

Helen Margaret Lester Plants



Helen Margaret Lester was born in Desloge, Missouri, in March 1925, the only child of Rollo Bertell and Margaret Stephens Lester.

She entered the University of Missouri as a journalism major, but soon switched to Civil Engineering. She received her BSCE in 1945. She joined West Virginia University in 1947 as a graduate student and Instructor in Mechanics, and received her MS in Civil Engineering in 1953. She was a Professor of Theoretical and Applied Mechanics and of Curriculum and Instruction in the Division of Education at WVU. She became Professor Emeritus, Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering in 1983. From 1985 to 1990 she served as Chair of Civil Engineering Technology at Indiana University-Purdue University - Fort Wayne.

Her husband Ken Plants had been a "bureaucrat" with the US Bureau of Mines in Morgantown - a chemical engineer with great expertise in cost estimation. Some of their "courting" evenings were spent manually checking the design calculations on the Star City, WV bridge, designed by the Dean and State Bridge Engineer. Helen and Ken had a daughter and two sons. Their daughter Francis lives in Tulsa, is a consulting geologist (married to a geologist) and has two daughters of high school/college age. While in Morgantown Helen was active in Trinity Episcopal Church where she served as a Vestryman and Bishop's Man. For many years she was a Girl Scout leader. Helen died in Tulsa, Oklahoma in September 1999.

From the beginning of her academic career, she was a gifted teacher and a role model for the few women students at West Virginia University at that time. Later, she became an advocate of programmed and individualized instruction. She and Wally Venable wrote series of papers on these topics and several texts: *Introduction to Statics, a Programmed Text*, (1975), *A Programmed Introduction to Dynamics* (1967), and *Mechanics of Materials, A Programmed Textbook*

(1974). She established the first doctoral program in Engineering Education at West Virginia University.

In 1975, the University of Missouri at Columbia recognized her with the Missouri Honor Award for Distinguished Service in Engineering. She became an ASEE Fellow in 1983 as a member of the first class of Fellows. She also received Distinguished Service Award, Western Electric Fund Award, and was an ASEE Vice-President (1974 – 1976).

The Helen Plants award is given for the best non-traditional presentation at the Frontiers in Education (FIE) conference.

Helen Plants was one of the pioneers in the Educational Research and Methods Division. She was chair of the ERM for three terms (1970-71, 1971-72, 1972-73), and she served as the Secretary/Treasurer for one year before that. She was a regular contributor to the *ERM Magazine* and *Engineering Education*. After the ERM Division became a co-sponsor of FIE, she led the efforts to develop workshops and other creative sessions for the conference. The conference then decided to recognize her creativity and contributions by naming this award for her, as she truly exemplified the characteristics that the sessions exemplify.

The above bio-sketch was assembled from information provided by Wally Venable, Ed Jones, Jim Stice, and John Lindenlaub. Some personal recollections of Helen appear below:

Recollections from Jim Stice:

Helen's husband, Ken, nearly always accompanied her to the ASEE annual conferences, and was a genial fellow.

I remember the years when Helen was the Chairperson of ERM. Now, that lady had drive! Man, the members of the Board were running with their tongues hanging out from the time we got to the conference! She nearly always had a rump session on Saturday night, and Sunday through Tuesday nights we always had meetings. They'd maybe not start until 9 o'clock or so, to give people time to attend evening sessions or banquets, but we got going sooner or later, and those meetings often lasted until well after midnight. As I remember, some of the folks who attended were Gordon Flammer, Lois Greenfield, George Hankins, John Lindenlaub, Jerry Paskusz, Billy Koen, Carol Goodson, Wally Venable, Joe Boland, Dendy Sloan, and me. And we got a lot done – I think ERM had more balls in the air in those days than any other division in ASEE. And our membership increased faster than any other division, by far. Helen worked harder than anyone, and saw to it that ERM was responding to members' needs in an organization that up to that time had essentially been a "Deans' Club."

I don't remember the details any more, but she had a hand in arranging for the

1974 FIE to be held in London. Those of us who attended felt it was a howling success. A memorable thing happened there. The British hosts had arranged for a reception to be held for those of us visiting from “the colonies.” It was to be held at the St. James Palace, and we each got a personal, written invitation – except Helen. When we got wind of this, we asked the hosts why she wasn’t invited. (As I recall, she was a recent chairperson of ERM, and an ASEE vice president.) “Well, old boy, it’s not done. There aren’t any female engineering professors in our organization,” or words to that effect. We did a quick caucus, and then told them that if Helen wasn’t invited, none of the rest of us would come. And we meant it! In short order it turned out that an invitation was hand-delivered to Helen, and she (and the rest of us) attended. Score one for the Yanks. I was proud of us.

Another memory was of the FIE meeting in Vienna-Budapest in 1990. Helen had done sabbaticals in the Philippines and at Kingston Polytechnic (now Kingston University) and later Brighton Poly in England. She had got acquainted with some of the people who were interested in engineering education in Europe, especially men from a technical institute in Klagenfurt, Austria. Along the way, interest began to build in having a conference on engineering education which would draw from Europe, the USA, and anyone else who wanted to come. It was decided to hold such a conference, and the overall chairman appointed to arrange the whole shebang was Victor Schutz, of Temple University – Vic spoke German, he had contacts, and he took off with a rush and a roar. He appointed Helen and me as co-chairs of the technical meetings for ERM, and Harriet Rigas as chair for the Education Group of IEEE. We started receiving and reading papers in 1989, and finally had the program ready to go before the meeting was held. Unfortunately, Harriet developed cancer in 1989, and died before the meeting took place, so Vic appointed someone else to take her place.

The meeting was a success – everyone I knew who went thoroughly enjoyed it. Most of the ERMers stayed in a converted convent in the Vienna Woods. Pretty place, but they locked it up at night – and it was a long ride from “The Ring” downtown to our convent. Helen and I were the “housemothers,” who let people in after hours. I hesitate to say that any of our lot were party animals, but that job cost us some sleep!

After the meeting, I didn’t see Helen again, but heard about her health problems. I was genuinely sad when I heard she had died. There was a lively lady with brains, class, vision and unbounded energy – and a good sense of humor! They don’t make many like her any more.

Recollections from John Lindenlaub:

Helen was a great mentor. My first ASEE Conference was at Penn State in 1969. Helen took me under her wing giving me guidance and encouragement. She introduced me to Bug House Square and all the other ERM exciting activities

of the time. First thing I know I was planning and giving workshops, etc.

Helen's whole family rooted for ERM. Her children posted notices all around campus - in the elevators, doors to the cafeteria, etc. In the men's rooms you would find an ERM notice above each urinal. (I'm not sure what was posted in the women's rooms.) She played an important role in teaming up with the IEEE Education Group (now Education Society) to co-sponsor FIE.

Recollections from Wally Venable:

Helen and I started working together in 1966. We had met casually through her daughter's interest in amateur geology which was shared by my wife. I was a Part-Time Instructor and she was an Assistant Professor and by Departmental policy, we shared her office. (Great plan, putting the most inexperienced new instructors in an office with an old hand). Of course we gave that up in the early 1990s.) She got me involved in ERM/ASEE for the Los Angeles meeting. As a result I remember "the other side of the story" on a lot of the ERM history.

Helen and I looked up to a lot of people like John because they had discovered things we had not even heard of yet. It wasn't until later that we found out we were all more-or-less the same age in terms of our understanding of education.

The major trigger was the ASEE Programmed Learning Project. This was intended to tell engineering faculty how to write programs, but the effect was much broader because the organizer brought in a behavioral physiologist who was a great match for the group.

Augustine A. "Gus" Root would open a session by saying "I used to be an engineer." He would then wait as long as it took until someone asked, "Well, what are you now?" In short, Gus wasn't just a "content expert," he knew the value of a good show in inspiring learners, as well as the importance on learner response and reinforcement.

It was a very exciting time!

For an archive of publications on Engineering Education at West Virginia University, see <http://www2.cemr.wvu.edu/~wwwenged/>