

# **Samuel and Mary King**

## **Classroom Resource Packet**

1. Student Biography of Samuel and Mary King
2. Vocabulary List
  - a. Vocabulary words are pulled from the student biography, the actors' scripts, and the Character Information portion of our Guide Script. Words are organized alphabetically.
3. Supplemental Resources (Pulled from The Pantagraph)
  - a. "Letters reveal rigors of Civil War soldiering" by Bill Kemp
    - i. Samuel King was a Civil War veteran.
  - b. "'Angel of the West Side' met daycare needs" by Bill Kemp
    - i. Mary King was heavily involved with the Day Nursery.

## Samuel Noble King (1834-1913) and Mary Reed King (1842-1928)

**Samuel Noble King** (known as S. Noble to most) was born in Tarlton, Ohio, on October 22, 1834, one of David and Almena (Caldwell) King's nine children. In 1840, David King moved his family to Springfield, Ohio, to accommodate David's budding **mercantile** business.

S. Noble attended Wittenberg College (now Wittenberg University) in Springfield, Ohio and, in 1853 at the age of 19, headed west on horseback to another Springfield—this one, the capital of Illinois. S. Noble decided to become a farmer rather than follow his father into the mercantile business. After a year in the employment of John Reed of New Berlin (located roughly 17 miles from Springfield), he had saved enough money to buy a small plot of his own and engaged in farming, a **vocation** which he remained committed to for the next half-century.

When the United States Civil War broke out in 1861, S. Noble enlisted as a private in the 26<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry Regiment, Company D, **mustering** in on August 17, 1861. S. Noble was quickly recognized by his superiors as officer material, and though a series of promotions rose to the rank of captain by the time he mustered out on October 26, 1864. The 26<sup>th</sup> Illinois saw action near Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Savannah, Georgia, and in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Overall, the regiment marched a total of 6,931 miles, fought 28 battles, and participated in an **innumerable** number of **skirmishes**. S. Noble was neither wounded nor ill during the entire four years he served in the Union army.

Following the war, S. Noble disposed of his property near Springfield, IL and sought to make his fortune in McLean County. He bought 240 acres of “unfenced prairieland” two-and-a-half miles from Bloomington on what is now Towanda Avenue (Normal Township). Soon after, he purchased 160 acres a mile-and-a-half northeast of his original plot. He became a prominent farmer, and his name became **synonymous** with scientific farming and was recognized not only in McLean County, but throughout the entire state of Illinois.

S. Noble set aside, at any given time, five to ten acres of his “north” plot for trials in soil enhancement, crop rotation, and fertilization **utilized** by the University of Illinois in Urbana, Illinois. These “test plots” contributed to the work of Cyril G. Hopkins, chair of **Agronomy** at the U of I and among the foremost authorities on soil fertility in the United States. The faculty of the College of Agriculture at the U of I called S. Noble “a farmer of wide practical experience” and “an **ardent** student of scientific principles as applied to modern methods of permanent soil improvement.”

S. Noble was considered a pioneer in the development of crop rotation and fertilizers. He developed a three-year crop rotation plan involving corn, oats, and clover. In an interview with *The Pantagraph* in 1900, S. Noble stated that only about a third of his land was planted in corn in any given year. The rest was in oats and clover. After a field was planted in corn one year, the following year would be oats and then clover. He observed that this method of crop rotation tended to make soil more fertile and reduce the risk of crop failure in the event of drought or disease.

He experimented with **phosphorus** as a fertilizer, applying half-a-ton per acre, and was thought to be among the first in McLean County to use **statistics** in evaluating the effects of fertilizer, as well as a **surface cultivator**, of which he was McLean County's first known operator. S. Noble also abandoned the common practice of burning off corn stalks after harvest. Instead, he decided to try plowing them under into the soil instead, along with using straw bedding, to build **tilth** in the soil. The result was an increased yield of nine bushels per acre. Any increase in yield would make farmers very happy come harvest time.

Because of his investment in the field of agriculture, S. Noble became a member of the **Illinois Farmer's Institute**, which was founded on June 24, 1895. The goal of this organization was to assist and encourage "useful education among the farmers, for developing agricultural resources of the State," and to develop greater interests in "cultivation of crops, in the breeding and care of domestic animals, in dairy **husbandry**, in **horticulture**, in farm drainage, in improved highways, and general farm management."

S. Noble was a very active member of the Farmers' Institute. He led discussions at annual meetings and presented programs on a variety of agricultural topics, including horse breeding and training. While S. Noble did not find all speakers at each and every Farmers' Institutes to be compelling, he apparently found the gatherings quite educational for the question-and-answer sessions and the collaboration among attendees that often followed the lectures.

Because of his leadership and expertise in the field of agriculture, S. Noble was elected to the board of directors of the state organization, representing the 13<sup>th</sup> District (which included McLean County) on February 23, 1899. During his tenure on the board of directors of the Illinois Farmers' Bureau, he and the other board members requested that U of I create a scholarship program for **prospective** students interested in the study of agriculture at the university. This program established a fund to "encourage many a farmer's boy and girl to work for a higher education which they might not otherwise hope to obtain."

S. Noble's progressive thinking also led him to **advocate** for **infrastructure**. He knew that, for a variety of reasons, farms needed **reliable** rural roads. To bring awareness to the matter and, he hoped, a solution to the generally poor conditions of **secondary** roads (especially in the winter and spring months), he accepted the nomination of his fellow landowners as chairman of the local executive committee to organize a "Good Roads" convention.

In this pre-**mechanization** age, S. Noble also became interested in the quality and durability of work animals. He decided to breed, use, and retail his own. According to advertisements for his horses, S. Noble had been breeding his horses "to the best horses imported by the Dillions and Stubblefields," (who bred **Percherons**) since the early 1870s. Percheron horses were a strong and durable breed of horse that was bred as a workhorse. They could pull more weight, withstand the heat better, do the work of two regular horses, had a quiet **disposition**, and were perfect for farm work.

S. Noble richly enjoyed farming. "A farmer's life," he was heard to say, "is most independent and happy." He saw **agrarian** life as liberating. In spite of his expressed contentment with farming and all that went with it, he realized something was missing. After building a farming enterprise, he found himself ready for companionship. S. Noble wed Mary Amelia Reed on June 27, 1871, in Ottawa, Illinois.

**Mary Amelia Reed** was born in Franklinville, Cattaraugus County, New York on September 20, 1842, one of Abram V. and Rachel (Freeman) Reed's six daughters. An **itinerant** farmer, Abram moved his family around until landing in Ottawa, Illinois; and, finally, to Normal Township, Illinois, where he apparently formed a partnership of some kind with S. Noble King. Mary and S. Noble were, thus, "thrown together" by circumstance. She had been an educator by trade, teaching for seven years in the Peru and Ottawa, Illinois areas and, for another three years, filling the role of principal at East Ottawa Grammar School.

Mary adapted well to life on the farm; but, like her husband, she **aspired** to higher purposes. She became active in the local chapter of "The King's Daughters" (now the "International Order of the King's Daughters and Sons"), a Christian organization formed to do **charitable** work.

While she and S. Noble had no children of their own, Mary was interested in how children were raised and about their early education. She belonged to two organizations who were founded with the goal of being a safe and caring place for working mothers to leave their children who were not of school age. In 1890, the King's Daughters, Bloomington Chapter, repurposed a cottage in Bloomington and established the "King's Daughter's Home," and in 1908, Mary began serving on the board of the Day Nursery and Settlement Association which established a home on Bloomington's west side with the same purpose.

Another cause Mary joined was the education of women in the **domestic sciences**. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, women were still "at home;" however, they observed the task of managing a household as becoming increasingly complex, perhaps even more so than their husbands' work. As such, women needed **expertise** and, thanks to people like Mary King, learning opportunities emerged.

In 1898, the **Illinois Association of Domestic Science** was founded. It was organized as a branch of the Illinois Farmers' Institute "to arouse a wider interest in the science and art of housekeeping" and was designed to assist farmers' wives and "to **stimulate** mutual helpfulness in their methods of housekeeping." The system of organization was exactly the same as the Farmers' Institute, in that each county had its own domestic science association. Mary was a co-founder the McLean County chapter and, for the ensuing 30 years, worked for its growth and development into a **viable** institution. She also served as secretary and president of the state association. She helped organize, and often led sessions at, conventions for women to learn important applications, e.g. preparing and cooking meat, the uses of different **cereals**, bread-baking, management of a **cellar**, **sanitations** and cleaning, preventing **contagious** diseases, and budgeting.

The Kings were also active members of the Second Presbyterian Church of Bloomington. S. Noble served as an officer on the church council and Mary combined her **devotion** and teaching skills in conducting a Bible study class for adult women.

In 1907, at 72 years of age, S. Noble had enjoyed unusually good health and remained quite active, considering that the average American male at the time did not survive much beyond 50. However, he experienced a life changing event that spring. The Kings' nephew, David Ward King of Missouri, came for a visit. As S. Noble departed the **depot** platform after picking up David in his buggy, he crossed the tracks and was struck by an east bound **Big Four** freight train engine. As *The Pantagraph* reported, "one arm fell under the wheels and was horribly **mangled**." He otherwise suffered non-life-threatening bruises and **contusions**. He was taken by ambulance to Brokaw Hospital and **Chicago & Alton railroad** surgeons were called to treat him. Unfortunately, his arm was badly damaged, and the surgeons were forced to **amputate** his left arm near the elbow. S. Noble was released from the hospital within the week, **recuperated** at home for a time under Mary's care, and eventually resumed his active lifestyle, but with some limitations.

In January 1911, the Kings retired from farming. They rented out their property in Normal Township, sold his entire herd of Percheron horses (19 **mares** and **fillies**, and 5 **stallions**), and moved to 903 Main Street in Bloomington. In an interview with *The Pantagraph* that announced his retirement from farming, he recalled that he had raised "fifty-four crops of corn" since he began farming in Illinois in 1854. He also stated that he had been crazy about horses for as long as he could remember. S. Noble said that his father "kept a carriage horse and from the time I was six years old I took care of that horse. That led me to the farm, my love for **stock**, more for horses.... there is no other animal that has as good sense as a horse." While he was born and

raised in town, he enjoyed working on the farm and didn't know of anything he would have liked better.

Just two years into retirement, after the New Year in 1913, he caught a cold, which, within a month, complicated into **septicemia**. He died on February 3, 1913, at the age of 78 and was **interred** in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery two days later.

Mary remained an active **philanthropist**, and even traveled to Europe in the summer of 1914. Mary also split her time between her Bloomington residence and a second home in Pasadena, California (where she and S. Noble had spent the winters of 1911 and 1912 after their retirement). May passed away in Pasadena after a gradual decline of health on December 20, 1928, at the age of 86.

In his will, S. Noble understandably left his earthly possessions to Mary. He added, though, a **provision** for the disposal of his property upon Mary's death. He and Mary desired that a **considerable** portion of their estate—the 240-acre plot in Normal Township where they farmed and lived—be left to fund, in **perpetuity**, the **Jessamine Withers Home**, also known as the “Old Ladies Home of Bloomington.”

At the time of her death in 1897, philanthropist Sarah Withers left her second private residence at 305 West Locust to establish a home for **impoverished** elderly women. She requested that it be named the Jessamine Withers Home after her adopted daughter, Jessamine, who died in 1892. Sarah had **designated** her first home, at the corner of East and Washington Streets, for the establishment of the Withers Library (now known as the Bloomington Public Library).

Though Sarah Withers dedicated a building for the Jessamine Withers Home, she was not able to provide operating **capital**, and, despite several small donations and **legacies**, the project remained **dormant** for the next 17 years. Enter the Kings. Within a month of the reading of her husband's will, Mary decided to donate part of her **inheritance** and order that the 240 acres of farm ground be, as soon as legally possible, placed in a trust, with the annual income **designated** to support the home. Leaders of Second Presbyterian Church of Bloomington were to be the trustees. By the end of April, that same year, Mary **conceded** additional properties to the trust, expanding it to more than one-half of her and her husband's entire estate.

Owing largely to the King trust, the Home opened on May 12, 1914, with the Board of Lady Managers supervising operations and a superintendent handling day-to-day affairs. As it entered its 50<sup>th</sup> year in the 1960s, **regulations** on nursing homes had been made more **stringent** by the State of Illinois and, because women now enjoyed the benefits of **Social Security** and **Medicare**, very few women were able to qualify for residence. The Home closed in 1963.

Starting in 1957, the Withers Home property—the 240-acre plot willed by the Kings—was gradually **liquidated**. That year, 75 acres were sold to **General Electric**, and in 1965, the remaining 165 acres was sold to the Bloomington Industrial Development Corporation. Today, this site is now home a variety of commercial properties, including the Chateau Hotel and Conference Center and Best Buy. A pink **granite** monument commemorating the Kings' legacy remains in a prominent place just north of Best Buy in the parking lot.

## Vocabulary

**Adjutant General (noun):** one who provides personnel support that affects soldiers' overall well-being; an assistant to commanding officers especially responsible for correspondence.

**Advent (noun):** a coming into being or use.

**Advocate (noun):** one who defends or maintains a cause or proposal.

**Agrarian (adjective):** of, relating to, or characteristic of farmers or their way of life.

**Agronomy (noun):** a branch of agriculture dealing with field-crop production and soil management.

**Ardent (adjective):** with an intense degree of zeal, devotion, or enthusiasm.

**Aspire (verb):** to direct one's hopes or ambitions towards achieving something.

**Atlanta (place):** the capital city of the state of Georgia. During the Civil War, Atlanta was an important transportation hub for the Confederate Army. In 1864, the Union Army attacked Atlanta to stop it from aiding the Confederate Army and to work their way into the rest of the South.

**Big Four (noun):** The Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis (CCC & StL) Railway.

**Bushels (noun):** a unit of measurement equating to 2150.42 cubic inches.

**Capital (noun):** the seat of government in a geographic area OR a value of accumulated goods and their production.

**Cellar (noun):** a room or set of rooms below the ground floor of a building, sometimes used as storage.

**Cereals (noun):** various plants that create grain used in food production.

**Charitable (adjective):** generous and benevolent towards others, especially those in need

**Chicago & Alton Railroad (noun):** a railroad that came to Bloomington in 1853 and became one of the largest employers in McLean County. This railroad linked Chicago to St. Louis and made Bloomington a hub for railroad transportation.

**Columbarium (noun):** a room or structure designed as a final resting place for cremated remains.

**Concede (verb):** to admit or acknowledge grudgingly.

**Considerable (adjective):** large in extent or degree and worth acknowledging.

**Consumer Science (noun):** the study of skills and knowledge that is beneficial for one's day-to-day home life. This can include cooking, parenting, budgeting, housing, etc.

**Contagious (adjective):** transmissible by direct or indirect contact with an infected person

**Cremation Niches (noun):** where cremated remains are interred, sometimes in a structure and sometimes in freestanding walls. These can be fronted with bronze, granite, or glass.

**Crop Rotation (noun):** the practice of growing different crops in succession on the same land chiefly to preserve the productive capacity of the soil.

**Depot (noun):** a building for railroad or bus passengers or freight.

**Depriving (verb):** to take something away from or withhold something from somebody.

**Designated (verb):** indicating or setting aside for a specific purpose or person.

**Devotion (noun):** the fact or state of being ardently dedicated and loyal.

**Dignified (adjective):** showing or expressing a quality of being honorable and esteemed.

**Disposition (noun):** prevailing tendency, mood, or inclination.

**Domestic Science (noun):** the study of household skills like cooking and sewing; similar to consumer science but often geared more towards young women and girls.

**Dormant (adjective):** inactive or suspended.

**Drainage (noun)** the act, process, or mode of drawing away rainwater.

**Enriched (verb):** to make soil more fertile.

**Expertise (noun):** high levels of skill or knowledge in a trade or topic

**Fertilizers (noun):** a substance (such as manure or a chemical mixture) used to make soil more fertile.

**Fillies (noun):** a young female horse usually of less than four years.

**General Electric (noun):** an American electric company founded in 1892.

**General Sherman (person):** William Tecumseh Sherman; a general in the Union Army known for his scorched-earth strategy of completely destroying the towns and cities he went through so that the Confederate Army could not benefit from them.

**Generous (adjective):** one who gives abundantly of their time or resources.

**Grand Army of the Republic (noun):** a fraternal organization for Civil War veterans who fought for the Union army, Navy, and Marines.

**Granite (noun):** a very hard natural igneous rock formation used especially for building and for monuments.

**Gravestone (noun):** a burial monument that displays information about the person/people buried in that plot.

**Horseless Carriages (noun):** early name for automobiles and motor cars.

**Horticulture (noun):** the science and art of growing fruits, vegetables, flowers, or ornamental plants.

**Husbandry (noun):** the cultivation or production of plants or animals.

**Humble (adjective):** not proud or arrogant.

**Illinois Farmers' Institute (noun):** a group founded in 1895 with the goals of encouraging farmers to seek out further agricultural education, creating resources for the state, and develop interest in new forms of farm management and crop cultivation. Each county had their own chapter, and a state-wide meeting was held annually.

**Immeasurably (adverb):** in a manner that is incapable of being measured.

**Impoverished (adjective):** reduced to poverty; poor.

**Infrastructure (noun):** the underlying foundation or basic framework of something like a system or organization.

**Intelligence (noun):** the ability to learn or understand, or to deal with new or trying situations.

**Interred (verb):** to have deposited (a dead body) in the earth or in a tomb; buried.

**Innumerable (adjective):** too many to be numbered; countless.

**Itinerant (adjective):** traveling from place to place, especially covering a circuit.

**Jessamine Withers Home (noun):** a place for elderly women, widowed and without means to support themselves, to spend their remaining years in a safe, caring environment. The home was funded by the Kings' estate, which was willed to the home in perpetuity.

**Legacy (noun):** something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past

**Liquidated (verb):** to convert assets (such as property) into cash.

**Mangled (adjective):** severely injured or damaged by cutting, tearing, or crushing.

**Mares (noun):** female horse or other equine animal especially when fully mature or of breeding age.

**McLean County Household Science Association (noun):** organized as a branch of the Illinois Farmers' Institute designed for farmers' wives to bolster an interest in domestic sciences and consider new methods of housekeeping.

**Mechanization (verb):** to equip with machinery especially to replace human or animal labor.

**Medicare (noun):** a government program of medical care especially for the aged

**Mercantile (adjective):** of or relating to merchants or trading.



**Mustered Out (verb):** to be discharged from military service.

**Peers (noun):** one belonging to the same societal group especially based on age, grade, or status.

**Percheron Horses (noun):** powerful rugged horses that originated in the Perche region of France and are often used as working animals.

**Perpetuity (noun):** the quality or state of being everlasting or unending.

**Philanthropy (noun):** active effort to promote human welfare.

**Phosphorus (noun):** a nonmetallic element that is essential for life in all known organisms, and that is used especially in fertilizers.

**Preparedness (noun):** a state of being prepared or ready.

**Procure (verb):** to get possession of or obtain something.

**Prospective (adjective):** relating to or effective in the future; expected.

**Provision (noun):** a measure taken beforehand to prepare for other circumstances.

**Recuperate (verb):** to recover health or strength.

**Regulations (noun):** authoritative rules, details, or procedures.

**Reliable (adjective):** suitable or fit to be relied on; dependable.

**Renounce (verb):** to give up, refuse, or resign usually by formal declaration.

**Sanitations (noun):** the promotion of hygiene and prevention of disease by maintenance of sanitary conditions.

**Secondary Roads (noun):** roads that are not as highly trafficked such as rural side streets.

**Septicemia (noun):** also known as blood poisoning; potentially life-threatening invasion of the bloodstream by bacteria from an infection.

**Skirmishes (noun):** minor fights or verbal conflicts.

**Social Security (noun):** a US program that provides benefits such as financial aid to retired, unemployed, and disabled individuals.

**Stallions (noun):** a male horse kept for breeding.

**Statistics (noun):** the collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of masses of numerical data.

**Stimulate (verb):** to excite activity or growth or to greater activity.

**Surface Cultivator (noun):** a machine that loosens soil and kills weeds on land that is going to be farmed.

**Synonymous (adjective):** having the same connotations, implications, or reference.

**Tile (noun):** a hollow or a semicircular and open earthenware or concrete piece used in constructing a drain.

**Tillage (noun):** the operation of plowing, sowing, and raising crops.

**Tilth (noun):** soil that is especially suitable for growing crops.

**Utilized (verb):** to make use of or make practical.

**Viable (adjective):** capable of existence and development as an independent unit

**Vocation (noun):** a summons or strong inclination to a particular state or course of action.

**Will (noun):** a legal declaration of a person's wishes regarding the disposal of his or her property or estate after death.

## Letters reveal rigors of Civil War soldiering

By Bill Kemp; September 25, 2011



This image from the July 11, 1863 Harper's Weekly shows the Union siege works before Vicksburg, Miss. The cylindrical wicker baskets seen here were known as gabions. They were filled with dirt and stones by soldiers (including those of the 94th) and used for defensive purposes. (Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History)

Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History

For historians, genealogists and everyday folk who appreciate well-told stories about the past, the Civil War offers a wealth of original source material, especially in the form of letters written by soldiers to those back home.

In the 1980s, Jack and Maurita Orendorff loaned the McLean County Museum of History 70 some letters written by Pvt. William H. Horine of the 94th Illinois Volunteer Infantry. The museum transcribed the letters, and the typed copies are now part of its sizable collection of Civil War correspondence.

A wry but honest humor runs through his correspondence, and at times Horine's matter-of-fact accounting of two years worth of fighting, dying, marching and bivouacking (with an emphasis on the latter two activities) assumes a measure of poignancy. In all likelihood his schooling was sporadic and incomplete, though his expressive vocabulary, his conscious use of earthy vernacular and his ability to perfectly capture a scene with a phrase or two would put many a college English major to shame.

In August 1862, Horine enlisted in Co. K of the newly formed 94th Illinois, generally known as the "McLean County Regiment." The 94th campaigned in Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Alabama, and participated in the Battle of Prairie Grove (Ark.) and the grueling, methodical sieges of Vicksburg, Miss. and Mobile, Ala.

Raised on a farm south of Bloomington, Horine was not writing to a mother, sister, sweetheart or wife, but rather his older brother Woodson, and thus didn't shy away from salty language and indelicate descriptions.

In January 1863, for instance, he asked for several boxes of "Grafenburgs pills" to remedy his constipation. "They come very handy when a feller wants to (expletive for defecating) and can't," he wrote.

In the Civil War, communicable diseases such as pneumonia and waterborne ailments such as dysentery claimed about twice the lives as enemy fire. In Springfield, Mo., still early in the war, Horine wrote of "a great deal of sickness and deaths in our regiment." Of the 95 men who served in Co. K, 17 did not make it back home, with most falling to disease.

Horine had no sympathy for "Secesh," his all-purpose term for those who supported the Confederacy, and he had no qualms provisioning his company via foraging. "We have been living off the Secesh pretty much since we came here," he wrote later from Madisonville, La. "We just helped ourselves to their calves, sheep and hogs. They're darned scarce though, and not very good what's of them."

The 94th played a pivotal role in the Dec. 7, 1862, Battle of Prairie Grove that ended the Confederate threat in northwest Arkansas. "The first round or two I felt like dodging," Horine

admitted to his brother, “but after firing several times I didn’t think anything more about it. I loaded and fired as deliberately as if I was shooting hogs.”

By mid-June 1863, the 94th was part of Ulysses S. Grant’s epic campaign to claim Vicksburg, Miss., the last remaining Confederate bastion on the Mississippi River. After the city fell on July 4, 1863, the 94th spent a series of disease-ridden months in Mississippi and Louisiana before being shipped to Brownsville, Texas.

It was there that Horine fell ill, perhaps suffering from malaria or scurvy (the latter resulting from a deficiency of vitamin C). By late July, he wrote that “one half of the boys has got ‘scurvy’ now, and if we stay here much longer they will all have it.”

The 94th vacated Brownsville in August 1864 and the men quickly found themselves in the sands along Mobile Bay, Ala., part of the massive campaign to capture the city and its surrounding fortifications. In a letter written in early September, during the long slog up the east side of the bay, Horine admitted to a significant loss of hearing, attributing it to fevers contracted outside of New Orleans and then Brownsville.

On Dec. 1, 1864, Horine received a discharge, which was six months before the regiment as a whole mustered out. After the war, he was a farmer and grocer, passing away in 1907 at the age of 67.

## ‘Angel of the West Side’ met daycare needs a century ago

By Bill Kemp; September 25, 2016



There are no known photographs of Jennie Thompson or the Day Nursery during her tenure with the west side social service provider. Seen here is a 1947 Halloween party at the Day Nursery, 1320 W. Mulberry St. Thompson worked out of this building, which remains standing today, though long ago it was converted back to its original use as a residence.

COURTESY OF MCLEAN COUNTY MUSEUM OF HISTORY

Ah, the good old days when all fathers were breadwinners and all mothers were homemakers.

Well, those days were never so simple, nor were they so good, at least for the many working class families whose mothers had to earn a living outside the home. Although it may come as a surprise to many traditionalists who yearn for an American past that never was, the lack of daycare for working mothers was an issue that goes back more than a century.

Locally, such a need led independent, reform-minded women to establish Bloomington's Day Nursery (what we would call a daycare center today) on the city's working-class west side.

Back then the west side included the Chicago and Alton Railroad Shops and the McLean County Coal Co., both of which employed a large number of foreign-born men. And many of their wives and other working-class women had factory floor jobs at local candy maker Paul F. Beich Co., also located on the west side.

The day nursery, which opened in early 1908, provided a safe, professionally run and low-cost daycare center for working mothers. From its very beginning the nursery also doubled as a settlement house, a type of social service center patterned after Progressive Era reformer Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago.

The Bloomington Day Nursery and Social Settlement Association (as it became known) eventually offered immigrant and neighborhood families a wide range of programs. In addition to childcare, there were cooking, sewing, "physical culture" (exercise), art and folk dance classes. Other services included a branch of the public library and an employment bureau that matched west side residents with "requests for help from the east side." (These usually entailed calls for domestic work — housekeepers, nannies, chauffeurs and the like.)

During its formative years no one was more closely associated with the day nursery than Jane "Jennie" Lynd Thompson. Mary McDowell, a contemporary of Addams who ran the University of Chicago Settlement House on that city's south side, was known as the "Angel of the Stockyards." Keeping that in mind, one could just as well call Jennie Thompson the "Angel of Bloomington's West Side."

The day nursery was first located in a small, wood-frame residence on the 1200 block of West Mulberry Street. Five years later the nursery moved into roomier quarters a block west on the same street, and two years after this former single-family home was substantially remodeled and enlarged. Remarkably, the house is still there today looking much as it did nearly 100 years ago, though it's now back to serving as a residence.

In order to meet growing expenses, day nursery supporters established the Women's Exchange in downtown Bloomington. This enterprise involved local women selling cakes, pies and various baked goods, as well as needle and other "fancy work," with profits going to nursery and settlement house operations.

Many area women took understandable pride in the fact that both the day nursery and Women's Exchange were managed and operated entirely by the supposedly "fairer sex."

"Miss Jennie," as Thompson would be called by a generation of west side children, was a beloved figure in the Twin Cities. Neighborhood women valued her know-how, patience and temperament as they came to depend on her uncanny ability to smooth over the many wrinkles in their working-class lives.

The West Mulberry Street center eventually included a health clinic, though they called it a dispensary, with local physicians and nurses volunteering their time. Patients were charged a nominal fee, based on ability to pay, or nothing at all. Minor surgeries were even performed there, including many tonsillectomies.

The Day Nursery and Social Settlement Association was established at a time of de facto segregation in the Twin Cities. Black residents and visitors were not allowed to stay at downtown Bloomington hotels or eat at downtown restaurants, and were directed to separate seating areas in local theaters. By the end of World War I the locally run homes for orphaned and neglected children were even segregated by race — black children were sent to the McLean County Home for Colored Children while their white counterparts resided at the Girls' Industrial Home or Victory Hall in Normal.

That being said, African Americans had access to some (though apparently not all) nursery and settlement house services. In her 1915 report, Thompson called for the establishment of a parallel day nursery to meet the needs of working African-American mothers. It wasn't until the 1940s, though, that the day nursery could promise black working-class families a welcoming place in which "no color line is drawn."



Too often day nursery backers, many of whom were well-intentioned middle- and upper-class mainline Protestants, adopted a patronizing tone when referring to working-class west side residents, many of whom were foreign-born or Catholic — or both.

“English is making individuals out of these foreigners,” declared settlement house language instructor C.F. Schreiber in early 1909. “The foreigner lives in groups and he has a group thought. As soon as he learns enough English words to dare to venture into a conversation with an American and gets into our sphere of thought, then he becomes an individual ... Let us see how many Americans we can make out of these immigrants.”

Many programs were designed with such “Americanization” goals in mind, especially during the “super-patriot” agitation of World War I and the reactionary politics of the early 1920s. The day nursery was even home to a chapter of the Children of the Republic, a Boy Scouts-like organization established by the Daughters of the American Revolution. This group aimed at inculcating in the children of immigrant parents “patriotism, the creed of the flag, the meaning of the salute and other lessons tending to make them true Americans when they grow up.”

The day nursery remained in operation on West Mulberry Street until 1968. That year the nursery relocated to 315 N. Stilwell St. and became known as the Day Care Center of McLean County. In 2008, it was renamed the Milestones Early Learning Center and six years later a new home was opened on Six Points Road. One hundred and eight years after its founding the old day nursery is still helping those in need!

Jennie Thompson passed away on Jan. 13, 1924, at the age of 63. Her death was called “a bewildering blow” to the day nursery, “so great was her worth in her special line of settlement work and so rare and beautiful her character.”

It was fitting that her earthly remains laid in state at the West Mulberry Street nursery and settlement house, where hundreds of west side folk could say their final goodbyes to “Miss Jennie.” They knew that more than any east side do-gooder philanthropist, Thompson had played an instrumental role in making the day nursery “an outpost of humanity, radiating love, help and encouragement.”