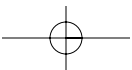
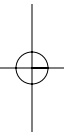


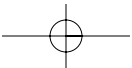
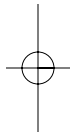
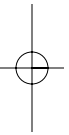


*A Mind
of Her Own*





WISCONSIN LAND AND LIFE



*A Mind
of Her Own*



HELEN CONNOR LAIRD AND FAMILY
1888–1982

Helen Laird

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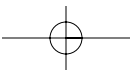
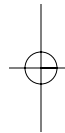
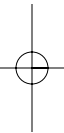
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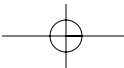
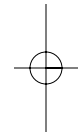
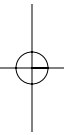
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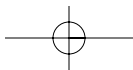
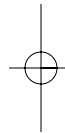
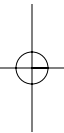




Our Best People

Our best people are able to discriminate between what is best and what is mediocre or common and they are also wise enough to hold onto the best of all time, even though it be the past. They are not “the first by which the new is tried, nor yet the last to lay the old aside.” That is, they do not dash ahead until they are pretty sure they have something better. They believe in old-fashioned virtues such as honesty, fair play in the home as well as in the nation’s affairs. They believe in justice, in consideration of others, in the saving grace of kindness and hospitality, and they usually have some faith in their fellow man and rejoice that, in spite of difficulties, he still aspires. Our best people are usually quite modest, unassuming people whose influence sometimes permeates a community rather than directs it, but they are the great stabilizers and in them lives the real worth, the hope of our nation.

—HELEN CONNOR LAIRD



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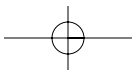
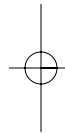
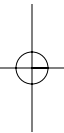
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Prologue

In 1923, Helen Connor Laird delivered a brief autobiographical sketch to a group of ministers' wives. The "great popularity" of several current autobiographies made her think that even her "humdrum life might have something of interest to others." A thirty-five-year-old "homemaker," member of the "restless" generation of college-educated women, she had no crystal ball. She did not know that history would largely ignore her father, W.D. Connor, a pioneer in Wisconsin's hardwood lumber industry, and an important figure in state politics during the period 1903–12; that her husband, Melvin Robert Laird, a Presbyterian minister, would become an esteemed state senator; that she would become a regent of the University of Wisconsin; or that her son Melvin R. Laird Jr. would become "one of the great leaders Wisconsin has produced," whose name would appear in the indexes of numerous political histories. Great achievements and great sorrows lay ahead in the life that proved to be not at all "humdrum."

Her long life's journey, which began in 1888 and ended in 1982, reflects the proud and painful American twentieth century. Her personal story, interwoven with that of the exceptional men in her life, including her competitive brothers, speaks to the way we were and are: a stridently materialistic nation with a deep and persistent spiritual component. This is her story and theirs, the telling of which would not have been possible had she not been a keeper of records, a "closet historian" as well as "closet poet," and had not those with whom she was most closely associated also been keepers of records. The progressive movement and the La Follette name have become almost synonymous with Wisconsin history. This saga of one of the state's leading moderate Republican families over three generations broadens the scope of that history.



Acknowledgments

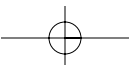
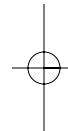
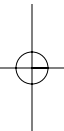
Helen Connor Laird, my mother-in-law, saved scrapbooks and diaries, her own and her husband's, as well as business and political documents, newspaper clippings, notes, essays, stories, speeches, poems, and letters. Disorganized as they all were—and scattered throughout her home, garage, and attic—they, the Helen Connor Laird family collection, became the basis for this biography. My brother-in-law Melvin R. Laird, “Bom,” graciously shared the personal letters he received from his mother and granted me permission to review family letters in the Melvin R. Laird Collection in the archives of the Wisconsin Historical Society. My husband, David Laird, has been supportive of this project over many years. I am grateful for his patience, his willingness to respond to hundreds of questions (to be interrupted in his work to “listen to this”), and am deeply humbled by his conviction that his family story was in good hands. That he sustained that conviction, following the manuscript's acceptance by the University of Wisconsin Press and his careful scrutiny of it, confirms my belief in miracles.

Many other members of the Connor and Laird families, some now deceased, contributed oral testimony and/or written material: Patricia (Laird) Thomas, Jessica Doyle, Lissa Laird, Angie Connor, William Duncan Connor Jr., Andy and Thelma Connor, Mary Roddis Connor, Gordon Phelps Connor, Sara Connor, Elizabeth Connor Campbell, and Jean Connor Evans.

The Connor Lumber and Land Company materials located in the archives of the Wisconsin Historical Library provided insight into the family's turbulent business and personal history. The university archives located in the University of Wisconsin Memorial Library enabled me to trace Helen's distinguished career as a regent.



Augusta Roddis shared her memories, and Edwin Witter Jr. shared his work of many years tracing the genealogical lines and history of the Witter and Phelps families. Lloyd Listle steered me to “Lower Town.” Walt and Agnes Carter and “Bud” and Marian Hanson, Connor Company employees, shared their stories about life in Laona in the “old days.” Arlett Spector, former editor of the *Forest Republican*, welcomed me into the back office where I spent many summer afternoons reading the back editions she kindly provided. Kent Calder and Michael Stevens gave much-needed encouragement. Vanessa Laird and Timothy Raylor read the manuscript with great sensitivity, corrected errors, and gave good advice.



A Note on Some Family Names

Mary or Mame is Huldah Maybelle Witter Connor.

W.D. is William Duncan Connor.

William is William Duncan Connor II.

Billie is William Duncan Connor III.

Richard is W.D.'s son.

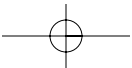
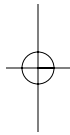
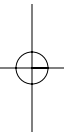
Dickens is Richard's son.

Dick is Richard Laird.

Bom or Bam is Melvin R. Laird Jr.

Rob is Robert Connor, W.D.'s brother.

Aunt Florence is Rob's wife.





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