

# Helen Hill Raitt Biography



Helen Hill Raitt was born March 28, 1905 to Helen Collier Hill and James H. Hill in Los Angeles, California, and grew up in the historic East Wynyate House in Pasadena. She graduated in 1927 with a degree in literature from Pomona College, where she was a fellow student and friend of Roger Revelle. She married Charles J.

Biddle and bore three children: W.(William) Craig Biddle, later a U.S. senator, Charles J. Biddle, Jr. ("Kayo"), and Alison Biddle (Gist). She married again to Russell Raitt in 1935 and bore her fourth child, Martha Raitt (Harrison).

After college Helen Raitt wrote plays and worked at the Pasadena Community Playhouse, and then wrote part-time for the Arcadia *Tribune*. In 1941 Helen and Russell Raitt moved to La Jolla where he began working as a geophysicist for the University of California Division of War Research. They lived first in the Wheeler Bailey House on Princess Street, designed by Irving Gill, and later moved to a house on Paseo del Ocaso. Helen Raitt wrote book reviews for the San Diego *Union* and became a designer and partner of La Jolla Handmades, a leather handcrafts shop. During World War II, she did volunteer work, teaching leatherworking to recuperating veterans, and founded the San Diego chapter of the Red Cross Arts and Skills Corps.

In the 1950s, Helen Raitt began to devote more time to SIO, where Dr. Raitt now worked as a researcher in geophysics. One of the first projects she was involved with was the Scripps Estates Associates, a housing development which made it possible for Scripps faculty to buy their own homes near campus. Helen Raitt was the first secretary of the board of SEA. In 1955 the Raitts moved into a house on one of the SEA lots on Ellentown Road, which Helen had had designed for entertaining up to one hundred guests.

Helen Raitt became the first president of the Oceanids in 1952, founded in order to promote cultural activities for students and their families, and which grew into the campus women's service organization. In her second term as president in 1962 she helped start Bear Facts and was a frequent contributor. The Oceanids newsletter was an important source of information on social and cultural activities for SIO families. She also helped start People to People, Oceanids' first interest group, which sponsored cultural and scientific exchange between SIO and the Escuela Superior de Ciencias Marinas of the Universidad Autonoma de Baja California in Ensenada, Mexico.

In addition to Oceanids, Helen Raitt helped form the International Center at UCSD and was on its by-laws committee with Judy Munk. She was one of the eight founders of Gallery 8, which sold handcrafted and imported items as a fundraiser for the International Center, and often donated items from her own collection. She was a member of the Committee to Aid Chilean Scholars, coordinator for the Asociación de las Californias, and hosted the first foreign student for the American Field Service. She also named the residence halls of Revelle College for famous oceanographic ships, and helped choose the triton and conch shell horn as symbols of Revelle College.

Helen Raitt is perhaps best known as the first woman to take part in an extended American oceanographic expedition. In 1952 she decided to meet Russell Raitt when Expedition Capricorn stopped in Suva, Fiji. To pay her travel expenses, she worked as a consultant for the National Research Council on "Problems of the Underwater Swimmer in the South Pacific," conducting literature searches and interviewing Pacific Islanders on local techniques and hazards of swimming and diving. When the expedition continued to Tonga, Helen booked passage for herself on the Tielbank, a copra freighter, and fell in love with the music, language, and culture of her Tongan fellow passengers. She rejoined the expedition in Tonga for the Christmas holidays. When John Isaacs was urgently called home but was unable to find passage on a ship leaving Tonga, it was decided he should take Helen's passage, and Roger Revelle invited Helen to accompany the expedition aboard the Spencer F. Baird.

Helen Raitt and her typewriter were a welcome addition to the Baird. Once on board, she kept the log, stood watches, typed reports, took dictation for Dr. Revelle, and assisted with oceanographic work. However, "feeling obligated to pay for this experience" once she reached home, she began writing the story of the expedition for the scientists' wives. Originally titled *Uncle This is William* for the radio call letters of the expedition's two ships, the book was published in 1956 by W.W. Norton as *Exploring the Deep Pacific*. Extremely popular, the book went on to four foreign editions, in England, Russia, Poland, and Japan, and an American paperback edition.

In 1961, she gave two radio talks called "Give Us Room" on the early history of SIO. While researching the talks, she saw that the early documents of the institution were scattered, disorganized, and gathering dust. She started the SIO Archives, and was its first volunteer archivist. The research for "Give Us Room" later grew into *Scripps Institution of Oceanography: First Fifty Years*, which she wrote with Beatrice Moulton.

Returning to Tonga in 1971, Helen Raitt realized that the Tongans had little access to books or pictures about their own history. Most early books on Tonga had been written by European explorers in the 1700s, and were inaccessible to the general public. Tongan schools and libraries had few books. Helen and Donna Gerstle, a Peace Corps volunteer, were denied entrance to the Nuku'alofa Club library because they were women. She returned in 1973 with books and photographs, eventually donating more than 1000 books to Tonga. Back in California, she started Tofua Press with Donna Gerstle, to preserve Tongan history and legends, and to make books on Tonga available to Tongans. Their first publication was *Gentle People* by Donna Gerstle, and was followed by a portfolio of historical prints. The third book, *Tonga Pictorial*, was written in both English and Tongan; its photographs were by Helen Raitt's grandson, Christopher Gist.

Tofua Press also published books on other subjects, particularly California history. The most popular of these was the story of Jennie Collier, Margaret Collier Graham, and Donald Graham, Helen Raitt's great aunts and uncle. The letters from their 1876 move to California from Iowa were discovered in a trunk in the attic of the House of Wynyate, next-door to Helen's childhood home. Margaret (Maggie) Graham was a well-known writer of short stories set in Southern California; her husband Donald Graham was the first mayor of South Pasadena. Helen Raitt and her cousin Mary Collier Wayne edited and published the letters as *We Three Came West*.

In addition to Tofua Press, Helen Raitt became involved with the Library at UCSD. In 1961 she had helped found the Friends of the Library with Melvin Voigt. Her efforts helped bring the Hill Collection on Pacific Voyages to UCSD. She donated her own collection of books on Tonga to the library in 1971, and helped to establish the Tonga Collection and the Baja California Collection at the library.

Helen Raitt died of heart failure on March 26, 1976, at the age of 70. Sally Spiess proposed a conference room in the SIO Library that overlooked the ocean as a memorial to her, and in 1977, the Helen Raitt Room was dedicated, furnished with tapa cloths and Tongan art.



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# **BEAR FACTS**

PUBLISHED BY OCEANIDS - UCSD WOMEN

MARCH 1968  
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BORN HELEN HILL - GRAND DAUGHTER TO JAMES HILL



▶ **LOS ANGELES**

exuberant founder of ALBERHILL COAL & CLAY CO.

mother combed HELENS long curls till age 18

▶ **SOUTH PASADENA**

blew saxophone in high school

• LARRY POWELL • WARD RITCHIE

cut hair, went to POMONA COLLEGE

AUTHORED

PHOTOGRAPHY ■ GRADUATED AS

GREEN APPLES

PASADENA ■ HELEN HILL BIDDLE

PLAYHOUSE ■ BORNED...

ALISON

CO AUTHORS

AUTHORED PLAYS

KAYO

THIS IS TRUE

IF HE WERE MINE

CRAIG

FIT TO BE TIED COVER YOUR SHORTS

PUPILS IN BACK YARD NURSERY SCHOOL

SALT SARDINES & GIRLS "THE TRUE ADVENTURES OF A WOMAN ON A FREIGHTER OFF THE COAST OF MEXICO"

married **RUSSELL RAITT**

GEOPHYSICAL ENGINEERING

▶ **ALTADENA**

BORNED:

MARTHA

AUTHORED

created POULTRY PAGE of ARCADIA

OUR CHICKENS

▶ **LA JOLLA**

PRINCESS ST.

TRIBUNE

KIKO THE NAUGHTY PARROT

PINEAPPLE ISLAND

HOUSE DESIGNED by IRVING GILL

WAR YEARS

NAVAL ELECTRONICS LAB.

• MOLLY & GAYLORD HARNWELL

organized for RED CROSS

• EASIE & ED McMILLAN

ARTS AND SKILLS CORPS

AT CAMP PENDLETON

AND NAVAL HOSPITAL

PASEO DEL OCASO HOUSE

MARINE PHYSICAL LABORATORY

formed with

host family to first La Jolla

• MONESS WATERBURY

• GERTRUDE LANG SMITH

first woman A.F.S. student

ON BOARD

SCRIPPS SHIPS TRIPS

LA JOLLA HAND

MADES

EXPEDITION CAPRICORN

PROBLEMS OF UNDERWATER SWIMMERS IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

EXPLORING THE DEEP PACIFIC translated into four languages

▶ invented

■ OCEANIDS

■ GRAND CHILDREN

ON BOARDS

■ SCRIPPS ESTATES ASSOCIATES

HOUSES

■ INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CENTER

FOR FACULTY

▶ created

■ BEAR FACTS

■ FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARY

AUTHORED

■ GRAND CHILDREN

SCRIPPS INSTITUTION OF OCEANOGRAPHY

"THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS" • ROSALYN TURECK

SOUTH PACIFIC

DELMAR SUBDIVISION.....

ENGLAND

■ GRANDCHILDREN

ALGIERS

BAJA CALIFORNIA SYMPOSIUMS

JAPAN

GO NEXT WE THREE CAME WEST OR 100 YEARS OF LIVING

FRANCE

ITALY

RUSSIA • MEXICO • HAWAII • BOREGO • FLORIDA

built town house

