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## Lake Forest Country Places XII:

### "Rookwoods" at 1080 Ashlawn: Home of Helen Culver

One of a series of articles by Arthur Miller, Archivist and Librarian for Special Collections at Lake Forest College, originally published in the *Lake Forest Journal*, 1994-1997; some have been replaced or updated.

Positioned to look west toward the sunset from its high vantage point near Telegraph Road (now Waukegan Road) just north of Deerpath is "Rookwoods," the home of Helen Culver and later her nephew, Charles Hull Ewing. "Rookwoods," built in 1900 probably by the Chicago architects Pond & Pond, is extraordinary both as a handsome country house which contributes to the variety of this genre in town and also as the home of a remarkably successful and influential Chicago business person and philanthropist. For Helen Culver stands out among American women for the range of her accomplishments during the span of her life, from 1832 to 1925.

Miss Culver's historical importance has many aspects, but perhaps most critical is the impetus she provided for the founding of Chicago's Hull House in 1889 and, through that, also the influencing of the new settlement-house movement in America -- perhaps the most successful and durable social betterment vehicle to emerge at any time since the dislocations of the Industrial Revolution began in the early Nineteenth Century. By 1889 Chicago perhaps was the worst example of the breakdown of social order resulting from the reorganizations of work and workers under the factory system. Massive strikes from the 1870s to the 1890s tore at Chicago's vulnerable underbelly, the crowded tenement districts which had swelled to house the city's great influx of immigrants needed to staff the expanding plants of its steel, manufacturing, and meatpacking industries. Even well-meaning better-circumstanced people were at a loss -- much as they are today -- about how to ameliorate the inhumane conditions of these miserable districts and their desperate inhabitants.

In brief, Jane Addams and Helen Gates Starr, who had seen Toynbee Hall founded in 1884 in London's slums, decided to move into a Chicago tenement district themselves and set up a neighborhood center to help families beyond the basic-needs level of most charities -- with language training and other education, cultural orientation, and advocacy. Facilities included an auditorium (the Hull House Players performed for a Lake Forest party given by the Aldises in the Durand Institute Auditorium around 1911), a gymnasium, a self-sustaining residential club for single women, an art gallery, and apartments for volunteer staff for the programs. In a revolutionary way, Hull House treated the newcomers with deep respect. It encouraged them to preserve their homelands' cultures even while learning to navigate in a new, opportunity-rich setting. This originally English idea spread mostly from the influence of Hull House's comprehensive programs and Jane Addams' leadership to other American cities -- Philadelphia, New York, Boston -- and to other parts of Chicago, drawing middle- and upper-class people back into the city to work with the newcomers, enriching lives on both sides. Hull House, indeed, was influential world-wide.

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But literally there would have been no Hull House without Helen Culver. For it was she who first rented to Miss Addams, and later gave to her, her own near-west-side home, actually her cousin's 1856 Italianate brick house then already vacant -- which still stands on Halsted surrounded by the University of Illinois at Chicago -- and eventually hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash and property. While the world knows both Miss Addams and her classic *Twenty Years at Hull House* and also Charles Hull whose name both his original house and the now-relocated settlement organization still bear, Miss Culver -- the real patron -- is little known, at best, even in this town where she spent much of her last quarter century.

Miss Culver certainly owed a great debt to Charles Hull. She was thirty-six in 1868 when she joined him in his real estate business here in Chicago. By that time she already had succeeded at two careers: mainly as an educator but during the Civil War first as a nurse behind the battle lines, Arpee reports, and later as the matron (assisted only by two other women) of the forty-bed military hospital at Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Like other Lake Forest builders (Farwells, Bross, McClure, etc.), Miss Culver's life and education started in New York state -- where she graduated from Randolph Academy in 1852. In 1853 she started a private school in Sycamore, Illinois, but by 1854 was teaching in Chicago where until 1861 she served as teacher and principal in primary, grammar, and high-school programs. After the war she returned to Chicago, and -- according to Arpee -- "became the first woman to be commissioned a notary public in Illinois."

From 1868 to 1889 Miss Culver worked with her cousin, Charles Hull, in his real estate ventures in Chicago and around the nation, including Atlanta and Jacksonville, Florida. When he died in 1889, Miss Culver -- herself already in her late fifties -- inherited this empire and ran it for years until her nephew, Charles Hull Ewing, took over.

In addition to backing Jane Addams and contributing substantially to founding the comprehensive settlement-house movement in America (she was a trustee of Hull House until 1898 when she was sixty-five), along with other philanthropic projects Miss Culver donated a million dollars to the University of Chicago, for biological research: buildings and endowment. She favored women's suffrage, as well, according to a survey for the *Woman's Who's of America*, 1914-1915.

In Lake Forest Arpee tells us that she "was one of the first to appreciate the advantages of the 'Second Skokie'" -- starting the trend to build houses along the west side of what now is Waukegan Road by buying a neglected farm, the western extent of which today is undeveloped park land, bordering the Skokie. Here she was joined soon by the Arthur Meekers and by the Ogden Armours, both just to the south. Her own home is an ample, but more moderately-scaled country place than the Ogden Armours' "Melody Farms" (now Lake Forest Academy and the land east of it to Waukegan Road).

The architecture of "Rookwoods," not identified in the Lake Forest Library's "Community Cornerstones" file, is in the style of the Chicago firm of Pond & Pond, the architects who developed the thirteen-building Hull House complex around the turn of the century (their Refectory alone still stands adjacent to the original Hull House): two-toned brick, typical of the Tudor style but also emphasizing the horizontal -- as in the Prairie School, which was led by Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. The repeated diamond motif, a frequent design element in the Hull House buildings as depicted by Norma Hamilton in her drawings for *Twenty Years At Hull House*, is used at "Rookwoods" both in third-floor windows above the entry and also in the balustrade on the second floor porch. The elbow gables are reminiscent, too, not only of Hull House but of the now demolished 1893 Annie Durand Cottage of Lake Forest Academy by Pond & Pond, on what now is Lake Forest College's South Campus. Pond & Pond's Moore Hall, originally the Academy's East House, still stands there with related brickwork and towers. These and other architectural elements of "Rookwoods" not only suggest Pond & Pond, but generally reflect as well the English Arts and Crafts Movement of that time, the impetus for the dignifying of work and the uniting of life, work, order and classes which

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[Brown House](#)

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was at the root of the Hull House experiment. The irregularly double gabled facade, too, echoes that of Shaw's own 1897 English Arts and Crafts Ragdale here in Lake Forest.

Miss Culver is recalled in Arpee riding around Lake Forest on her bicycle after the turn of the century, where the community took pride in her Civil War pluck and philanthropic vision. Of course, she was no less of a woman business pioneer a century ago. In her last decade she was blind, but -- in anticipation of this -- had memorized poetry to sustain her. And during World War I she held the local production record for knitting scarves and socks for troops overseas, even though sightless. She spent all but summers during her last years in Sarasota, Florida -- returning in the gentle months to live with her nephew and his family at "Rookwoods" and to listen to the sounds of the sunset hour near the "Second Skokie."

(I acknowledge gratefully Peggy Glowacki, assistant to the director of Jane Addams' Hull House Museum, for calling my attention to Miss Culver, for providing Miss Culver's 1925 Lake Forester obituary, and for offering corrections to this article in draft. Also, Terry Tatum and Franz Schulze were generously helpful on architecture questions. As always, any inaccuracies or omissions are my own!)

Arthur Miller

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