

Ethel Hamilton Hanson (1882-1920)

A common expression says, “If you want something done, ask a busy person.” In the early 1900s, that person in Bloomington/Normal was Ethel Hamilton Hanson. She had a record of getting things done in educational, political, and charitable activities all over McLean County.

Ethel Hamilton was born on September 27, 1882 in Bloomington, IL. She was one of two children born to Franklin and Emma (Cone) Hamilton. Her father, Frank, was a successful lawyer in downtown Bloomington for many years. Her mother, Emma, died when she was only five years old. The family had a history of public service. Her uncle, John Hamilton, was an Illinois state senator and was later elected governor. Her father, Frank, also served as a state representative in Illinois.

Hanson grew up attending Bloomington schools, and then went to the Northfield **Seminary** in Mount Hermon, Massachusetts. After her studies there, she attended Illinois State Normal University (Illinois State University today) where she completed the standard two-year program to earn a teaching certificate. She graduated in June 1902.

The following year she taught Latin and math at the high school in Arcola, IL. Hanson then moved to Marinette, WI, where she taught for four years. Returning home to Bloomington, Hanson taught mathematics at Bloomington High School for two years. During that time, she began the volunteer activities that would become so much a part of her life in the years to come. She became a “strenuous volunteer” for the Young Women’s Christian Association (Y.W.C.A.). Founded in Bloomington in 1908, the Y.W.C.A. offered many opportunities for working women to enrich their lives. Hanson, along with several other teachers, “gave liberally of their time, without **remuneration**.” This was after full days of teaching at the high school. She also gained a **reputation** as a speaker and **toastmistress** at civic and social events.

At seven o’clock on a Saturday evening on October 15, 1910, Ethel Hamilton married Frank O. Hanson at her parent’s home. *The Pantagraph* called the couple’s wedding “the leading society event of the week.” Frank was from a well-known local family. He graduated from Illinois Wesleyan University with a law degree and practiced as an attorney for 46 years in downtown Bloomington. Ethel and Frank had two children, a son and a daughter.

As was the custom of the time, Hanson resigned from teaching following her marriage. But her commitment to volunteer work and public service continued all her life. Beside her continuing work with the Y.W.C.A., she became active in the Illinois Parent-Teacher Association, serving as vice-president of the state PTO, and president of District 6, which included McLean and surrounding counties. She was a leader of the local Women’s Republican Committee where she vigorously supported candidates who worked for women’s **suffrage**.

As “The Great War” raged in Europe, President Woodrow Wilson felt the need for the United States to prepare for its **inevitable** entry into the conflict. In 1916, the **National Defense Act** was passed. The act enabled U.S. military to strengthen and prepare for war. Later, the **Council of National Defense** (C.N.D.) was established. The purpose of this group was to prepare civilian society to support soldiers fighting overseas. This Council expanded into committees on the state and local level, including McLean County.

Women were asked to join the fight and support the war effort too. In 1917, the Women’s Committee of the Council of National Defense was formed. Their mission was to assist with “problems of food, morals, health, education, recreation, quality of citizenship, and with securing a greater measure of social and industrial democracy for women and children workers.”

Because of her skills as a leader and a speaker, Hanson was made chairperson of the McLean County Council of National Defense Women’s Committee. She assisted communities in the area

in forming their own Women's Committees. These committees registered women for war service, whether it was as volunteers or paid positions. The government wanted to know which women could be depended on to help in case of need. It also asked which women had access to cars or typewriters. Registrations were held at the public library, schools, and businesses. Women were also asked to sign pledges to promise to conserve food, plant **war gardens**, and preserve their own produce. They also helped raise money for the war effort.

Unfortunately, some of the Council's activities turned neighbors against each other. Bloomington was home to a large and vibrant German community. There were many German heritage activities, a weekly German language newspaper, and German was taught in schools. After America entered the war, this community within Bloomington became the target of a **systematic** campaign of **suspicion** and **persecution**. The McLean County C.N.D. adopted a resolution stating that it was an act of disloyalty to print anything in German and that the German newspaper should stop using the German language. They went on further to state German should be dropped from the curriculum in public schools. Hanson was assigned to a committee to investigate the issue. After the committee's report to the school board, the board decided to drop German classes, some even before the school year ended. The same was true in Normal and surrounding towns.

With the end of the war, Hanson used her organizing skills to help her husband Frank campaign for state senator in Illinois. On October 28, 1920, after driving her children to school after lunch, she was suddenly **stricken** with double pneumonia and died the next day. Four days after her funeral, Frank was elected state senator. Hanson is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: What reasons do you think persuaded Bloomington schools to stop teaching German? Were there any other options?