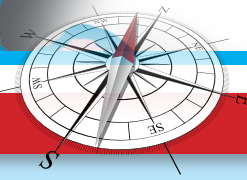# Missouri Road Trip

Every Hero Has A Story: Helen Stephens

Born in Fulton, Mo., in 1918, Helen grew up at a time when schools didn't have athletic programs for girls. Life on her family farm – always working at something – kept Helen active. And she was fast. Really fast.

A physical education teacher at Fulton High School realized Helen's talent and began coaching her. One of his first tests was to time her in the 50-yard dash. Her mark was 5.8 seconds. Had this been an official competition, she would have tied the world record. Fearing something was wrong with his stopwatch, the coach timed her again.

She clocked a 5.9. Yes, Helen was fast.

In 1935, 16-year-old Helen ran her first official race, facing Stella Walsh, a gold medal winner from the 1932 Olympics. Helen won the race in 6.6 seconds and set what at the time was an indoor record for the 50-yard dash on a dirt track.

Newspapers began referring to Helen as "The Missouri Express" and "The Fulton Flash," a nickname that stuck throughout her life.

By 1936, Helen was a member of the U.S. Olympic team that competed in Munich, Germany. She was involved in two events at the Olympics, the 100-meter dash and the 400-meter relay.

At age 18, Helen won the 100-meter dash in a world-record time of 11.5 seconds. That mark stood for 24 years. Later, running the anchor leg for the 400-meter relay team, Helen propelled the U.S. to a gold medal in world-record time, 46.9 seconds.

As someone who enjoyed competition throughout her life, Helen excelled at a variety of sports. She helped advance women's athletics and is noted as the first woman in the U.S. to create, own and manage her own semi-pro basketball team, the Helen Stephens Olympics Co-Eds.

Helen Stephens died Jan. 17, 1994.

Points of Interest

- At the age of 65, Helen ran the 100-meter dash in 16.4 seconds, just four seconds slower than when she was 18.
- Helen and another Olympic great, Jesse Owens, headlined a traveling tour of exhibition races after the 1936 Olympics.
- Adolph Hitler demanded to meet Helen after her performance in Munich.
- Learn more about Helen's hometown of Fulton in the community newspaper, the Fulton Sun, FultonSun.com.
- Learn more about Helen Stephens from The State Historical Society of Missouri's Historic Missourians site, shs.umsystem.edu.

Sources: State Historical Society of Missouri, William Woods University, Callaway County Public Library
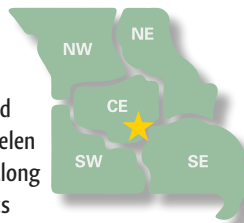
Take A Road Trip to Fulton!

The next time you're in Fulton, visit the campus of William Woods University, Helen's alma mater. Her name adorns the university's sports complex, and inside you'll find a display of memorabilia devoted to her life and impressive athletic career. Helen was inducted into the William Woods University Athletics Hall of Fame in 2013. (Helen also is enshrined in the United States Track and Field Hall of Fame, along with the Women's Sports Foundation's International Women's Sports Hall of Fame.) While you are in Fulton, visit the National Churchill Museum on the Westminster College campus. The museum honors the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, who gave one of the most significant speeches of his career at the college in 1946. The museum is housed beneath a London church that was moved stone-by-stone to the campus in the 1960s for the 20th anniversary of Churchill's visit. Learn more about the National Churchill Museum at NationalChurchillMuseum.org.

Helen Stephens Sports Complex
William Woods University Campus
One University Ave. • Fulton • 800-995-3159
Photo courtesy William Woods University

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