

Jennie Thompson (1860-1924)

Jane “Jennie” Lynd Thompson was born in 1860 in the present-day province of Ontario Canada. She was the oldest of seven children, and she immigrated with her family to the United States in 1865.

In Canada her father, Alexander, had worked as a cabinet maker. After the family moved to Bloomington in 1870, Alexander supported his family as an organ builder and case maker. The Thompsons moved frequently and lived in seven houses between 1872 and 1893!

In June of 1878, when Thompson was only 17 years of age, her mother passed away. Thompson was left to care for her six younger brothers and sisters, including a baby. Sixteen years later, Thompson’s father died in 1894 from a “**hemorrhage** of the brain” (possibly referring to a stroke) and Thompson took charge of her family on her own.

These events probably helped shape Thompson’s life, which she committed to helping others in need. As an adult, she was active in religious and charitable work. She was very involved with Second Presbyterian Church, where she led multiple groups related to **missions**, education, and youth ministry, serving in some of those groups as secretary, president, and **district** representative.

She was also employed as a housekeeper in 1900 and worked as the private secretary to the pastor of her church in 1902. However, by 1910 she was unemployed and living with one of her sisters, who worked as a music teacher.

Two years earlier, in 1908, Thompson made a decision that would change the rest of her life. She became a **charter member** of the Day Nursery and Settlement Association, a private day care and kindergarten which opened that year. It was organized by a group of women who felt they needed to do something “worthwhile for mothers who were **obliged** to work away from home during the day.” Working mothers frequently kept older children out of school to watch their younger pre-school-aged brothers and sisters, but the Day Nursery changed that. It provided a safe and caring place where mothers could leave their children while they were at their jobs.

Thompson was **appointed** to the house committee, which appears to have been in charge of the Day Nursery’s building and grounds, and activities. Within months she was the chairman of the “investigating committee.” Members of this committee visited the homes of day nursery and kindergarten children to determine if their families required the aid they received, and to identify any additional needs those families might have. Many of the first families that Thompson visited were German immigrants. About the families she visited, she said that “[t]he great majority are not of the **destitute** class but are persons who are trying to pay for their little homes and educate their children and help make it possible for the mothers to aid as wage-earners.”

The Association also operated an on-site public library branch and served as meeting place. A group of mostly immigrant women from the west side of Bloomington met at the Day Nursery to participate in strength training routines (known as “physical culture”) and take lessons on topics such as “Recipes of German Cooking” and “How the Body Resists Disease”—things that could help them in their day-to-day lives. All Day Nursery programs were designed to emphasize physical health and productive lifestyles, and their list of offerings grew as the community’s needs grew.

In September 1911, Thompson, who soon became known as “Miss Jennie,” was hired as a “**resident** worker” and began dealing directly with the community’s neediest families.

Thompson “not only distributed food, clothing, and other **bodily necessities**, but gave friendship, comfort and wise **counsel** to all in trouble.” She continued to visit many of the students’ homes, where she saw that most parents were foreign born and had poor English skills.

As a result, more and more English classes were offered at the Association’s Settlement Home. These classes were important for immigrants because the **Naturalization Act of 1906** made English a requirement for completing the process of **naturalization** — and because most Americans believed that English language skills were a basic requirement of good citizenship.

Less than two years after the Settlement Home opened, Thompson called for the board to find a larger space, and a fundraising campaign began immediately. The campaign fell far short of its goal; but with the money they raised plus their regular funds, the Association was able to purchase a larger property in the fall of 1912.

Between April and October of 1914 the home was remodeled to **accommodate** the organization’s ever-growing needs. A second story was added, along with a new basement and additional rooms. When construction was complete, the house included a library and reading room, nursery and kindergarten rooms, two classrooms, bathrooms, an office, a kitchen and dining room, two bedrooms, storage and supply rooms, and a free **clinic** staffed by Bloomington physicians. Thompson moved out when work began. When the remodel was finished, she returned to live in one of the second floor bedrooms.

Thompson eventually supervised all departments of the Settlement Home. *The Pantagraph* reported that “She is a special favorite of the children and mothers of the neighborhood and her advice is sought daily.” Perhaps it was her **philosophy** that drew so many to her: “A settlement house must be a home, radiating comfort, counsel and cheer.” The affection that Thompson received from members of the community was equally given back to them.

In 1918, Thompson, now “field director” of the Settlement Home, made almost 1,000 house calls. She provided parental care, assisted doctors during child birth, and watched over both mother and child for 10 days afterward.

Thompson also cared for 50 sick families during the **Flu Pandemic of 1918-1919**, which killed an estimated 675,000 Americans. In Illinois, the disease spread from Chicago outward along transportation corridors to cities including Bloomington. The pages of *The Pantagraph* were filled with **obituaries** of those who had died. Thompson supplied medicine, made pneumonia jackets (which contained tubing that circulated hot water near the patient’s chest), and even prepared bodies for burial. The situation was so severe that the Settlement Home was closed for four weeks during the worst of the **outbreak**.

Afterward, Thompson continued to be a resource for the physical and emotional needs of local families: “Many women were glad to learn Miss Thompson was at home on Saturday and brought to her many wrinkles of their life to be smoothed out. In fact the Settlement House has been made . . . an outpost of humanity, radiating love, help and encouragement.” Thompson took children to visit the doctor and purchase shoes, and she even had a telephone in her upstairs bedroom that she answered at all times of the night!

The Home’s **clientele** continued to expand. In the 1923 annual report published by *The Pantagraph*, Thompson announced that the Home had served three families from Mexico. She stated that “For several years I have felt so sorry for them living in the desolate box cars, but until last year there was no one among them who could speak English.” **Ironically**, a language barrier had separated them from the services of the place that could best help them **integrate** into their new community.

Thompson worked tirelessly until her sudden death on January 13, 1924 at Brokaw Hospital. She was 63 years old.

Her funeral was held three days later at her church. Afterward, her body **lay in state** in the Day Nursery and was viewed by hundreds of **mourners**. On the day of her funeral, all of the social agencies in town cut back to **essential** operations to allow workers who were not absolutely needed on the job to attend Thompson's funeral and pay their respects for her life of service.

Discussion: In what ways would your life change if you suddenly had to care for several younger siblings full-time?