

THE WOMAN BEHIND THE MAN: A LOOK INTO THE LIFE OF HUGH NIBLEY'S WIDOW

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In a little green house one block south of BYU campus lives the widow of well-known Latter-day Saint historian Hugh Nibley.¹

Phyllis Draper Nibley, now seventy-nine years old, has lived in her Provo home for fifty years. She was born nearby in Salt Lake City, August 2, 1926, in the home of her aunt.

Nibley's parents were divorced only eighteen months after her birth. When Nibley was five, her mother remarried, to a man who worked as a government surveyor in Oregon. Nibley took the last name of her stepfather, Bill Draper, and moved to Oregon with her mother, stepfather, and stepbrother.

After four years and two newly born half-brothers, Nibley returned to Salt Lake City with her family after her stepfather died in a work accident. While growing up in Salt Lake City, she attended Jordan High School. There she found a lifelong love for music as she played an old cello her mother bought years before. Throughout her life, music and learning played an important role in cultivating lasting memories in both her marriage and family.

"I think one of her greatest strengths and attractions was her musical ability," said Michael Lyon, a friend of the Nibley family for more than thirty-five years.

Nibley, who worked as the librarian for the Utah Valley Symphony Orchestra for a number of years, said she and Hugh Nibley spent time with their children attending plays, musical events, and most anything that involved the arts. Phyllis Nibley



Figure 1. Left: Phyllis (second from right) playing with a high school quartet;² Right: Making music with Hugh. “We filled the house with classical music.”³

said as the children were growing up, she and her husband placed great emphasis on music and learning within the home.

“We filled the house with classical music,” she said.

Nibley said it was her musical abilities that instigated her first conversations with Hugh Nibley. While studying English at BYU, she worked on campus in the housing office. She said Hugh Nibley came into her office to find housing as a single male and a new professor. Noticing her cello in the office, he began a casual conversation and told her he had recently seen a BYU Symphony Orchestra performance, which she played for at the time.

Although the conversation started a series of encounters, she said the story of her marriage started when Hugh Nibley returned to Utah as a soldier from World War II.

Shortly after his return, Hugh spoke with John A. Widtsoe about working as a professor at BYU. Widtsoe told the thirty-six-year-old Nibley if he wanted to work at BYU, he should get married. Phyllis Nibley said he agreed to Widtsoe’s suggestion, but only on the condition that Widtsoe would arrange with God to let him marry the first girl he met at BYU—Phyllis.

Phyllis Nibley said she did not realize that she was actually the first girl he had met at BYU. She said she was also not aware, until after the marriage, about the “agreement” Widtsoe had made with God. However, she said it did not take long for her or her sweetheart to know they wanted to marry each other.

“We both knew that it was ordained,” she said.



Figure 2. Family photo, Berkeley, 1959. Front, left: Phyllis (holding Rebecca), Michael, Hugh, Alex, Paul. Back, left: Christina, Tom.⁴

A few months after the couple had met, they were married on September 18, 1946, in the Salt Lake Temple. The couple had eight children: four boys and four girls.

Nibley said her husband maintained his duties as a father even though he spent most of his days and nights at work. She said he would come home from work, play with children, bathe them, and read them stories before putting them to bed. After he helped her with the children, he would then return to campus and continue his research.

While her husband conducted his research, Phyllis Nibley said she would read from favorite mystery novels by authors like Agatha Christie and Erle Stanley Gardner.

“That’s purely escape literature you read so that you don’t have to think about what’s going on in your daily life,” she said.

Becky Nibley, the third youngest child in the family, said her mother loved a variety of literature, but she was especially acquainted with the works of Jane Austen. Her mother’s reading habits influenced the attitude of the home, she said.

“She always encouraged education highly,” Becky Nibley said.

While Phyllis Nibley’s reading habits influenced her children, Becky Nibley said the habit also created a balance to her father’s research.



Figure 3. Phyllis reading one of Hugh's manuscripts, 2008.⁵

Phyllis Nibley said she read for enjoyment and to pass the time while her husband was at work. Even though her husband was constantly busy with his research, she said she strived to remain supportive. She said his research was some of the first of its kind and that it was vital to the gospel. To her, he had a special gift of correlating the gospel taught in ancient scripture with that of modern day.

“She knew that the work that he did was extremely important to the gospel,” Becky Nibley said.

Lyon, who was also an illustrator for several of Mr. Nibley's works, said he used to say that his wife “kept him alive.”

“I was struck by how he grew more and more appreciative of her,” Lyon said. “I think they understood each other very well in their strengths and weaknesses.”

Before the death of Hugh Nibley, Phyllis Nibley “was always by his side and caring for his needs,” as he lay bedridden in the front room of their Provo home, Lyon said.

Phyllis Nibley said while she took care of her husband's needs as he was bedridden, she received help from her third oldest child, Thomas.

“If Tom hadn’t been here, I could not have taken care of [Hugh],” she said.

After a two-year struggle with varying ailments, Hugh Nibley died from congestive heart failure at age ninety-four on February 24, 2005.

“She’s doing the best she can with it and you can tell she still cares,” said Celeste Nibley, a sophomore studying international relations at BYU.

Celeste currently lives with her grandmother and helps her with things that she needs. Over the years, the Nibley home has housed five or six grandchildren as they attended BYU. Although Phyllis Nibley can no longer play her cello and is not as active as she once was, her granddaughter said she likes to do crossword puzzles, read, and visit with old friends that stop by the house.

Notes

1. Originally published as David Johnson, “The Woman behind the Man: A Look into the Life of Hugh Nibley’s Widow,” *Daily Universe*, April 7, 2006, <https://universe.byu.edu/2006/04/07/the-woman-behind-the-man-a-look-into-the-life-of-hugh-nibleys-widow/>. Used by permission.
2. Petersen Collection, box 10, folder 4. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-STW8693-EC-Box10Folder4.jpeg.
3. Photo by Mark A. Philbrick, BYU Photo. Published in *BYU Today*, February 1984, 19. With permission. Photo ID: BYU-TodayFeb1984-EC.jpeg.
4. Courtesy of David Nibley. See Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 291. Photo ID: family1960.jpeg.
5. Courtesy of Shirley S. Ricks. Photo ID: Ricks, SS Phyllis Nibley.jpeg.