Myrline Miller Anderson: How a Williamson woman came to live among the Sioux

By MARY L. SEMINSKI Special to the Sun-Gazette

Myrline Miller was 21 in 1918 when, on Thanksgiving, she wrote a letter to her fiancé, Alvin Anderson, asking him to marry her. Their engagement, he wrote, was short-lived. He had an unusual condition for Myrline, though. He asked if, after they were married, she would go with him — for just two years, in his words — from South Dakota to "the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota, where he had a job managing the J. P. Morgan Indian Trading Post.

Myrline Miller had grown up in Sallisabaud area with her father, Henry, schoolteacher and Civil War veteran; her mother, Amanda; and two brothers, Harry and Orville. In those days South Dakota was, from the quiet hamlet of Sallisabaud, very much the "Wild West." Perhaps she hesitated, but she said yes — both to the marriage proposal and to the two years on the reservation.

We wouldn't know much about Myrline's life if she hadn't written a short memoir for the South Dakota Women's Club. That piece is now part of the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society (Chatsworth, 1992) and the Lycoming County Women's History Collection at the Lycoming College Library.

Myrline Miller Anderson had emigrated from Sweden with her family as a toddler in 1870. When he was 10, his mother died and he came to Lycoming County to live with his older sister, Amanda, and her husband, Gustav Carlson.

When John was 17, his widowed father, taking advantage of cheap land prices in northern Michigan, moved the entire family to the small town of Valentine. John bought a camera, apprenticed himself to a photographer, and soon was earning a living with his camera. When the George Crook of the U.S. Army as a civilian photographer with the 10th Cavalry charged with documenting the transition of Native Americans from life on the open plains to life on the reservations.

John Anderson continued to travel back to Williamson, and on one trip, he and Myrline Miller became engaged.

Just before Mr. Anderson left for the West we became engaged. Two years later he came back and we were married and left at once for South Dakota. That was in the fall of 1896. There were no fast trains in those days but we finally reached Valentine, Neb., at one o'clock in the morning. It had never been out of Pennsylvania when we woke up in the dark streets of Valentine.

But their happy life on the reservation, which they stayed in for two years, was not all that it seemed. As they tried to live in the harsh conditions of the reservation, they discovered that the life there was not what they had expected.

In 1901, John moved back to Pennsylvania, where he worked as a photographer for the Lycoming County Historical Society. He continued to travel and photograph the lives of Native Americans in the West.

Later they moved to California, where John died in 1949. The Andersons, in 1961, were buried in Sallisabaud, alongside their son, Harold, Rosecoe, and Myrline's parents.

Left a legacy

John and Myrline Anderson each left a legacy. John Anderson's photography, taken over those 40 years, document the tremendous changes that took place on the reservation while the couple lived there. Considered the definitive photographs, they are held by the Rosebud Reservation, the photographs are held by many museums, including the Smithsonian.

In addition to providing the invaluable gift of friendship to the women on the reservation, Myrline Miller Anderson published a beautiful book of simple poems about the people she lived among called "Sioux Memory Gems,"

Illustrated with John Anderson's photographs, the book is a part of the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society Museum.

In the preface, the people of the reservation wrote, "We are only trying to make known the fact that God breathed into the thinking Indian a soul, which the public at large knows little nor has ever tried to understand."

In turn, the people of Rosebud honored Myrline. There is a window in the Episcopal Church in the small town of Mission, S.D., honoring her, John, and their son, Rosecoe, for their contributions to the community.