Helen Stewart Statue Dedicated at Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort State Historic park

On December 3, 2011 on a cold blustery day, over 300 government officials, civic leaders, friends, and descendants gathered to honor, Helen J. Stewart, often called, “The First Lady of Las Vegas. The statue was dedicated to her near her former home, now the grounds of the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort State Historic Park at the southeast corner of Washington and Las Vegas Boulevard.

Dr. Linda Miller, Helen Stewart interpreter, coordinated the speakers. Speakers were selected who reflected the various organizations Helen Stewart represented. Friends of the Fort President Don Hotchkiss and Nevada State Parks Administrator David Morrow lead the list of speakers. Helen J. Stewart was a civic leader who had governors, state legislators and U.S. Congressmen in her home. Representative Shelley Berkley discussed Helen’s closeness with government officials and her contributions to the community. Senator Harry Reid had here accomplishments put into the Congressional Record and this was presented by his aide Melissa Varelis. Senator Heller also sent a proclamation which was presented by his aide Britt Chapman. Former Governor and U.S. Senator Richard Bryan spoke on her closeness with the first families of Nevada. Mayor Carolyn Goodman was thanked by Dr. Miller for the funding from the Las Vegas Centennial Commission which provided the funding for the statue. State Senator Ruben Kuehen, who now represents the district where her home was stood, spoke about her influence on legislation to get the state to pay for her enormous (600) Paiutes basket collection to be displayed at the State Museum. Unfortunately, negotiations broke down before her death in 1926 and all her baskets but one were sold by the family. Her closeness to the Paiutes was reflected by the musical prelude conducted by Kenny Anderson of the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe. Robert Segmiller, vice chair of the tribe explained how well they were treated by Helen Stewart. Charlene Eswonia, the great grand-daughter of Daisy Ben Smith, a Paiute who worked for Helen Stewart, showed a picture of Daisy taken by Helen.

Dr. Linda Young, a Clark County School Board trustee, explained Helen’s love for education and her election as the first woman to serve on the school board in 1916. County Commissioner Mary Beth Scow read a quote from one of Helen’s letters describing her excitement for her son William being elected to the county commission as it would “show his metal”. Bishop Dan Edwards representing the Episcopal Church of Nevada, described Helen’s deep faith and her involvement in the founding and naming of Christ Episcopal Church.

Roy York of Rotary International presented a proclamation describing the humanitarian work that Helen had done. She was preparing to be at the 1926 Rotary International Convention with her basket collection when she died in March 1926. The Rotarians sent Helen flowers every week during her illness.

Craig Colton, Postmaster of Las Vegas, honored Helen Stewart who was the first postmaster of Las Vegas beginning in 1893. He said that her picture is the first one to hang on the wall of postmasters in the Sunset post office headquarters.

Immediate past president of the Mesquite Club Joan Powell ,talked about Helen’s accomplishments as a charter member of the Mesquite Club and responsible for suggesting the name of the club. Helen was also the fifth president of the club. Ruth Baty, Nevada President of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs also reflected on Helen’s contributions to the club.

Shelia McKay, honored Helen as a business woman and presented a proclamation honoring her business accomplishments. She also honored Dr. Miller with a pin.

A musical interlude was provided by 15 year old opera singer Ellie Smith. Helen Stewart while president of the Mesquite Club was responsible for bringing opera to Las Vegas. Ellie sang, “Think of Me” from Phantom of the Opera which was a fitting selection for the event as all were thinking about the accomplishments of Helen Stewart.

Descendants of Helen J. Stewart expressed their appreciation. There were about fifteen family members coming from several states. They gathered for a family reunion afterwards.

Benjamin Victor, sculptor, unveiled the statue of Helen J. Stewart. Gwendolyn Clancy discussed the documentary chronicling her life. Participants were then invited to view the video in the Fort’s theater while enjoying refreshments.

Helen Jane Wiser Stewart (1854-1926) moved to Las Vegas with her husband in 1882. Two years later her husband Archibald Stewart was killed at the Kiel ranch, and Helen took over running the “Los Vegas Ranch”. In later years, Helen and her father Hiram Wiser began buying land in response to rumors of the railroad going through the Las Vegas Valley. In 1902 Helen sold over 1800 acres to Senator Clark of Montana, who had ties to the railroad. In May, 1905, a land sale occurred, and the City of Las Vegas developed.

This work is a culmination of events that began in September 2008 when various community groups such as the Southern Nevada Women’s History Project, League of Women Voters, Daughters of the American Revolution, Nevada Council for History Education, Mesquite Club and Christ Church Episcopal Ladies Guild members joined with the Friends of the Fort to kick off fund raising for the statue at the Old Fort. Unfortunately, the down turn in the economy stalled fund raising efforts.

The Friends of the Fort, a non-profit organization that works with the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort State Historic Park, applied for and was awarded $99,000 by the Las Vegas Centennial Commission on July 26, 2010, to fund the statue of Helen Stewart. Dr. Linda Miller as Helen J. Stewart and Phyllis Weaver as Delphine Squires, made the presentation. Sculptor Benjamin Victor was chosen to design and create the statue. He also sculpted the Sarah Winnemucca statue in Statuary Hall in the US Capitol.

For more information contact the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort State Historic Park at 486-3511 or Dr. Linda Miller at 492-7742