Jerusha Bailey Mussina: Williamsport Crusader for Temperance

By MARY L. SIEMINSKI
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Jerusha Bailey Mussina was the leader of the “Woman’s Crusade” for temperance in Williamsport.

The local Crusade was part of a nationwide protest against the liquor trade and occurred almost 50 years before Prohibition became law.

During the winter of 1873-74, tens of thousands of women in small towns and cities marched on local saloons, hotels and other liquor outlets. In Williamsport, it was said that there were 30 of these dens of iniquity within walking distance of Market Square. This is how Jerusha Mussina described the Williamsport Crusade, which took place from March to June 1874: “Every afternoon bands of women, after meeting in prayer, started from the Pine Street M.E. Church in different directions, visiting hotels and saloons, kneeling and praying on cold, damp and often filthy pavement, or breathing the offensive air of bar rooms, sometimes being subjected to abuse, and even endangering their lives in some instances.”

The Williamsport Woman’s Crusade might have been forgotten if not for a 30-page booklet held by Lycoming County Historical Society, with the title “A true record of the Temperance Movement”.
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Crusaders, why and what they did, with names of women signers to address the saloon-keepers, list of officers, etc. That booklet has been digitized and is included in the Lycoming County Women's History Collection (www.lycoming.edu/library/lcwhc), an online archive of primary source material relating to the history of women in Lycoming County.

On the front of the booklet is a portrait of Jerusha Bailey Mussina with the caption “Mother Mussina.” She has a solemn expression, far-seeing eyes and a determined chin—all of which held her in good stead all of her life. The title “Mother” was bestowed on her and Crusade leaders in other cities and towns by their followers to honor their courage and leadership.

Who was Mother Mussina?

As with most women of her time period, we have few details about Jerusha Mussina’s life. As also is typical, we know more about her husband, Jacob Lyons (J.L.) Mussina. Jerusha Bailey was born in Lycoming County on April 20, 1813.

J.L. Mussina’s list of accomplishments is long—he had a daguerreotype gallery in Williamsport; he organized the first band; and was a leading supporter of the fledgling Dickinson Seminary (now Lycoming College).

J.L. Mussina is probably best known for the jewelry business that he and saloons that the “praying band of women” visited, following in the footsteps of Mother Mussina.

The City Hotel was their first stop on Day 1 of the Crusade — March 1, 1874. The next day they gathered again and visited the Herdic House, which at that time was Peter Herdic’s Hotel on West Fourth, and Crusaders were treated with respect, proprietors and patrons sometimes slammed doors in their faces, insulted them, threw water on them, and tried to smoke them out.

Crusaders were well known for their charitable and church work in Williamsport. She was a long-time member of the Pine Street Church, where she was a Sunday families, women filled with the zeal of Protestant evangelism. The rallies that Mother Mussina organized filled churches.
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As with most women of her time period, we have few details about Jerusha Mussina's life. As also is typical, we know more about her husband, Jacob Lyons (J.L.) Mussina. Jerusha Bailey was born in Lycoming County on April 20, 1813.

According to Williamsport historian Emerson Collins, her father was John Bailey, who fought in the War of 1812 and died as a result of his service. Jerusha's mother reportedly remarried and moved away, and Peter Vanderbelt, a Williamsport blacksmith, adopted Jerusha.

On March 18, 1834, when Jerusha was 20 years old, she married Jacob Lyons (J.L.) Mussina, a native of Aaronsburg, at the Pine Street M.E. Church. They had three daughters and five sons over the next 20 years and for most of those years they made their home on Market Street between Third and Fourth streets.

The Mussina family was, and still is, prominent in Williamsport.

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The Crusade in Williamsport

Jerusha Mussina and the Crusaders regarded liquor as a source of irresistible temptation to the men of Williamsport. The drinkers' wives and children suffered when the men spent their money on liquor rather than bringing it home to their families. The Crusaders were determined to bring public attention to the plight of these families and to stop the liquor trade if they could.

"The true record of the Temperance Crusaders" offers a day-by-day account of the bars and saloons that the "praying band of women" visited, following in the footsteps of Mother Mussina.

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They also picketed the saloons around the old curbside market, hoping to deter the farmers from spending the cash in their pockets on drinks.

The True Record

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The Crusade in 1874 was well known for its charitable work in Williamsport. She was a long-time member of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.) established in Williamsport, Mother Mussina was unanimously elected president. She held that position for 11 years. The W.C.T.U. met above the family jewelry shop on the northwest corner of Market Square.

Although we know little about Jerusha Mussina's life, her influence was great.

The Crusade that she led in Williamsport was part of what historians call the large women's mass movement up to that time in the United States. It was a grassroots and political movement by the mothers, wives and daughters of middle-class families, women filled with the zeal of Protestant evangelism. The rallies that Mother Mussina organized filled the courthouse.

Jerusha Bailey Mussina died on Feb. 11, 1887, at the age of 73 and is buried in Wildwood Cemetery.

She was a woman of great note in her own time, and she and the Woman's Crusade of 1874 remain an important part of local history.

Sieminski is project manager for the women's history initiative that is a cooperative community undertaking between Lycoming College, the James V. Brown Library and the Lycoming County Historical Society.

Her column will be published on the second Sunday of each month.

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