

Florence Crittenton Home: Serving young mothers

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Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

The Florence Crittenton Mission in Williamsport provided housing and services to unmarried mothers in the city and surrounding areas for more than 80 years, from its founding in 1895 as the "Home for Fallen Women" until the Florence Crittenton Home on Woodmont Avenue closed its doors in 1976.

The mission was named after the daughter of Charles Crittenton, a successful drug and patent medicine distributor in New York City. Florence died of scarlet fever when she was 4, and Crittenton devoted the rest of his life to mission work in her honor. His first initiative was to open the Florence Night



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown above left, is Young Florence Crittenton for whom the Florence Crittenton Home is named. Above right, 1105 Woodmont Ave., the location of the Florence Crittenton Home in Williamsport from 1967 to 1976.

Mission on Bleeker Street, intended to "rescue" prostitutes. Later, Florence Crittenton Homes were established in residential care for unmarried cities throughout the United States and Canada to provide (See FLORENCE, Page E-3)

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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 Lycoming 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 establishment of the home was in response to the need to do "something toward the rescuing 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 home, and be willing to conform to its rules and regulations."

In 1895, with \$150 in hand, the founders rented a house on West Jefferson Street, near the foot of Hepburn Street (where Wegmans' parking lot is today). The following year, the Home for Fallen Women affiliated with the national Florence Crittenton Mission. Kate Barrett, national Florence Crittenton president, spent a few days in Williamsport, 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 group bought a house at 673 Campbell St. In 1967, 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 Williamsport, the first women to be "rescued" were 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 benevolent, 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 allocation varied from year to year. In later years, the mission partially was supported by the Community Chest and then the United Way. The Crittenton Home sponsored donation days and annual dinners and solicited monetary gifts from individuals and institutions.

At one time, young women, referred to in reports as "betrayed girls," had to commit to stay for six months. They were trained in domestic occupations including sewing and cooking. After their babies were born, many of the young women found jobs, and their infants were cared for at the home for \$1 a week. The goal was to make the young women independent and able to support themselves and their infants.

Helen Hoyt, reporting in the Gazette & Bulletin on Nov. 11, 1914, noted that as Thanksgiving



PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown is the New York City Mission, established in 1883, intended to "rescue" prostitutes in New York City.

approached, the home was accepting donations of food, canned goods and other materials. She remarked on "the splendid work that is being done there." The Florence Crittenton Home, she suggested, was a home "with a family of girls who have learned a lesson and became sadder, wiser, then happier for it."

During World War I the numbers of young women served rose. Perhaps young men going off to war left pregnant girlfriends behind. After World War I, the general trend in social work was toward a reliance on professional social workers, not volunteers, and the emphasis changed from social reform to working with individuals. The Tressler Lutheran Home provided adoption services, and the state Child Welfare Services offered a variety of services to the young women.

Service needs change

By the late 60s and early 70s, the Williamsport Florence Crittenton Home was not serving Lycoming 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 Williamsport 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 Williamsport High School and other schools.

Although the Crittenton Home is closed, Florence Crittenton Services of Williamsport 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 and the West End Christian Community Center, helping with diapers and other basic needs.

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