

Helene Billing Wurlitzer: A Life of Supporting the Arts

- 1874** On December 15, Helene is born in Salt Lake City to German immigrant Gustav Billing and Henriette Schneider Billing, a Cincinnati, Ohio physician's daughter. The couple is in Utah establishing a mining smelter funded by Ohio investors.
- 1878** The family moves to Colorado to oversee the operation of a silver and lead smelter in Leadville.
- 1880** Gustav Billing purchases a mining operation in Magdalena, New Mexico just west of Socorro and soon moves his family to that city. Due to the silver boom, Socorro has a population that exceeds both Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Helene thrives in the care-free outdoors of the high New Mexico desert.
- 1887** The Billing family moves to Cincinnati, Henriette's childhood home.
- 1888** Helene's sister Ilse is born in Ohio and the family soon moves to Germany, her father's home, so the children can have a better education.
- 1890** Gustav dies unexpectedly and within a few years Henriette moves the family back to Cincinnati and proceeds to run the family mining business herself. She is an astute business woman and takes her daughters to New Mexico twice each year to inspect the mines. During these years, Helene meets Howard Wurlitzer, whose family manufactures musical instruments.
- 1895** Helene and Howard marry in a large German wedding. While Howard runs the Wurlitzer business, Helene studies and pursues artistic endeavors, with much of her energy spent on Cincinnati College of Music. The couple has three children, Raimund, Louise and Valeska.
- 1924** Daughter Ilse Louise dies at 26 from epilepsy, a result of being hit in the head with a rock thrown by a misguided lad.
- 1928** Howard dies at age 57 and his cousins take over the thriving business, by this time famous for its pianos, organs and jukeboxes.
- 1936** The Cincinnati College of Music appoints Helene its first woman trustee, a position she holds for 15 years. During this time, Helene meets Eduardo Rael, a young vocal scholarship student from Taos. She offers to pay his living expenses in exchange for Spanish lessons. This begins a lifetime friendship.
- 1939** Henriette Billing dies and Helene is for the first time in the position to decide for herself where she will live.

- 1940** Helene returns to New Mexico, place of her happy childhood memories. At Eduardo's urging, she visits Taos and becomes enchanted. She purchases 14 acres of land near Taos Plaza and returns each summer for 15 years, at which time she stays in Taos fulltime.
- 1942** Her adobe home, built by Arturo V. Martinez y Salazar, is completed and she moves in. The lintel over the front door is inscribed with the statement, "Built in the 11th Hour, 1942." Some say the reference is to World War II. Other believe the meaning references Hopi elder stories. Only Helene knows. Throughout the 40's Helene supports artists including Ansel Adams, Earl Stroh, Andrew Dasburg, Patrociño Barela, Tom Benrimo, Ira Moskowitz, Emil Bisttram and Dorothy Brett.
- 1950** Helene meets a young academic, Henry Saurerwein III, employed for ten years by the Pentagon in Maryland. He and his partner Burton Phillips have recently left their government employment and moved to Taos. Helene and Henry became close friends with a common interest in art, languages and music.
- 1954** With Henry's help, Helene establishes the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation with a mission to provide residencies and stipends for artists, writers and musicians. The first artist to receive a stipend grant is Agnes Martin. The board of directors includes community members from all three cultures.
- 1963** Helene dies at age 89.
- 1996** Henry Saurerwein dies at age 78 after leading the artist residency program for 42 years. Michael Knight becomes the foundation's second director and leads the organization for 18 years.
- 2015** Nic Knight becomes the foundation's third director and takes on the monumental task of digitizing archival materials and creating a database of the nearly 2000 residents who have stayed in one of the foundation's eleven casitas. As of this exhibition, artists from 1985 through 2018 have been documented on www.wurlitzerfoundation.org.
- 2018** First art exhibition of alumni of Helene Wurlitzer Foundation residency program opens at Harwood Museum of Art in Taos.