mind a world without ugliness. How much of

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<sup>1</sup> A. B. Macdonald.

<sup>2</sup> The *Kansan*.

this world's beauty I would have missed if I had not used my eyes all the time for Helen! I am well repaid in her disposition, which is the happiest I have ever known.'"<sup>3</sup>

"The possibilities of Helen's musical development became apparent at the age of three when one day, standing beside her father's piano as he played, she placed her tiny hand upon the instrument, feeling thus the vibrations. She smiled. Her father ceased playing and she frowned. Again he began playing, and again she smiled. This was the first step in a lifetime of determined effort coupled with the gift of a phenomenally acute mind that solved difficulties and surmounted almost unbelievable obstacles and thus produced a world-known musician."<sup>4</sup>

"Helen's two cousins provided her first incentive to learn. Whatever they did Helen regarded as a game to be played along with them. When they colored maps for homework, Helen must color maps; when they modeled in clay, Helen must model in clay. When they began to study music, the year Helen was seven, she insisted on having a daily practice hour just as did the cousins."<sup>5</sup>

"How she was taught to play is a long, long, story, for she could not see the keyboard nor hear a note she struck." Her rare qualities of perception, with infinite patience and perseverance, wrought the miracle. "When she is learning a piece she asks that the story of it be told to her, and from that she weaves her sound phrases."<sup>6</sup>

"But a new interest came into Helen's life, and that was school. At Olathe, Kansas, is the state school for the deaf. There was hesitancy about accepting her, for a student both deaf and blind had never been registered there. But, after an examination had shown her mentally alert and well advanced, they took her in. The special teacher assigned to her could only spare one hour a day for instruction. But Helen studied, and in four years had finished the regular course for deaf students, a special course for the blind, and additional history courses. Her average grade was about 97." (Mr Macdonald wrote that "she finished a nine-

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<sup>3</sup> A. B. Macdonald.

<sup>4</sup> *The Kansan*.

<sup>5</sup> Alice Kling.

<sup>6</sup> A. B. Macdonald.

year schedule, including a high-school course, in four years, and was graduated with high honors."—*Ed.*)

"Her first encouragement to make a serious study of music came from a blind piano tuner and musician who made a stop at Olathe. At the music store, half of which was occupied by Mrs. Martin's millinery shop, he heard Helen play. So enthusiastic was he that he gave her four lessons in Braille. (Prior to this her mother had taught her — all memory work. — *Ed.*)

"In 1923 Helen made her first public appearance in a church in Olathe. The music critic of the *Kansas City Star* had heard about the recital to be given and made the trip to Olathe to hear her. The next day Kansas read the story of Helen from the first page. . . Later she was offered a scholarship at the conservatory of music in Wichita, and became a student there where all others had normal sight and hearing. . . In all (1928) she can play about one hundred numbers from memory, all classical . . . There was nothing of the amateur musician about this girl's masterful playing. There was everything of the artist about her playing Chopin's *Valse in A Minor* so reverently. To each measure she gave beauty of tone and perfect technic—to the whole, fineness of feeling and interpretation of mood . . .

"Some of her time she puts to making additions to her musical library, which she made herself by copying point music from libraries in Albany, Cincinnati and Congressional."† Today this library numbers over 6,000 pieces and is worth about \$3,000.

This article in *The Etude* from which we have quoted freely was entitled "The Most Amazing Achievement in the History of Music Study." The editor wrote: "The facts in this article seemed so incredible that we refused to publish them until they could be investigated and verified by a professional musician. Therefore we asked Dr. Karol Liszniewski of the artist faculty of the Cincinnati Conservatory to visit Miss Martin and report to us."

That report mentions a dozen classics played for him during the interview. "What she does is quite extraordinary, and—here is the main point for me—apparently gives her great pleasure! What a divine thing is music, if it can make even deaf people

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† Alice Kling.

happy! I do not hesitate to say that she is quite remarkable. I found her sitting at the typewriter, which she has used since she was six. She was answering letters from persons who had written following her appearance at a musicale here. I read some of those letters. They were written in choice English and there was not one mistake in them. . . The visit made a great impression on me."

Miss Martin attended a concert by Paderewski, and "heard" a part of the master's playing by holding in her lap a square tin can in which syrup had come from the grocery. She met him afterward behind the scenes. He took her face in his hands, kissed her, and said: 'You are wonderful! I know in all the world no other musician who has overcome such handicaps as you have.'"<sup>8</sup>

Our little Nebraskan had an hour's visit with Helen Keller in the parlor of a Lincoln hotel. "To know her personally seemed beyond even my wildest dreams," wrote Helen Martin. "Her whole personality seemed love. . . I think she understood all the deeper feelings that I made no effort to express. There was one moment of extreme enjoyment that no words can express, and then she was gone." Perfect understanding — communion without words! Is this the manner of our converse in the world beyond? "As we stepped out into the street, the twilight of a perfect day had fallen. The wind was high and cold, but everything passed as in a dream. All the way back to my uncle's home Miss Keller was still with me in spirit, and she has remained so through the days that have followed. I hope it will be so always."<sup>9</sup>

Continuing, Mr. Macdonald wrote: "In an interview with Helen Keller in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a newspaper man spoke of Helen May Martin as 'a second Helen Keller,' to which Miss Keller retorted: 'She is not a "second" to me, for she has done what I could never do; she has made of herself an accomplished pianist and musician. She is the only deaf and blind musician. She is the most accomplished deaf and blind person in the world.'"

Fred Lewis, noted artist of Sioux City, invited Helen to his studio and then told the story in his paper. We quote very briefly:

"The other day she 'heard' James Reistrup play Beethoven's

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<sup>8</sup>A. B. Macdonald.

<sup>9</sup>A. B. Macdonald.



Moonlight Sonata by simply laying her hands on the sounding board. She so delighted in listening to his interpretation that she asked him to play it again and again. At certain passages she held her hands over Reistrup's to 'watch' his fingering. Then she sat at the piano and played the Sonata 'his way.'

"... She studied a wood carving of the Lion of Lucerne for a while and then told us all about that Lion's tragedy, which historical discourse disposed of Marie Antoinette, Louis XVI and the French revolution.

"She laid hands on a small bronze head of Mary, Queen of Scots, and presently began telling A. F. Allen (editor and owner of the *Sioux City Journal*) all about Holyrood palace and the murder of Riccio.

"She was handed another little bronze head. This seemed to be a new face and headgear in her experience of historic characters. Her mother with her fingers said, "Dante." Miss Martin instantly replied, 'Oh, yes! The great Italian poet. I'm glad to see what he really looked like.' Then she told the story of Dante and Beatrice.

"Shown the replica of a great marble statue, she first felt of its sandaled feet; from the foot her hand followed up the folds of the gown to the knee; she climbed on a chair and her fingers stroked the long beard; then over the face to the top of the head. We thought those famous horns might disconcert her, but when she clutched them she cried, 'Moses!' Then she went straight back to the tablets beneath his right arm and said, 'The Ten Commandments.'

"Her study of the old masters had certainly taught her all there is to know about Michaelangelo's Moses."<sup>10</sup>

Helen's mind is like a diamond with many facets. She is an extremely balanced and practical young woman, and her interests are widely diversified. ("Young woman" is a term often applied to her by the interviewers, tho her birth-date is December 18, 1893.) She will be young even when her physical counterpart is old, for her serene spirit holds the secret of eternal youth. Loving and beloved among her hundreds of friends, always active in her self-appointed tasks, always happy and confident,

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<sup>10</sup> Fred Lewis.

knowing her own power, she lives such a life as all mortals will know when we recognize the Fatherhood and so make Brotherhood a divine reality.

"There are twelve different systems of printed reading for the blind," wrote Mr. Macdonald. "Helen reads them all readily. She subscribes to sixteen magazines in Braille, among them *The Reader's Digest*. It costs \$20 a year and she could not afford that, but for a long time it has been sent to her by C. Q. Chandler of Wichita, who also gave her the harp upon which she loves to play. She takes a book review and a musical review, published in Paris. To be able to read them she taught herself French by studying the same books in English and French.

"She reads her fashion magazine religiously. 'She dresses in the newest modes, as you can see,' said her mother. 'She chooses all her colors and they blend beautifully always. She is very particular about her shoes and it is wonderful to watch her choose them. She is exceedingly neat and dainty in everything.'

"Her mother claims there are few housekeepers as good as Helen. She sews, washes dishes, sweeps, irons as well as anyone, is the best salad-maker her mother knows, and excels her and Gertrude in making cakes, pies and bread. In fact, she won first prize in an annual bread-making contest in Olathe. When Mrs. Martin had a millinery store there, Helen did most of the house-keeping. She tatted an American flag, in colors, without an imperfect stitch among its 32,000.

"I asked Helen: 'How did you ever do it?'

"Mother, tell him that I have ten eyes in my ten fingers. Tell him not to be amazed at what I do, but to think of the wonderful things done by blind persons all through the ages.'

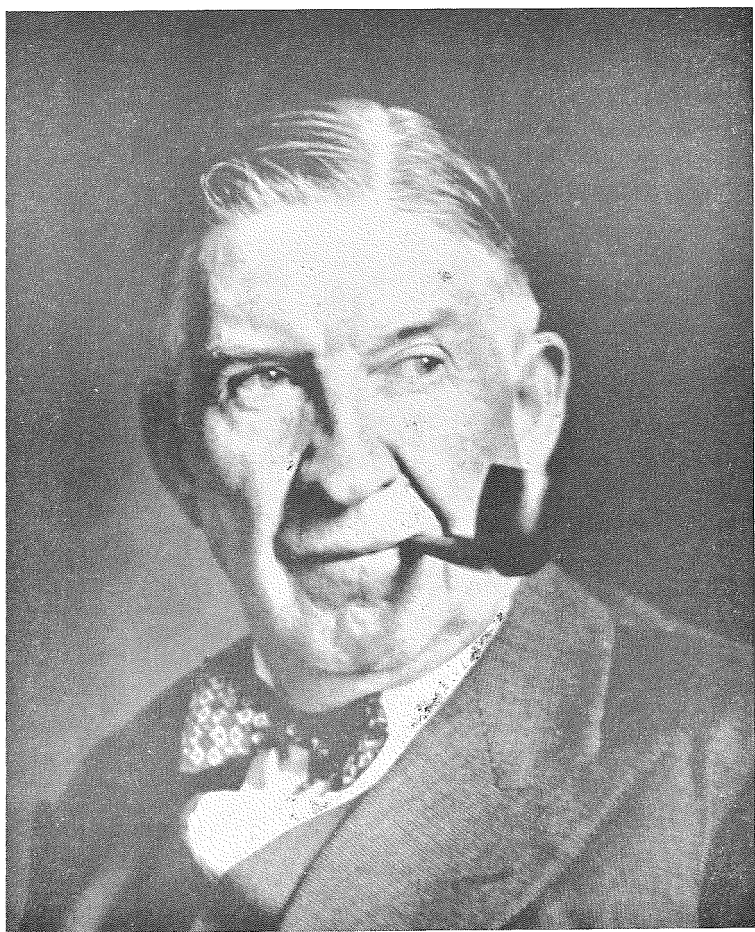
"'But you can neither see nor hear,' I persisted.

"'With patience and perseverance anything can be done,' she answered. . . 'In those early years I do not remember ever knowing discouragement.'

"The president of a radio company invented and made, especially for her, a radio receiving set which magnifies the incoming sounds and causes the disc to vibrate."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> A. B. Macdonald.



BOB DAVIS HIMSELF

Courtesy Davart

"But it is at the piano that I found her most often, playing softly, just the shade of a smile on her serious, small face, enjoying her music more than anything else in the world." <sup>12</sup>

Down in Georgia occurred "a simple meeting between two famous persons. Helen May Martin, who is recognized as the 'most wonderful musician in the world,' extended her fingers a bit eagerly, a bit shyly, and said, 'I'd never dreamed of meeting you. It's such an honor!'

"And Harry Stillwell Edwards, who, as everyone knows, is Macon's most distinguished author and gallant gentleman, took the girl's hand and stood without speaking as she touched his hair, his face and shoulders, her fingers trembling with excitement and happiness. Then he put his arm around her shoulder and walked with her to his study at Holly Bluff." Among his parting gifts was a book of his own, inscribed: "For Helen May Martin (Darlin' for short), from Harry Stillwell Edwards, with respect, admiration and love." <sup>13</sup>

In that famous column of *The New York Sun* which has appeared thrice weekly for over fifteen years under the caption "Bob Davis Reveals," we found last year a story of particular interest to Nebraskans who knew Mr. Davis first as a native son; later as that one particular editor on *Munsey's* staff who has brought into the public eye a long, long list of distinguished writers, and whose personal acquaintance is perhaps the most extensive of any living editor and ramifies into all quarters of the globe, which he has girdled many times. He is author of the "Ode to the Printing Press" that is known in all languages, and so well liked that over two thousand pirated versions are in existence. He has taken more than three thousand photographic portraits of distinguished people, not one line of which has ever been retouched. So remarkable is his art in these likenesses that an exhibit from his collection drew ten thousand visitors. Arnold Bennett described him as one of "the most dramatic and enthralling letter writers alive," and Richard Le Gallienne wrote: "Never has the habitable globe been 'reported' so extensively, so vividly and so understandingly as in the swift, masterly sketches which make up twelve of his volumes."

<sup>12</sup> Alice Kling.

<sup>13</sup> Hazel Birch.

There is a special kinship between Helen Martin and Bob Davis in their tolerance, sympathy and genuine interest in human beings. "He leaves so many friends in the far-away places," wrote William Lyon Phelps, "that if you go there yourself and mention his name, everything becomes yours at once." More than ever, then, can we appreciate his impressions of Helen:

"Her mother, born in Brownville, Nebraska, (my own birth-place) had honored me with an invitation to witness the amazing accomplishments of her daughter, who from childhood neither saw nor heard except with her mind's eye and her inner ear. . . Believe it or not, Bob Ripley, but Mrs. Martin imparted the startling information that the same medico brought us both into the world, one year apart. 'His name was Dr. S. A. Holliday, and he was the family physician for several miles up and down the Missouri River,' said my friend from the Cornhusker State. . . And so she presented me to Helen as the boy who lived in the house next to hers far away and long ago.

"Indeed, it was a weird experience to observe and hear this grown woman (although she has the face and stature of a girl of fifteen) at the keyboard. Her music, played with infinite softness, free from crescendo, possesses a remoteness almost spiritual.

...

"When a child, strolling with her mother along a country road, she always wanted to be informed of the visible beauty seen by her parent. And as they walked, Mrs. Martin 'told' into her daughter's palm the endless story of nature's loveliness.

"On a visit to the Wisconsin Dells, during a display of Northern Lights, Helen gave evidence that the phenomenon had manifested its presence to her inner consciousness. So complete in detail was her mother's description, conveyed by dancing fingers to her miraculous daughter, that Helen reduced her inner vision to writing. It is here quoted as further evidence that sightless eyes and deaf ears see and hear the rustling of the spheres:

"The night we were about to leave Devil's Lake, we had a great thrill watching the Northern Lights—great shafts of rainbow colors in the sky, forming a mighty curtain hung in the form of an arch, the keystone of which touched the zenith, its two ends resting upon the eastern and western horizons. The curtain, never at rest, seemed to be moved by an unseen hand that shook it in waves of changing color, the folds shifting rapidly up and down across the sky, making the colors merge, blue changing to crimson and purple in one vast kaleidoscope. We could

even hear the soft rustling of the curtain suspended in the sky like richly dyed silk moving there for our pleasure, and we stood hushed in amazement at what God could do. Then to the tremulous sky came a moment of rest—and presto! before our astonished gaze appeared millions of rainbow-colored, fan-shaped shells. God seemed very near, and the deep ‘peace that passeth all understanding’ enfolded us.

“To what source may one trace the gifts of this remarkable woman laboring in silence and darkness? And yet a world that would be cheerless and drab to others is to this extraordinary mortal a heaven on earth, a veritable paradise through which she walks, ever elated, thankful to be at her mother’s side.

“Uncomplaining, sure of her destiny, yearning to know more, feel more and live happily in her allotted sphere, she moves onward, grateful to those who have brought beauty into her life.”

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So here ends the story of this amazing little woman as told by those privileged to know her. It seems fitting to close with a letter from Helen herself, written to this office on the 19th day of November last year:

“This is my mother’s wedding anniversary. She was married at Omaha. We wish we were in Brownville today. You know it is almost a ghost town now, but the scenery is glorious. And I was always happy climbing those bluffs. We hope to be there when the bridge is opened in the spring. That bridge was the dream of two generations of the family before me. Both my grandfather and the uncle who died last year had hoped to live to see that bridge built. Now, with my sister’s tragic death on May 1, we are all that is left.

“I am planning a book, in fiction style, of the last four generations of the family, but it will take lots of historical research. And there are few if any state histories in Braille.”

At our request, Mrs. Martin sent us the following extracts from Helen’s diary. They give just a glimpse of the Peter Pan spirit that is forever hers, the constant awareness of beauty and romance thrilling her soul with delight. Yet she is “blind.” How much do we see who have the gift of sight?

*October 29, 1933.* We have a program at Ashland tomorrow night at the prettiest little church, so we went on down to Lincoln. After lunch at a darling little tea room we went to the Capitol, up to the tower on the sixteenth floor, and out on a portico to see the city from that height. It looked like a dolls’ village! The wind was blowing hard. They have walls breast-high around the porticoes or we would have been blown off like scraps of paper. Probably the most beautiful capitol in the United States—and I was proud of it! The State where I was born; and more, the very city where I was born; and—still more thrilling—we could look at the very windows of the room where I was born. Next we visited the historical museum and found my grandfather’s name in some of the books. Among the antiques was a very old piano I ached to try.

*May 30, 1938.* We were up and off at four o'clock on our trip to Brownville. We had decided to go up on the Missouri side this time, and it was very beautiful. They had planted roses and flowers all along the highway, and there were hills and valleys and the bluffs. After the rain we had last night it was a perfectly lovely day for the trip.

From the Missouri side as we drew nearer we could see the bluffs of Brownville. Another car was with us as we crossed on the hand ferry. It was a great thrill, as we had never approached Brownville that way. The way my grandfather had gone—but what a different picture he must have seen! It must have been a dense forest then. Just think—my mother and her brothers had walked across here many times on ice. Before we left the boat she could see so plainly the houses that she knew.

We drove straight to the cemetery on the highest bluff, where you can see up and down the river for miles. Stand in Nebraska, look over into Missouri, then up to the north only a few miles and see Iowa; and, farther south, just a point of Kansas—and the Missouri River like a silver ribbon winding through.

The graves were already decorated, and everywhere was the fragrance of roses. I felt that I had stepped way back in time—that I was in a garden of many, many years ago. The thought was thrilling: it gets bigger and lovelier all the time.

The Live-Forever on my grandfather's tombstone was prettier than I had ever seen it. Planted many years ago by mother's old friend Rena.

We drove east to the city park for lunch and looked across to the south bluff where stands the high school as in my mother's girlhood days. Just a few years ago I had played there in the same room where my mother had studied. It was at a meeting of the Parent-Teacher Association—unheard of in the eighties when my mother was a little girl at school.

So wherever she goes through life Helen "looks" and Helen "sees" and Helen "hears" and thrills, making her own all the majesty and mystery and glory of this wondrous world God gave to His children.

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