Florence Crittenton Home: Serving young mothers

10/19/2016

Williamson Women

The Florence Crittenton Mission in Williamson provided housing and services to unmarried mothers in the city and surrounding areas for more than 80 years, from its founding in 1927 until the "Home for Single Women" until the Florence Crittenton Home on Woodmont Avenue closed its doors in 1979.

The mission was named after the daughter of Carrie Crittenton, a successful drugstore medicine distributor in New York City. Florence died of cancer in 1874, and Crittenton devoted the rest of her life to missions work in her honor. Her first initiative was to open the Florence Nightingale Home for Nurses in New York City.

Shown above left, is Young Florence Crittenton for whom the Florence Crittenton Home is named. Above right, 1105 Washington Ave., the location of the Florence Crittenton Home in Williamson from 1957 to 1979.

Mission on Bleeker Street, intended to "rescue" prostitutes. Later, Florence Crittenton Homes were established in cities throughout the United States and Canada to provide residential care for unmarried mothers.

(See FLORENCE, Page B3)

Florence Crittenton Home: Serving young mothers

(From Page B1)

mothers and their children and to undertake preventive and protective work for young girls. The Florence Crittenton Mission was part of a general reform movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, often led by women, that sought to address questions of urban growth, moral decline, immigration and women's rightful place in society.

The local mission, like many others, was administered almost entirely by women and, for the most part, staffed with women volunteers. Unfortunately, few local archival records survive — no photographs, no copies of house rules or statistical records. Researchers must rely mainly on newspaper stories. Records of some adoptions are held at the Wyoming County Courthouse.

Home for the Fallen

"Home for the Fallen: A New Institution To Be Established" was the headline in the Sept. 28, 1895 Gazette & Bulletin. The article added that the new home was in response to the need to "do something toward the rescue of many women and girls who are going astray from paths of morality. Their (the founders') idea is to provide a home for friendless girls and women who have fallen, or who are in circumstances that may lead to their fall, from want of employment, from destitution, or from evil associates, or who may voluntarily commit themselves to the care of the house by expressing a willing to conform to its rules and regulations.

In addition to $150 in hand, the founders rented a house on West Jefferson Street, near the foot of Hibbert Street (where Wegmans is today). The following year, the Home for Fallen Women was dedicated as the national Florence Crittenton Mission by the Rev. J. J. Barrett, national Florence Crittenton president, speaking with Williamson, consulting with the newly formed group. On her advice, they moved the home to 1432 W. Fourth St. (west of Cemetery Street), because "in order to help the girls permanently they must be taken as far as possible from their old surroundings" (Gazette & Bulletin, Oct. 12, 1896).

That year, the home housed three women and two children. In 1902, the founders bought a house at 679 Campbell Ave. In 1907, the home was moved to a larger house at 1105 Woodmont Ave.

Not only the location, but also the mission of the organization changed over time. It is clear that, in Williamson, the first women to be "rescued" were young prostitutes, probably attracted to the area by the large number of men working in the lumber industry. Over the years, the Florence Crittenton Mission, nationally and locally, evolved from a church-oriented, soul-saving mission for "fallen women" into humanitarian, custodial hideouts for young women desiring or forced to keep their pregnancies secret.

Funding the home

Raising money for this charitable work always was a challenge. By 1903, the Florence Crittenton Mission was receiving state funding, but the mission varied from year to year. In later years, the mission partially — but not fully — was supported by the Community Chest and the United Way. The Crittenton Home sponsored donation days and annual dinners and solicited monetary gifts from individuals and institutions.

At one time, young girls referred to in reports as "betrayed girls," had to commit to stay for six months. They were trained in domestic work, including sewing and cooking. After their babies were born, the girls were released, and Crittenton devoted the rest of her life to missions work in her honor. Her first initiative was to open the Florence Nightingale Home for Nurses in New York City.

Service needs change

By the late 60s and early 70s, the Florence Crittenton Home was not serving Louisiana County girls, referring them to other homes for reasons of confidentiality. Residents were from other geographic areas, and they mostly were white, middle-class young women who wanted to keep their pregnancies secret. By the time the Williamson Home closed, birth control pills were available, abortion was legal, the social stigma attached to unmarried pregnancy had lessened and pregnant girls were allowed to attend Williamson High School and other schools.

Although the Crittenton Home is closed, the Florence Crittenton Services of Williamson continues to support young pregnant unmarried women and first-time low-income mothers by working through local agencies. Crittenton Services has funded educational outreach and services to the community through Susquehanna Health's Reproductive Health Center and the Nurse Family Partnership and has supported young low-income mothers through such agencies as the Shepherd of the Streets occupied the West End Christian Community Center, helping with day care and other basic needs.

Stenberg is a retired librarian and manager of the Lymeong County Women's History Collection. Her column is published on the second Sunday of each month and she can be reached at jeh@mcg.com.