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*Helen Deming*

## *Art Kept Her Going*

*by Margie Cooke Porteus*

During the late 1920's and the 1930's, many children in the Thomas area had special moments of happiness learning basic painting techniques from a dedicated teacher. It would be interesting to know how many of the students used their teacher's paints and brushes because their parents couldn't afford to buy supplies for their children. Oftentimes the parents paid for the lessons with milk, eggs, or vegetables.

The teacher made arrangements with the owners of the local dry goods stores to save for her the heavy cardboard that fabrics were wrapped around. These rectangles were used as horizontal or vertical

canvases; consequently, hundreds of simple sunsets and mountain scenes on identical shapes decorated the walls of many Thomas homes. There were some paying adult students, but the teacher showed interest mainly in children and young people.

This art teacher was Helen Deming. She grew up in the Thomas area, attended Southwestern Normal School in 1911, and did work at the Chicago University Preparatory School in 1919-1920.

In 1921, Miss Deming was head of the Art Department at Northern Oklahoma College in Tonkawa. A dedication to her in the 1921 yearbook read: "Miss Deming has great ability in her chosen line. There has been much work accomplished under her direction." She taught at Northern six more years before returning to Thomas.

Why did Miss Deming give up her career as a successful college teacher? Her stepfather, R. R. Cooke, was becoming feeble; and her mother had had a stroke which confined her to a wheelchair. So Helen returned home to care for them. She nursed Mr. Cooke through a long illness until his death and learned the care needed for a wheelchair patient.

How did she keep her creativity alive? Once she enrolled in an art correspondence course but didn't finish it because her mother objected to the nude drawings she was asked to do. Painting was her therapy. She painted on anything — canvas, glass, velvet; she painted flowers on silk for headscarves, painted flowers on little girls' dresses, painted designs on crib covers. She painted and taught painting.

Because Helen's mother couldn't be left alone and since Helen loved children, she encouraged her students to come to her home. She taught them how to mix paints, how to hold a brush, and how to paint simple scenes; most important, she taught them an appreciation of art. If they showed talent, she encouraged her young students to do more ambitious projects.

She gave holiday parties for the children; she had the first private kindergarten in Thomas in her home, complete with caps and gowns for graduation. Since she couldn't leave the house to teach a Sunday School class, she had a missionary society for children in her home. In all of these activities, art was an important part.

Through all of these years, she and her mother kept a positive attitude and wonderful sense of humor. It must have been because of the children and, of course, the art. ❧