

Susan Augusta Pike Sanders (1842 – 1931)

Susan Augusta Pike Sanders was born in Maine on March 25, 1842. She was the third of seven children and the first daughter of Harrison Wallace Pike and Susan A. Mayberry Pike. The family moved to Bloomington, Illinois in 1854 following Harrison's brother Meshack. Meshack had moved to the area earlier and in 1853 opened the Pike House Hotel located near the corner of Monroe and Center streets in downtown Bloomington.

Sue Pike Sanders spent much of her life engaged in public work. Much like her mother, she prized literacy, writing, and education, and kept scrapbooks of historical newspaper clippings which she later contributed to the McLean County Historical Society. Along with that Sue was asked many times to write accounts and summaries of her participation in major public service activities for which she was well-known.

Before engaging in public work Sue began teaching school in June, 1858 at the "Reeder District" in Heyworth, McLean County, IL. In 1861 she placed a small flag bearing the emblem of "Old Glory" over her desk at that school. This act did not go over well with some of the students in her class as Heyworth was primarily populated with Southern leaning Democrats, who were also known as Copperheads. A Copperhead was a Democrat in the North who opposed the American Civil War and wanted an immediate peace settlement with Confederates in the South. Some of her pupils might have thought her act of displaying Old Glory (which was the flag that represented the North) was a way to criticize their views and the views of their parents so those pupils ripped the flag down, stamped it into a mud hole, and tried to bury it. Sue lectured them about the story of the stars and stripes of the flag and when she asked how many of the children would help her keep the flag from being torn down, only one boy did not raise his hand and said "Papa won't let me." Sue further explained what "Old Glory" meant to which the little boy said he would bring his knife and fight anyone who tried to take down the flag.¹ In honor of her placement of the flag inside the schoolhouse, Sue received a bronze medal that was made in her honor and distributed all over the nation.

Sue's talent for teaching and motivation was useful in her later years when she joined the Women's Relief Corps in 1861. The Corps was later known as the "Girls of '61." During the Civil War Sue had four brothers and nine cousins who fought for the Union. Her brother Edward fought in Company A of the 33rd Illinois Infantry Regiment, often known as the "Teacher's Regiment" because so many soldiers were students and faculty at Illinois State Normal University in Normal, IL. Edward received a Congressional Medal of Honor for his "gallantry in action," for saving his regiment's cannon during The Battle of Cache River in Arkansas. Her brother Alpheus, was one of the youngest soldiers to enlist at the age of fifteen. He and their brother Ivory were taken prisoner and sent to the infamous Confederate prison Andersonville in Andersonville, Georgia.

The Women's Relief Corps was an aid society formed to support Union soldiers in their fight. The WRC in Bloomington was created to send aid in particular to the 33rd Illinois Infantry Regiment which was made up of many men from McLean County. The women made clothing and quilts, canned various foodstuffs, and prepared medical supplies such as bandages, and sent them to soldiers or hospitals in need. In her article

¹ Sue Pike Sanders, "The Flag on the School House," McLean County Historical Society Archives

called “Private Benefactions to the Soldiers and Their Families, 1861 – 1865,” Sue described the scene at the community worksite, writing: “As one of the girls who gave all the time I could from my school work, I well remember the speed with which this work was done, with grinders, cutters and knives in the hands of Bloomington’s loyal girls.”² Even after soldiers came home, their work was far from over because many soldiers came home disabled and could not support their families. Overall, the WRC raised \$18,237.50, which would equal about \$442,786.85 in 2008. Some of the WRC’s manufactured items include 582 pillowcases, 595 rolling bandages, 245 cans of fruit, and 10,000 pounds of books and papers.

At the National Convention in Washington D.C. in 1892 Sue gave a small speech similar to the one she gave to the schoolchildren about “Old Glory” to motivate the ladies of the WRC. In her account of the Convention she wrote “I said, ‘Ladies of the National Woman’s Committee of the WRC, I want to know if among you there are 18 delegates that will volunteer to defend this convention from intruders.’ As I requested obligation to defend each sights, an Indiana woman sung out, ‘I’ll defend it with my honor and fist if necessary.’ Such was the spirit of my delegates.”³ True to the spirit of the WRC, Sue was able to revive the group in Bloomington in 1917 with the outbreak of World War I and served as president of the aid society. She also served as president of the National WRC.

Despite her attempts to swear off public service, Sue was volunteered into serving as president of the project to improve the Girls’ Industrial Home in 1892 after just moving back to Bloomington from Delevan, IL. She was so well-known at that point that she was introduced to the Board for the Home as follows: “Ladies, this is Mrs. Sue A Pike Sanders, of course you all know her and there is no need of any formality.”⁴

Sue was involved in the creation of Bloomington’s first public library later named Withers Library. After returning to Bloomington Sue joined the Ladies’ Library Association. She was elected president of the Board of Directors and threw herself wholeheartedly into the efforts of creating a public library. The City of Bloomington approved the plan and the first public library in Bloomington was formed. Sue also served as secretary for the library board in 1894.

Sue continued to be active throughout her life. She co-founded and became secretary of the Delavan Cemetery in 1872 and helped raise funds and provide labor to make the cemetery presentable. She co-founded a social club known as the B.D. Society in 1880 with the initials standing for something secret. Club activities included playing cards, desert social hours, and literary productions. Sue also took on the role as historian for the Letitia Green Stevenson Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1902 and helped found the Lucy Orme Morgan Home for Girls.

With all her participation in public and community work, the McLean County Historical Society often asked Sue to write accounts of her experiences. She spoke at quarterly meetings of the society about topics she felt were important such as the founding of the Girls Industrial Home in Bloomington, the Bloomington Library Association, or about the treatment of the Kickapoo by early white settlers. She also contributed over 40 scrapbooks to the historical society which she had pieced together

² Sue Pike Sanders, “Private Benefactions to the Soldiers and Their Families, 1861 – 1865,” McLean County Museum of History Archives

³ Sue Pike Sanders, reminiscence on Woman’s Relief Corps, McLean County Museum of History Archives

⁴ Sue Pike Sanders, “Girls’ Industrial Home,” McLean County Museum of History Archives

over a 60-year period from old copies of local newspapers. Sue utilized her writing abilities even more when she was editor of the National Vidette in Delavan from 1885 through 1890.

Even though she worked tirelessly for different organizations and charities in the community, Sue was still able to maintain her roles as a wife and a mother. She married James T. Sanders on September 19, 1867 in Jacksonville, IL. James hailed from Millersburg, Kentucky and worked as a special agent of the Chicago and Alton Railroad at Delavan, IL from 1869 through 1888. He also participated in the real estate and fire insurance business in Bloomington after he and his family moved to town on November 7, 1902. James also acted as the Bloomington agent of the Citizens Insurance Company of Missouri. Sue and James had four children, one dying in infancy. They had two sons, Harold Pike Sanders and Royal Woodson Sanders, and one daughter Bernadine Sanders, who died at the young age of fifteen due to diabetes.

Sue died on September 8, 1931 after experiencing a stroke of paralysis, similar to the one that took her husband's life three years before. She had been ill for several years prior to her death and had been hospitalized at St. Joseph's Hospital a few weeks before she died. She was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to her husband and one of her children.

By: Sarah Yoo, 2008