



**Written by Jean Bartlett, January 31, 2018  
(A Pacifica Historical Society Project)**



**Helen Donnan, Denfeld High School yearbook, 1941: "Girls' Club 2, 3, 4; Orchestra 2; Debate 4; W. C. T. U. 3, 4; Girls' Club Carnival 2, 3, 4; Publicity Committee for Jr. Class Play 3; Play Reading Committee for Sr. Class Play 4; "Cri" Reporter 3; News Book 3; Girls' Glee Club 2; Gym Cadet 4."**

"Why is it so important for people to be involved in their community?" was one of the first questions longtime Pacifican Helen James answered in this January 31, 2018 interview.

"The community is what we are and what we do for it," Helen said. "So we only have as good a community as what we put into it."

Helen Clara (Donnan) James was born on May 12, 1923 to Clark and Catherine (Webber) Donnan.

"I was born in Breckenridge, Minnesota. It borders North Dakota. It was a small town when I was born and I don't actually know if it is there anymore. We moved from Breckenridge to Duluth, MN, when I was quite young."

Breckenridge – a beautiful area where the Bois de Sioux River and the Otter Tail River join at Breckenridge and Wahpeton (Wahpeton is its twin city in North Dakota) to form the Red River of the North – is still very much there. The population hasn't grown much since Helen was born. The 1920 U.S. Census puts it at 2,400, and the 2010 Census places it at 3,386.

"My father grew up on a farm and his family owned farms in both the North Dakota and South Dakota areas. He worked as a farmer and his dream was to have his own farm. But he was more of a rover than a farmer. He had a natural-born traveler's instinct. Every three or four years he would go off looking for a farm. It was always that mythical farm.

"But around our house, with whatever land he had, he built a beautiful garden filled with vegetables.

"My mother was from Saint Paul, MN, and she came from a larger family than my father. A couple of my mother's brothers moved to Duluth, MN, and they had a horse and buggy shop that they eventually turned into a car dealership.

"When my mother was a teenager, she got job as a housekeeper and children's nanny with a family. She lived with the family as well. Somewhere along the way, she got a job with the Post Office. My parents met there though I don't really know the details. My father, who was a very handsome young man, used to kid that when he first saw her at the Post Office, he said something to her, probably to sweep her off her feet. But instead, she slammed the window down!

"Once my parents married, my mother did not work outside of the home for many years. In those days, women were sometimes viewed as second class citizens and so often jobs were not physically or socially available for them. My father, however, was very much ahead of his time. He believed that women should have all the same opportunities for an education as men had. He also believed women were equal partners in a marriage.

"The Parent-Teacher Association welcomed women as volunteers in the 1920s and 1930s, and my mother was early to sign up for that in Minnesota. I think she volunteered however she could in her community. But I remember one of the most empowering moments for her was when she was hired during WWII to do something related to the War effort. She was so proud. She had a job and a paycheck. I was so impressed with her attitude.

"Both of my parents were great encouragers. They really wanted their children to have a good education. My father's education, which was typical of many men in the area at that time, was limited. My mother's education was limited as well. We moved to Duluth because their schools were really excellent."

In the 1940 U.S. Census, Clark Donnan, 50, notes he completed eighth grade and that Catherine Donnan, 45, completed ninth grade. Helen was almost 17 and her little sister, Arlayne, was 9.

"In actuality, one of my parents had a third grade education and the other had a fifth grade education. But for employment purposes, my father exaggerated their education on that Census because he needed to."

The family's address in 1940 was: 105 58th Avenue West, Duluth. Helen's dad was working then as a mechanic.



"I attended kindergarten through junior college in Duluth. At Duluth Junior College my major was social sciences. I also did swimming, tennis, field hockey and badminton. There was a general attitude then that children and young people should try everything. My sister Arlayne became a professional ice skater and she had the good fortune of being able to skate with Sonja Henie in her show, the year before Ms. Henie retired (in 1956). My sister thought this was a great honor and she was very proud of it. She had the deepest respect for Sonja's ability on ice and her achievements. Arlayne travelled the world in many different shows. She lives in Marin now."

**(Pictured at left. Arlayne Donnan performing on ice. Circa, 1957.)**

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**Author: Jean Bartlett** ([www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com))

**An interview with Helen James (page 3)**

"Like most everyone in those earlier days, I was affected by the Depression and that's what put me on the road to getting my degree in sociology. In my early years of high school, I wondered if there would be a time that we wouldn't be in a Depression. When it ended, I realized that there could most certainly be another Depression at some point. Look at what happened to us in 2008. My family was poor in the 1930s and I thought about this young man who lived in the same area that we did in Duluth. He worked as a social worker and he was always working. I decided I would be a social worker because I would always have a job. Plus social work was a natural fit for me. In addition, I learned about Jane Addams when I was in high school. She was one of the heroines of social work and she was definitely a heroine to me."

Jane Addams was the founder of the Settlement House Movement in Chicago and she was the first U.S. woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

"She was a very committed member of her community and I guess the lessons she lived just stuck with me."

After she received her associate degree, Helen and some of her friends from Duluth Junior College, moved to Chicago.

"This was during WWII, and there were no jobs in Duluth," Helen said. "And Chicago was a wonderful experience. There were half a dozen of us and we all got jobs. I was filing war bonds stubs."

These bonds were sold to help finance the war effort. Americans were asked by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to join in this patriotic "great partnership" and open their wallets. President Roosevelt, in fact, bought the first bond. In 1941, 15.5 million bonds were issued and in 1942, 147 million were issued. Each bond came with an identification stub that was detached from the certificate and delivered to the Bureau of Public Debt.

"All the other girls soon went back to their families," Helen noted. "But I stayed and lived on my own after they left. I had a job and I liked being in Chicago. All these exciting things to see and do. You could take a bus and go anywhere. I was adventurous. I inherited that from my father and he encouraged me to be independent; to get out there and do things.

"My father was a very forward thinking man. Politically, he was a very aware liberal. I remember a man from our community told me that my dad was the best person he had ever talked to in regards to political insight. That amazed me and stuck with me. I had never appreciated my dad in that way."

During the War, Helen's father got a job in the War industry on the West Coast. Helen was thrilled. "I really wanted to live there!" And so she moved with her parents and sister to San Francisco. The family lived on 6th Avenue, near Golden Gate Park. Helen immediately got a job as a clerk typist at the Presidio



"I wanted to continue my college education and during the War, UC Berkeley (University of California, Berkeley) was desperate for people to enroll – so many of the men were away in the War. You did have to have good grades and I did have good grades. So I went to Berkeley. Nowadays you almost have to sell your soul to get into Berkeley. But back then, I lived with my parents and worked, and for a nickel, I could take the bus that took me to the bridge railway. Then it was, I don't recall exactly, but maybe a dime to take the train across the Bay Bridge."

Helen received her bachelor's degree in Sociology. She then found a job as a recreation director at a teen center in San Francisco's Hayes Valley.

"Where that teen center was at that time, there was a lot more poverty. I remember when the kids found out I lived in the Richmond District, they said, 'Oh! You must be so rich!' And I thought, 'Well, I can't really explain that one!'"

While Helen was working at the teen center, she decided to go to Hastings Law School.

"I always wanted to get my law degree. I just did. Though I never thought it was within my reach. But it was so convenient. Once again I could take the bus to Hastings which was on Van Ness Avenue. I was in law school for a year and a half. Why did I leave it? I met my husband Lowell."

Originally from Missouri, Lowell moved with his family to West Seattle, Washington during his childhood and attended West Seattle High School.

"When Lowell was 17, both he and his twin brother were pulled right out of high school into the Army and I know that really affected him."

Lowell served in the 41st Army Recon Cavalry in New Guinea. It was an area where the weapons faced were not only those of well-concealed defenders, but where the battleground itself was riddled with near impossible terrain and blazing temperatures, and diseases such as malaria and scrub typhus flourished. Lowell entered as a private and achieved the rank of Sergeant.



"His family moved to San Francisco, I don't know exactly when, but that's how I met Lowell. His family went to the same church that I did. It sounds so goody-goody! It was the Park Presidio United Methodist Church on Geary Blvd. in San Francisco. The men were coming back and all the churches in those days had socials after the War; young people groups. I was in the middle of law school and maybe I could have waited until I completed law school, but I had met someone very special.

"So many industries were hiring men as they returned from the War and Lowell was hired by American-Hawaiian Steamship Company and worked on the San Francisco waterfront. His official title was clerk, but essentially he managed the freight for American-Hawaiian on the waterfront. It was a good job and Lowell worked there for many years, until the late 1950s. One time I had to go to the waterfront to pick up a trunk my sister had sent home from Europe and when I looked around, I could see why Lowell was hooked on working there. It was so exciting. After he left, he worked for a while in construction and then he did accounting.

"Lowell had a low key attitude and I liked it. Here I was with all these degrees, but he was also very bright. His social attitude just felt comfortable and

we stayed together all those years, 68 years – until his death in 2016 – because we worked well together. He was 92. He was six months younger than me and I used to tell people, 'I'm embarrassed to say I married a younger man. But they last longer!' We married in 1947 and had four kids in three years!"

"My parents didn't particularly like Lowell, at least not in the beginning, because he was a quiet man, not really a people person, and my father was a talker. But something interesting about my parents is that they were kind of outcasts, this is more so in Minnesota. My mother came from a Catholic Church background and at that time, that was heresy to marry out of your religion. Maybe that's why I was really encouraged to try things and to do things differently."

In 1949, the couple's first child, Catherine, was born. Their twin sons, Peter and Paul came along in 1950 and their youngest, Lowell, was born in 1952.



**Helen and Lowell with Cathy, Peter and Paul, 1951.**



**Lowell, Sr. and Lowell, Jr., 1952.**



**Arlayne, Grandma and Grandpa Donnan, and Helen's four children, San Francisco, 1953.**

On Washington's Birthday, February of 1954, Lowell had the day off and he and Helen went to Pacifica to look for a home.

"Everyone wanted to get into a house. We were renting in San Francisco and all these developments were popping up all over. We heard about this land next to San Francisco – it wasn't called Pacifica, in fact we just called it "that land down there" – and a realtor took us to Linda Mar where the newest houses were being built. He was all excited about this little home he wanted to show us. Well, there had just been a big storm and the house was sitting in a barren field surrounded by water with its roof blown off!"

The next stop was a home in the north end of town – on Miller Avenue in Pacific Manor – but the realtor left the key back in his office. No problem. The three climbed through an open window. It had just begun to rain outside and the house was nice and warm. The couple wasn't sure they could afford it. \$10,500 was a lot of money in those days. But they made the commitment and moved their family to Pacifica.

"What I loved about this home was all the land around it. There were hardly any houses at that point in Pacific Manor and the kids could roam up on the hillsides, and there was a creek nearby. It was an ideal place for children. I lived near a creek as a child and I spent hours alongside of it, catching minnows and what not. I wanted something like that for my children. I didn't drive back then, so it meant making sure we had everything we needed within walking distance.

"Pacific Manor School was right there. We had a market and a movie theater. There was a big commercial development going in at the bottom of Pacific Manor. Save More Meats went in in 1955. Tic Tock was a great place for hamburgers. Everyone went there. We had nice restaurants too – Mori's Inn up on Mori's Point and Nick's in Rockaway – but these were main restaurants, no place to take four kids.

"We had only been in Pacifica for about a month when we learned the Democrats were putting on a candidate's night at I believe, Pacific Manor School, but definitely one of the local schools. Lowell and I agreed that I should go because he would be tired when he got home from work. While Lowell watched the kids, I went to this meeting and there was this very commanding woman, Edna Laurel Calhan. Now she was friendly but when she spoke, everyone listened. I remember she wore a very large hat."



**Edna Laurel Calhan.**

Edna was a member of the San Mateo County Democratic Committee and president and founder of the North Coastside Democratic Forum.

"Edna said to me, 'We don't have a secretary. Would you be our secretary?' And I found out that no one said, 'No' to Edna! I became the secretary and that is how I got started on volunteering. Pacifica is built on volunteers."

Other members of the North Coastside Democratic Forum in 1954, included: Elmer Geppert, William Hodges, Bertha Anderson, Frank Daugherty, George Mason and James B. Daly.

On November 22, 1957, the City of Pacifica was incorporated.

"Before Pacifica incorporated, our Coastside city was county run and the school district was very important. A lot of decisions were made through the district. Fred Lucas was the Superintendent of Schools in 1954 and he was very dynamic and he very much encouraged school district employees to take active parts in the community. The first President of the Chamber of Commerce was John Munt who was the School District Business Manager.

"I became a member of the PTA and someone told me the only thing you needed to be a teacher was a whistle and a storybook," Helen laughed. "I found out the hard way that wasn't true. I became a substitute teacher in 1956 and that is really hard work. But one of my favorite stories from those teaching days was I was working with a class of first graders and they were all excited because it was Show And Tell that morning. I am reading the names off the roster and I notice this little boy was really sobbing. 'What's the matter?' I asked him. 'One of the kids took my snowball and I brought it in for Show And Tell.'

"What's funny here is that no one thinks of snow in Pacifica. But we've had it a few times, just a dusting, over the many decades I've lived here. I think three times. Now I grew up in Duluth. I know snow and I know a snow ball is not meant for a classroom in Pacifica. But he didn't know and he had this little puddle in his desk. He was so upset!

"When my youngest was about 5, I decided I had to have some kind of official label to go to work and I decided to get my teaching credential. I took what was available for someone raising four small children, which was substitute teaching, and I headed off to San Francisco State University to take classes at night.

Before Pacifica incorporated – "there was a lot of controversy about Pacifica becoming a city and it was the third vote that finally won" – Helen worked with fellow Pacifican Jim Cooper as co-chairman on bond issues for the School District.

"The State had a program to offer the Jefferson Union High School District a thirty-year loan, and they had to bond themselves, and we had to persuade voters to bring this money in for the schools. It was just extraordinary when the money received included enough money to build our two Pacifica high schools (Oceana and Terra Nova).

"Jim Cooper was a jewel dealing with people. Everybody loved Jim. As to my involvement, I didn't do this just because I was a mom – though my children's education was very important to me – it had to do with the thinking that my family brought me up with. 'Do what you can to improve your own education and everyone's education where you are.'"

Helen said she was never one for the "limelight" and not a lot of people knew she was so involved with getting Oceana and Terra Nova built. However, in a May 14, 1957 *San Mateo Times* article, Mrs. Helen James is listed on the Jefferson Union High School District bond steering committee, along with: Jim Cooper, Peter J. Markovich, Stanley Brown, J. Robert Buchanan, Thomas J. Callan, Sr., Mrs. Anna M. Eason, Mrs. John J. Eckert, Elio A. Fontana, James Fox, Mrs. Edward Goldkuhl, Mrs. Larry D. Green, Walter Henkel, Lyal Ingersoll, William A. Larsen, Thomas F. Noonan, Donald Miller, Raymond M. Logan, Jr., Don Williams, Raymond T. Whitney, John A. Putkey, Al Rigler, Mrs. M. E. Nofriger and Robert T. Hale.



**The four James children in 1956. In 1962, the family moved to the Linda Mar area of Pacifica.**

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**An interview with Helen James (page 8)**

Along with the city's incorporation in 1957, the Pacifica branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) was chartered. Helen was one of the co-founders.

"We had such a community of women here in Pacifica. The men went off to work and if we needed something done in Pacifica, we had to do it. But we were friends and we did what we needed to do to help ourselves. Jean Fassler, Shirley Drye, Jan Dutton, Mildred Owen, Sydney Clark – these were just a few of the City of Pacifica's earliest citizens and they really cared about our community."

In 1960, armed with her teaching credential, Helen began teaching full time at Pedro Valley School. She taught second graders.

"Teaching was the last thing I ever intended to do. I wanted to be a social worker and a lawyer. I taught second graders for a number of years. Did I like it? It wasn't a matter of liking it. I needed to work! It was more of just a matter of flowing into what was needed. Special education, however, did particularly interest me because I had a child that was having problems. He was very bright, but he didn't have the verbal skills that his peers had.

"The University of California was bringing in all kinds of experts to discuss and work with dyslexia. I got very involved with that and attended lectures and workshops. By the time my son began high school, I was able to take him to Berkeley for special classes. It was the same year that the California Legislature voted for funds for educational help in the area of dyslexia.

"Louise Kukula and I went to San Francisco State to take classes on special education and we were hired in the District as the first teachers to teach this special education class. The first year we did it as home teaching then after that we did pull-outs; meaning, we would go to the class and work with the children individually. I stayed involved with that throughout my teaching career. For about nine years I worked specifically with dyslexic children and then I went on to work as a reading specialist in the District."

Helen also became involved with Mizpah not long after she and her family moved to Pacifica. Dedicated to the betterment of the community, Mizpah is the oldest charitable women's organization in Pacifica. Founded in 1948 at the Little Brown Church, Mizpah is a nonreligious organization dedicated to reaching out to the community.

"We keep the Mizpah membership small, at 25 members, with each member taking on a mandatory office role. I think we were the first organization here in Pacifica to give scholarships to children. One of the other things we did was to bring the Mobile Blood Unit to Pacifica, which we still do, and we feed all the blood donors."

With 64 years of Mizpah service under her belt, Helen is the nonprofit's longest member.



**Helen, bottom right, at a 2015 Mizpah luncheon.**

"I suppose I am the longest member of the Pacifica Branch of AAUW too," Helen chuckled.

Helen was also involved in the Science in Action Committee that got the ball rolling on protecting the natural, "three-mile stretch of beach, tide pool habitat, marsh, erosive bluffs, cliff-top trail and cypress and eucalyptus forests" that make up the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve in Moss Beach. A popular resource – over-discovered beginning in the early 1900s – in the 1960s, because of the Science in Action Committee, San Mateo County proposed that the State of California acquire the area as a state reserve. Consequently, "except as authorized in conjunction with scientific research approved by the California Department of Fish and Game and the San Mateo County Department of Parks, no disturbance or taking of marine life, archaeological resources or geological formations is allowed, and no fishing or collecting is permitted."

In 1983, Helen got involved with Pacifica Community Television. "I just fell into this one," she said in an interview I did with her for the *Pacifica Tribune* back in 2007. "Pat Kennison was in charge of the School District and I was told the District really needed someone to look after the video equipment. I was getting ready to retire from teaching and I thought all that was needed was for me to check the equipment in and out for the District. But it turns out they actually had a morning broadcast on the District. The fellow managing the station back then didn't have time to do the morning show. So there I am, with no film experience, carrying a camera on one shoulder and a recorder on the other shoulder and 55 to 75 feet of cable because I didn't want to carry batteries. I learned!"

Helen learned to work with four mikes, a mixer, a VCR, a monitor and a camera. "The great thing about community television is it is an intergenerational thing. You can have a 13 year-old, a 30 year-old and an 80 year-old all working on the same project and nobody cares about anyone's age."

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**An interview with Helen James (page 10)**

Included among Helen's video work with PCT was her "Education Spotlight" series, which was recognized in 1985 by the San Mateo County School Boards Association with a prestigious Russell Kent Award. In 1991, her community television work on schools and historical events was the recipient of an award from the Volunteer Center of San Mateo County.



Jean Bartlett 2008 photo

**Helen, center row, third from left, poses with the PCT production team of the multi-award winning television show *Footprints of Pacifica*, a show that highlights "The lore and the lure of lovely Pacifica, its character and its characters." The photo was taken for the 50th *Footprints* broadcast and features, top row, 1 to r: audio technician Jerry Crow, director Robert Twigg, and computer graphics operator and script writer Matthew Kaplan. Middle row, 1 to r: floor manager James Parsons, production supervisor Jason Francisco, camerawoman Helen James, executive producer Kathleen Manning, videographer and segment editor Steve Brown, and executive director Martin Anaya. Bottom row, 1 to r: camerawoman JoAnn Zavoral and host and producer Frank Winston.**

Helen has performed in several "Coastside Capers" plays written about historic Pacifica and used as fundraisers. In the first one, in 1959, she noted that her role included doing the can-can. "Oh! I was good at the can-can!" 1990 was the last time she was involved in a Pacifica play but she says it's time for another one to be done. This time, however, she'll cheer from the audience. She has also dressed up for the Pacifica Historical Society, another group for which she has been a longtime volunteer.

"I started working as a 'clipper' for the Pacifica Historical Society in 1989. Our first task was to house old *Tribune* newspapers. Then we went through them and clipped historical articles on Pacifica and filed them for future use." Helen also did a similar "clipping" job for the School District throughout the years.

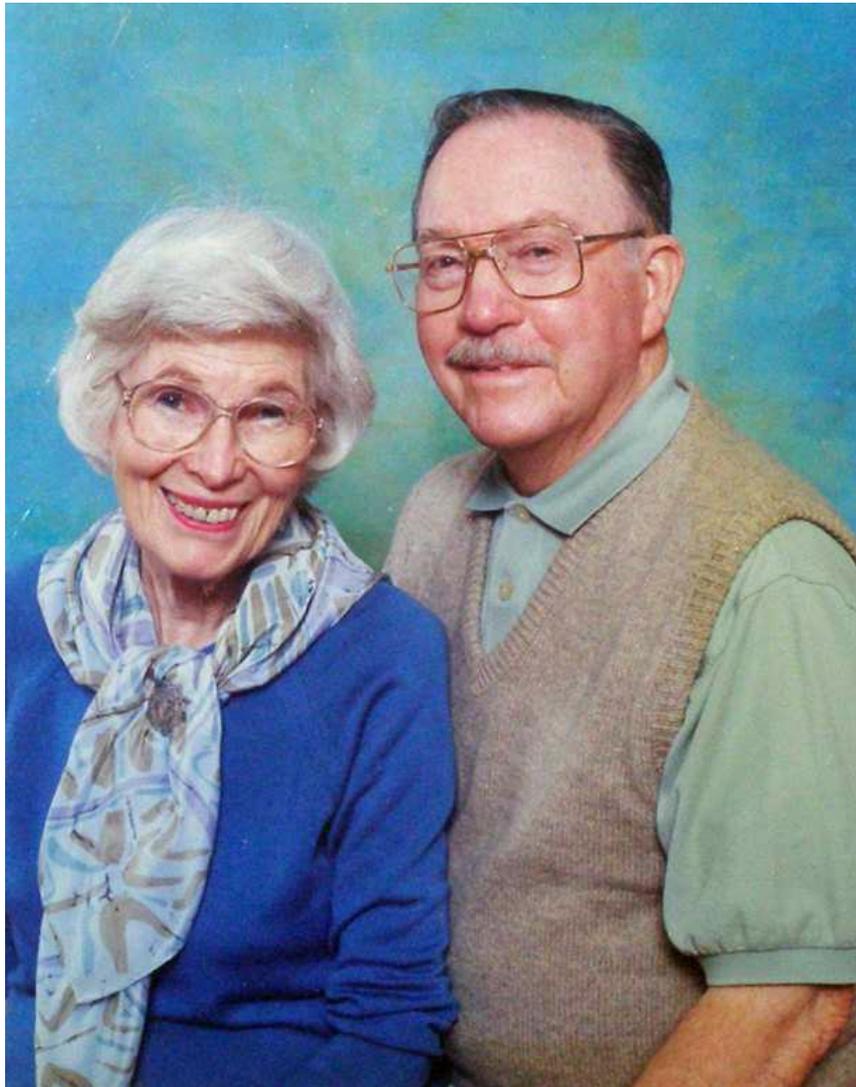


Jean Bartlett photo

**In a July 2011 fundraising event at the Sam Mazza Castle in Pacifica, three members of the Pacifica Historical Society arrive as ghosts of Pacifica's past: Helen James as the shotgun wielding Lydia Comerford-Fahey, JoAnn Zavoral as FiFi LaRue (of the castle/speakeasy Chateau La Fayette), and Marv Morganti as Rev. Herschel Harkins.**

In 2000, Helen was the recipient of the Pacifica Chamber of Commerce "Fuchsia Lifetime Achievement" award. In 2002, Michele Garside, Superintendent of the Laguna Salada Union School District (now the Pacifica School District), sent Helen's story to the National Women's History Remembering Project. In 2013, along with the Rotary Club of Pacifica, Helen was recognized by Pacificans Care, a community-based nonprofit, with a 2012 People Who Care Award. The award acknowledges and celebrates "those individuals, groups or businesses, who have significantly contributed to the well-being of the community and through their actions and contributions, have exemplified Pacifica as a community that cares."

Helen's service to Pacifica is so extensive it is hard to imagine it has all been captured here. That being said, Helen has at least one more affiliation and that is she has long stood with the Women in Black, a worldwide network of women committed to Peace. The Pacifica Women in Black stand every Saturday (1 to 2 pm) at the southwest corner of West Manor Drive and Palmetto Avenue.



**Helen and the love of her life, Lowell James, in 1997, became parents to four, grandparents to seven, and great grandparents to seven.**

"At one point, people suggested to me that I run for Pacifica City Council. But when you are on City Council, you are totally pulled off of anything else you want to do. As I mentioned, I am a natural born social worker and I wanted to get a lot of things done. I stayed away from that. I also stayed away from being president of any organization. It's nice to have the honor, but all that extra work you have to do to get just 'some' things done. I'm a worker bee.

"Regarding the City, we have had wonderful people like Mayor Jean Fassler and City Manager Karl Baldwin running this city. But the City of Pacifica never had any money and so many of the people with the City often do not have, or have not had, the skills to develop this into the town that Pacificans want. In fact, the City for many years has not been inclined to listen to what the people are saying.

"But there is a freedom in Pacifica. You see it in the hills and the ocean, and you feel it in the members of our community – and that is still just like it was back in those early days. We have so many great teachers...we have wonderful art and music. People step forward to do things for their community here in Pacifica. We are lucky there."

