

Hazel Heckman Biography

Hazel Melissa Price was born April 6, 1904 in Liberty Kansas. She was the youngest of 5 children of William and Alice Price, who lived and farmed in Liberty for many years. Hazel grew up loving the outdoors and finding joy in the opportunities she had to help her parents around the farm. She attended Liberty High School and graduated from nearby Independence High School in 1922. She attended the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas, majoring in Education, appearing in the Jayhawker Yearbook in 1926 as a member of Pen & Scroll, a Freshman & Sophomore Literary Society for which membership was based on competitive tryouts. She married Earle Heckman, a native of Liberty, at Independence, Kansas, on September 4, 1926, whereupon they settled in Blackwell, Oklahoma. Earle was part owner and a supervisor in a foundry. Hazel worked for several years in the copy room and as a beat writer on the Blackstone Daily News. She began pursuing her lifelong passion for writing during the 1930's. She co-authored a yet unpublished novel, "One More Hostage," dated 1935, with Jesse Hart Wright, who may have been a relative, or a neighbor in Blackwell. Her son Jim was born in 1931.

Hazel's determination to succeed as a writer led her to take a series of courses in Creative Writing from Professor W.S. Campbell of the University of Oklahoma between 1939 and 1945. A collection of 34

writing projects she produced for this course survives in the Heckman Collection, each paper neatly typed on onion skin paper and bundled with twine. Every single paper was graded “A,” with frequent comments by Professor Campbell, such as “Excellent!” “Splendid,” and so forth. Her correspondence over many years with her professor, who wrote many books under the pen name Stanley Vestal, show that he regarded her as his “prize” student, and he was a source of much encouragement for her through the years when she struggled to get her work published.

Hazel began writing seriously in the 1940’s, frequently submitting short stories to national magazines, such as Saturday Evening Post, Woman’s Day, Argosy, and Harper’s. She later told the Tacoma News Tribune that her first published article was “Undesirable Aliens,” (about Starlings) but this has not yet been verified. For years she strove unsuccessfully to find a publisher for what she felt was to be her masterpiece, a collection of stories loosely based on the people of her home town which she called “Picket Rock.”

In 1946, Earle was hired as a supervisor by Atlas Foundry in Tacoma, Washington. Hazel and Earle, together with their son, moved to Tacoma. One of the first things she did was to enroll in Murray Morgan’s writing class at the College (now University) of Puget Sound. This marked the beginning of a life-long friendship between the two

writers. Murray wrote to his publisher (soon to be Hazel's as well) that there was a "girl" in his class who seemed to be destined to be the best of them all, "if she proves able to stick to it." At the time, Hazel was 43 and Murray was 35. The two began corresponding around 1948, a practice which continued for 50 years. More than any other person, Murray served as a mentor, coach and advocate for Hazel. His support was an enormous factor in Hazel's eventual success.

Sometime in the late 1940's, Hazel and Earle were invited to spend a weekend at the Joe Long (formerly Ostlings') farm on East Oro Bay. The farm was owned by Atlas Foundry and used by the Longs to entertain their customers and favorite employees. It was love at first sight, and just a few years later the Heckmans bought the old William Ekenstam place on Villa Beach Road (now "Ann of Green Gables") from William Baskett. Hazel and Earle eventually moved to the island full-time in 1964. This proved to be a defining moment in her career.

Success began to come to Hazel in the early 1950's, as her articles and short stories were published in many of the leading magazines. A serious student of nature, she quickly became an expert on the flora and fauna of the Pacific Northwest, and for the last forty years of her life she walked the woods and beaches of Anderson Island daily, taking copious detailed notes on what she found. A keen observer of human character, she came easily to love the people of the island community

and made many lasting friendships among the islanders. Bessie Cammon, *the* island historian, introduced Hazel to the stories of the pioneers and shared her memories of growing up on the island. Hazel was instrumental in getting Bessie to write her foundational book *Island Memoir* and helped her find a publisher for it. Meanwhile, Hazel's great book, *Island in the Sound*, was published in 1967 to much acclaim. It was followed by *Island Year* in 1972. Among the many awards Hazel received for her work is an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Puget Sound. Hazel continued to write short stories and kept up a voluminous correspondence practically to the end of her life.

Hazel took an active part in island life, participating in the Anderson Island Community Club and the Community Church. For years she made weekly trips to town to take fresh produce to a Food Bank. When interest in forming a historical society sprung up in 1975, Hazel attended all the early meetings and served on its Board of Directors for many years. She constantly strove to bring attention to the island's historic places and was a tireless advocate for environmental causes. Later in life, when she needed assistance to continue living at home, a group of islanders lead by Wendy Field, Frank Higgins, Liane Heckman, Tom White and Judy Beck put together a team of volunteers who lovingly cared for Hazel until the end of her days. Hazel passed away peacefully at her home on June 21, 2002.

The Heckman family generously donated a collection of Hazel's papers to the Anderson Island Historical Society in 2022. Included among this material are 6 novels, including the manuscripts of her three published books, and more than 150 short stories, many of which appeared in the magazines noted earlier, besides two plays and hundreds of letters written by Hazel and later returned to the family. The long range plan for this collection is to put virtually all of it into the hands of the public. Efforts are underway to find publishers for her other novels, and a volume of the *Complete Short Stories of Hazel Heckman* is under consideration. In the meantime, the material is being scanned, edited, and posted on the Anderson Island Historical Society website as it becomes available.

Epilogue

Eulogy delivered by Rick Anderson at memorial service for Hazel Heckman on June 27, 2002.