

She's Not Just "Mrs. Sam"

HELEN ROBSON WALTON

By EVE K. SANDSTROM

W

hen asked to pick one adjective to describe herself, Helen Robson Walton selects "happy."

"I know I'm a happy person," she says. "And I know that happiness comes from within. I've learned to avoid self-pity."

Helen Robson Walton has had a fortunate life, true.

Born into a loving and financially secure family, she received a good education. She married a man who has been saluted as the business success story of the 20th century. She is the mother of four handsome, talented and successful children and obviously takes pleasure in her 10 grandchildren and her first great-grandchild born early this year.

With this background, Helen Walton might have spent her energies traveling, entertaining or shopping. She might have started her own business. She could have served the world merely by lending her name and status to a good cause now and then, while letting others do the real work.

But listen as she talks about one committee on which she is now serving, a group that is investigating the use of a voucher system to allow parents to select the schools that their children will attend.

"I asked (the administrators of the program): 'Are they taking out the better students?' 'What impact has the parent had in that school?' 'What level is this child—say, in the top, the middle or the bottom?' If you know those things, you know something about what you're doing to the school (and the students who are) left.

"But they wouldn't answer my questions. They just didn't have the answers, because they had not even bothered to check on who these students were—whether they were the best students, the poorest, the troublemakers.

"It amazes me that (the administrators) would think they could judge their program when they didn't get those kinds of statistics."

These are not the comments of a dabbler, a person taking a superficial interest in an issue. This is the reaction of an intelligent woman who is keenly aware of her abilities and her opportunities to make a difference in the world. *Continued*

Photography by Gil Jain

B

ecause "responsible" is another word Helen Walton applies to herself.

"I know I'm responsible for what I do," she says. "I'm responsible for my actions."

Then, before she can sound too serious, she gives a rich, throaty laugh. "It doesn't do any good to whine and cry about things," she says.

To many people, Helen Robson Walton, OU class of 1941, might be identified most easily as "Mrs. Sam." For nearly 50 years, until his death in 1992, she was the wife of Sam Walton, founder of the Wal-Mart chain of discount stores and by any standard one of the most amazing retailers in the history of the United States.

Although she never acquired the flamboyant style "Mr. Sam" could use so effectively, Helen Walton has a list of accomplishments that shines as brightly as her husband's. And she definitely has a personality—and work—of her own.

The *Sooner Magazine* interview took place in Norman, where she was breaking a trip from her home in Bentonville, Arkansas—headquarters for Walton Enterprises—to New York City. She and her son, Jim, had left by private plane at 6:30 a.m. so that Jim could attend a meeting of bank directors.

Looking much more youthful than her 73 years, Helen Walton wears a suit and matching blouse in a cheerful green. Her gold jewelry is conservative—it includes a rather worn gold ring she says had belonged to her father—and the stones in her wide bracelet do not glitter. Her upswept hair style is timeless, rather than trendy.

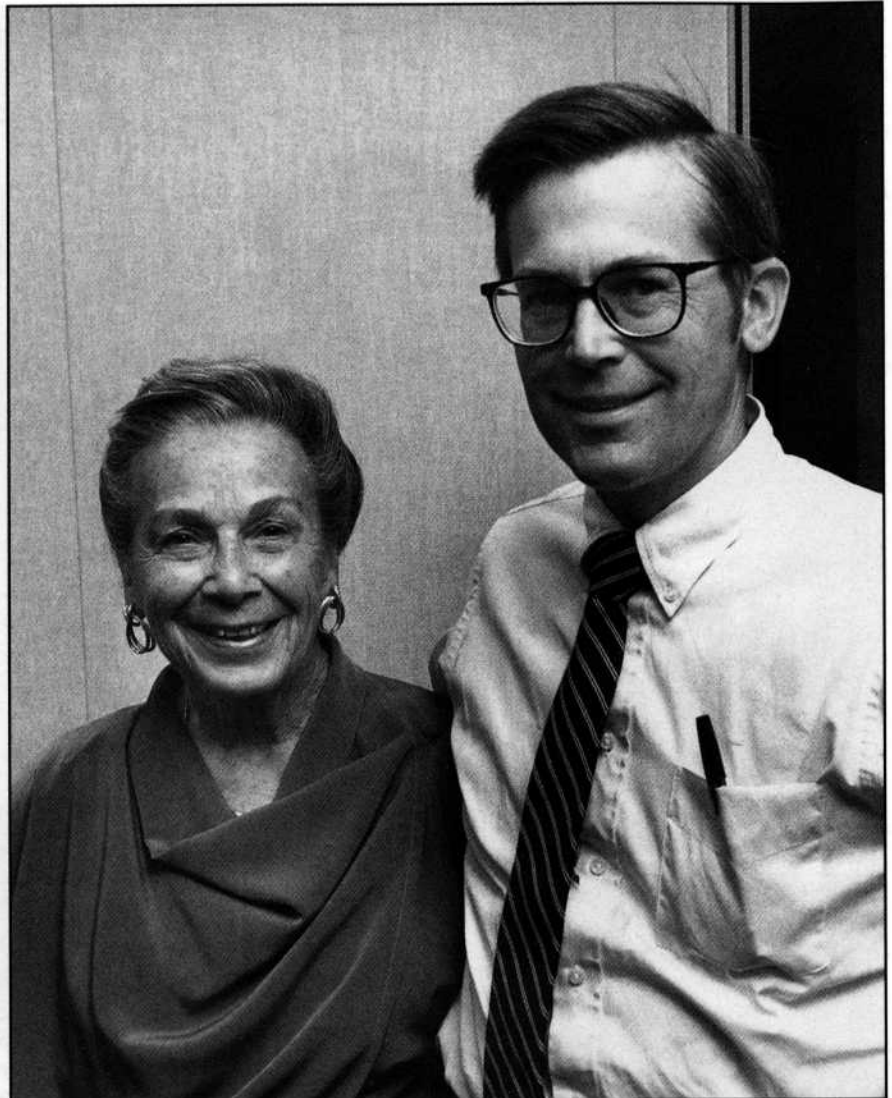
Her handshake is firm and her greeting for the interviewer friendly, although she usually refuses to give interviews. She readily agrees to an unscheduled request for photographs.

"That's fine," she says, smiling. "I've combed my hair."

In a moment, Jim Walton, who heads Walton Enterprises, the entity that oversees many family business interests, walks swiftly into the office. He seems surprised to see the interviewer and photographer.

"Oh, I thought you might just be sitting here," he says to his mother. "I thought maybe you'd like to come to the meeting."

"I will another time," she answers.



Concerned that his mother might be bored, Jim Walton, right, head of Walton Enterprises, the overseer of many of the family's business interests, stops by to invite Helen Walton to sit in on a board meeting at Norman's Security National Bank.

Jim pauses to pose for a picture, then gives his mother a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Have a good trip. See you Saturday."

She beams fondly as he leaves. "He's the sweetest thing."

When Jim Walton wants to entertain his mother for an hour, he does not send a member of the steno pool out to buy her a copy of *Vogue*. He invites her to attend a meeting of bank directors—an indication of his awareness of his mother's keen interest in business.

And he does not send a messenger to invite her; he leaves his meeting and comes himself. Can that mean the Waltons really match the down-to-earth image that has fascinated the national press since 1985, when *Forbes* magazine gave Sam Walton the unwelcome designation as the "richest man in America"?

Helen Walton probably would insist that she comes from a down-to-earth background. Her father, L.S. Robson, was a successful lawyer, rancher and banker in Claremore. A

Sam Walton cited his wife's family as his inspiration in both business and family life.

The Robsons, from left, brothers Nick and Frank, and sister-in-law Ludmilla, join Helen and Sam Walton before the 1991 Commencement where she received one of OU's first honorary degrees.

native of Georgia, he served as a member of the Oklahoma Highway Commission.

Her mother, Hazel Carr Robson, was active in church work and activities that supported education. "I remember well the big pots of soup she fixed for the kids at school," her daughter says. "That was in the early 1930s. There were plenty of kids who had no lunches because there was nothing to eat at home."

That may have been the year she had only one new dress, Helen Walton recalls, and the year that her mother agonized over the grocery bill. Even successful men like her father were having trouble making ends meet in Depression Oklahoma.

"I think you had to live through that to really understand it," she says.

In his autobiography, *Sam Walton: Made in America*, written with John Huey, Walton cites his wife's family as his inspiration in both business and family life. Early on, his lawyer father-in-law formed a family corporation, making Helen and her three brothers stockholders in his business enterprises.

"I'm pretty business-oriented," she says. "I was raised that way. Information was always shared.

"And I knew—early—that I didn't talk about family business outside the family either. Far too many people don't teach their children that what they hear at home stays there."

Helen Robson graduated from Claremore High School,



**Wanting to marry
a man with energy,
drive and desire
for success, Helen
confessed, “maybe
I overshot a little.”**

then attended Christian College for Women in Columbia, Missouri, for two years before transferring to the University of Oklahoma. She was one of the few women majoring in finance in the class of 1941. She pictured herself working in international banking, perhaps in some big New York bank. But after graduation, her father asked her to stay in Claremore.

“My dad thought I should learn to cook and keep house.” Helen Walton laughs again. “Which tells you that I was not very domestic in those first 21 years of my life.

“I agreed with him that I would come home for one year, then I would be free to do whatever I wanted to do.”

After a few months—“I think he got tired of what I was putting on the table”—a secretarial slot opened in her father’s law office, and Helen took it. She had minored in secretarial science, and all the Robson children had taken turns keeping books for the ranch, so she had some office experience.

“I think (women) should not even think about getting married until they have worked for somebody else. You’re on your own, and you have to be responsible for your own actions.” She grins. “I lived at home, so my salary was room-and-board and \$90 a month. It made it very difficult to buy all the clothes I wanted to buy.”

That December, World War II began. And in April 1942, Helen Robson met a young man who was working for the DuPont plant in Pryor, waiting to be called into the U.S. Army. His name was Samuel Moore Walton.

Sam Walton had worked his way through the University of Missouri with a variety of sales jobs. After a year as a trainee with J.C. Penney Company Inc., he had picked retail sales as his career field.

In Sam Walton’s autobiography, Helen is quoted as saying she always had told her parents she wanted to marry someone “who had that special energy and drive, that desire to be a success.” Later she confessed, “I certainly found what I was looking for, but now I laugh sometimes and say maybe I overshot a little.”



President Emeritus G. L. Cross, left, congratulates Helen and a proud Sam Walton at the 1991 Commencement banquet.

By the time the Waltons were married on Valentine's Day 1943, Sam was in the Army. When he was discharged in 1945, he wanted to go into business for himself, first eyeing a partnership in a St. Louis department store.

But, he records in his autobiography, Helen changed his mind. She did not want to live in a big city.

That preference was to alter the face of American retailing. Because of his wife's preference, Walton bought a small "five-and-dime" store in Newport, Arkansas. There, and later with a variety store in Bentonville, Arkansas, he learned how to bring aggressive big-city merchandising to small-town America.



Today Wal-Mart has 1,700 stores, and Sam's Wholesale Club operates 200 stores in 43 states. And the backbone of the business is small-town locations.

The four Walton children—Rob, Jim, John and Alice—were born in the first seven years of the Waltons' marriage, while their father was establishing the habit of working long hours and traveling frequently to study new ideas in retail sales. Helen Walton admits that she sometimes felt house-bound when her children were young. But she rarely considered taking up a career of her own, despite her business background. And, she says, she was never tempted to work side-by-side with Sam in the family business.

In his autobiography, however, Walton makes it clear that his wife was a frequent adviser. In particular, he credits her with the idea of including "the associates," the entry-level employees of Wal-Mart, in the company's profit-sharing plan and other benefits.

"It didn't take long to realize the enormous potential (this idea) had for improving our business," Walton wrote.

"I think that working with your husband would be very difficult," Helen Walton says. "But there were times when I felt I was really imposed on, with all the children and the volunteer service that you automatically do when your children are young. Then I used to think that I ought to get a job myself."

But, like many other women, Helen Walton found that the "automatic" activities of a young mother gave her a rewarding and significant outlet. Today, on a resumé that includes two honorary doctorates, election to the Oklahoma Hall of Fame, national offices for the Presbyterian Church (USA) and honors from the government of Guatemala, she also lists

her credentials as a Girl Scout and Cub Scout leader, Sunday school superintendent and PTA president.

"I used to get annoyed with people who didn't have a sense of the importance of PTA," she says. "Because I felt it was our children's opportunity to be educated well. I used to get real put out with some people. They'd be concerned for their own child, but not for the whole system.

"You can always do those little extras for your own child. It's the community that matters."

So Helen Walton found a "career" in volunteer service. She was the first woman to serve on the Bentonville Parks and Recreation Commission. She was on the advisory board for the Northwest Arkansas Child Care Training Program, a member of the Arkansas Governor's Task Force on Child Care and the Arkansas Governor's Commission on Adult Literacy.

She has been active in the Presbyterian Women on the local, presbytery, synod and national levels. She was the first woman moderator of the Arkansas Presbytery and worked hard for the union of the northern and southern branches of the Presbyterian Church, a merger achieved in 1983. She was the first woman officer of the board of directors of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Foundation in its history and later served as president of the foundation's board of trustees.

The Walton family has long sponsored a program that brings Central American students to study at American universities. Helen Walton also took a particular interest in the Presbyterian Church-affiliated University of the Ozarks, which operates a nationally recognized program of college-level education for the learning disabled. She is a former trustee of that university and served as general chairman of three of its major fund-raising campaigns.

The Waltons built a fine arts center in Fayetteville, Arkansas, which is used by both the University of Arkansas and the community, and Helen Walton serves on the center's advisory council.

In 1989, as part of the University of Oklahoma Centennial Campaign, she endowed the Helen Robson Walton Chair in Marketing and served several years on the advisory council for the OU College of Business Administration.

Robert Lusch was the college's dean when she was asked to join the council.

"I had about 20 people I asked to serve," he says, "and most of them gave me a pro forma 'yes.' But Helen Walton kept me on the phone for 30 minutes with some penetrating questions about the school, the board and its duties and aims before she said she'd serve.

"She turned out to be one our most effective board members. She radiates energy."

As a board member, Lusch says, Helen Walton was a particularly strong advocate of two principles.

"First was the student," he says. "She believes—and

appropriately so—that the University is there for the student. We tend to talk about faculty concerns, but she always brought in the student.

“Secondly, she’s also eager for the business school to have key linkages with other entities on campus.”

When Lusch stepped down as dean, he was appointed to the Helen Walton chair.

“We’d love to have her on the Board of Advisors again,” he said. “She’s definitely not the token female on a board. She says what she believes.”

But perhaps closest to her heart at the present time is the study of early childhood education. In Bentonville she helped start a community-sponsored, non-profit child care and development center. The center now serves 160 children of working parents. In 1985, in recognition of her work, the facility was named The Helen Robson Walton Center.

Helen Robson Walton is a person with definite opinions, and lots of her opinions have a businesslike slant.

On day care: “For business, good day care could stop turnover. That’s expensive. It’s a lot cheaper to have child care than to have a lot of turnover. But the day care must be better than the state requirements. (Arkansas requires) one (care giver) to six children in infant care. (At the Helen Walton Center) we have one to four, and we hope to have one to three.

“No (one) person can really (care for six infants) and not have burnout. I’d like to see some man try it! Infant care is so expensive that care of older children must subsidize it.”

On Hillary Clinton, a long-time friend and a former member of the Wal-Mart board of directors: “She’s great. The country’s lucky to have a woman of her character and ability going into that position.”

On former President George Bush, who came to Bentonville to award the Medal of Freedom to Sam Walton shortly before his death in 1992: “When President Bush came to give the award to Sam—that person was never shown on television during the whole campaign. (And the real) Mrs. Bush was never shown on television.”

On religious training for children: “I think it’s the responsibility of the parents, not the school. First, there’s no prayer that’s right for everyone—religion is a very personal thing. Religion is within—you live it.

“How many parents really teach their children to pray? How many study the Bible with their children? How many have prayer before meals?”

On church union: “I’ve been active in the Presbyterian Church all my life. The church has been so good to me in letting me do things. But when you talk about union, it gets to be a complicated thing. We belonged to one branch (of the Presbyterian Church) in Newport, then to another when we moved to Bentonville. I couldn’t see the difference. Of course, (merger means) you lose some. We’ve had a number of churches leave.”

On women in business: “I have a lot of hope for young women going into business today. They have so much opportunity to rise. But in retail it is still a hard thing to get to the top, and that’s true with our company, too. Women do the major buying for American families, but their gains have not been as great in retail as in other phases of business.”

Two of the Walton sons are active in the family business, Jim as head of Walton Enterprises, the entity which oversees the family holdings, and Rob as chairman of the board of Wal-Mart Stores. A third son, John, is a successful designer of sailboats, and daughter Alice heads her own investment firm.

Helen Walton’s honors include honorary doctorates from the University of the Ozarks and the University of Oklahoma, where she was one of the first to receive the designation instituted in 1991. She has been honored as an outstanding graduate by every school she attended—Claremore High School, Christian College and OU. She has been honored by her sorority, Kappa Kappa Gamma, and by Delta Kappa Gamma Society International, an educational organization. She was named a Mother of Distinction by the Little Rock Florence Crittenden Home. The Waltons jointly were awarded Guatemala’s highest civilian citation, the Order of the Quetzal, for their work in offering educational opportunities to the young people of that country and for their support of mission work among Guatemalan Indian tribes.

In Bentonville, she received the Chamber of Commerce’s top community service award in 1978. In 1985 the hometown couple was honored with “Sam and Helen Walton Day,” a community-wide celebration. In 1992 Helen Walton was elected to the Oklahoma Hall of Fame.

Her future plans include the continued study of day care and other issues related to education. She has agreed to visit several former Iron Curtain countries with a group of Presbyterian Women this year. And she intends to maintain an interest in OU.

“I’d like to see OU with a very good business administration division. They can be tops in the country! But at the same time, I want them to require the liberal arts. It just broadens your outlook.”

With the *Sooner Magazine* interview over, Helen Walton heads for a luncheon date with Kappa friends from her OU days. With her is a black nylon suitcase—large, but unremarkable—which she is taking to New York.

As she walks to the elevator, she bends slightly to pull the suitcase along by its handle. “It has wheels, but I lost the strap,” she says cheerfully.

Downstairs, the bank’s mail clerk hastily offers to carry the suitcase, but she firmly refuses his offer.

Walking rapidly, and still bending slightly, Helen Walton rolls the suitcase out a side door, an independent woman following her own path.

