Married to a Magnate: Peter Herdic’s two wives

Williamsport Women

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Peter Herdic’s rise to riches is legendary in Lycoming County. When Peter, the father of the lumber era,
came to town, the village had only 1,700 inhabitants and consisted of a few city blocks around Market, Third and
Fourth Streets, surrounded by farmland and forests.

When Peter declared bankruptcy in 1878, there were more than 20,000 inhabitants, many of them working for Peter
Herdic. Peter is responsible for the development of the city westward to what we now call Millionaire’s Row — and he
was one of those millionaires.

I wondered what life was like for the two wives and the children of the lumber baron. In many ways, Peter “owned”
Williamsport. As his empire grew — he was mayor and he owned the newspaper, many of the business, and the utilities
— he was frequently sued by his business associates.

He went bankrupt twice, and each time he managed to regain some of his previous wealth. Did the family have to
cut back on their spending in lean times? Pull the children out of school? How was it to be such a public figure in the
midst of such dramatic ups and downs?

Amanda Taylor

The Williamsport lumber baron was married twice and had three children. His first wife was Amanda Taylor. Amanda
originally was from Smithboro, a small hamlet in Tioga County, N.Y., just north of the Pennsylvania border on
the Susquehanna River. Her parents were Foster Taylor and Abigail Parker, originally from New England.

One of Amanda’s ancestors, Benjamin Taylor, fought in the American Revolution at the Battle of Bunker Hill. The sixth of
her eight children, Amanda was born on May 27, 1829.

She was 20 and he was 25 when they married on Christmas day in 1849. For four years, Amanda and Peter’s
home was on a small farm (See MARRIED, Page E-3)
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be way out in the country.

Church members said that Amanda Herdic was a constant inspiration to those who worked with her. She was described as "comely" in the photograph of her from the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society; she is young and attractive. She is dressed plainly. Her eyes seem sad and she has the stoic, resolute look of a woman who knows the hard labor of farm life.

She is buried in the Williamsport Cemetery on Washington Boulevard. Their daughter Flora was a toddler when her mother died. It would be interesting to know who took care of Flora after her mother died and before Peter remarried. It seems unlikely that Peter spent much time at home.

Encie Maynard

Several years after Amanda’s death, Peter married again. It is reported that he engaged a dancing teacher and tutors to polish his social skills before his second marriage. His wife was Encie Maynard, a woman from a well-established and respected Williamsport family. Her father was Judge John W. Maynard. Her mother, Almira DePui, traced her ancestry back to the Puritan minister Cotton Mather. Encie Elizabeth Maynard was born in 1853 in Tylor County, where her father was practicing law. The young family moved to Williamsport a few years later.

The Maynard home in Williamsport was located where the Lycoming County Historical Society stands today. The home itself became the site of the Historical Society, but unfortunately the lovely building was destroyed by fire in 1890.

By all accounts, Encie Maynard was the belle of the ball in Williamsport before her marriage. Col. Thomas Lloyd, in a 1926 article in the Williamsport Gazette and Bulletin, called Encie “one of the leading ladies of the social set that graced the village” and “a woman of high intellectual attainments and accomplishment.” Most likely she attended one of the “ladies’ schools” that had sprang up in Williamsport in that time period and received private music lessons.

Encie’s father was not only a fine pianist and sometimes the church organist, but also a composer. He wrote a concerto, lost except for one piano piece, “Berceuse,” published in Williamsport in 1858. A copy of that score hangs in the Herdic House restaurant today, another is held by the library of the University of Virginia.

Looking at her very formal photograph, we see a fashionably dressed young woman with beautifully styled hair. She has deep-set eyes, porcelain skin, full lips and a square chin. She is regal, self-confident and in her place in society.

The wedding of Encie Maynard and Peter Herdic took place on January 12, 1860. Encie was 25 when she married Peter 39. The wedding was most likely celebrated at Christ Church, the Episcopal Church that the Maynard family was associated with.

Later Peter would donate the land for another Episcopal church, Trinity on West Fourth Street, in the new section of town he had developed. Millennium’s Row, nearer both to his home and to the grand Herdic House, the hotel that stood at the corner of West Fourth and Campbell Streets.

Charitable activities

The town of Williamsport had been growing quickly since the 1850s, when Peter first came to town. The lumber business was lucrative; a mansion after marriage was built on Millionaire’s Row. But the growing population put strains on the social fabric of the city. Injured workers needed a hospital, and a working parent who lost a spouse found it hard to take care of the children.

Encie Herdic was one of the city’s first social workers who stepped in to help. She was a founding member of the Women’s Christian Association, which became the Home for the Friendless, an agency that provided a home for needy children and older women. She was one of the first board chairs of that organization and served as president for decades.

In 1874, she signed the temperance pledge of Mother Marcella and the temperance crusaders, who were concerned that city men were spending their money on drink, not their families.

Ironically, the crusaders made Peter’s Herdic House one of their first stops. Mrs. Peter Herdic is listed as a donor to many other charitable organizations, including the Young Women’s Christian Association, which served female mill workers in Williamsport.

Social scene

Encie Herdic was at the center of the social scene in Williamsport and entertained in style befitting the wife of a lumber baron. According to the New York Sun article “Story of Peter Herdic” (March 4, 1877), she added grace and beauty to his mansion, and charmed his home life. She filled his house with rare books and articles of virtue, and from the abundant means of her husband, dispensed an elegant hospitality.

Peter and Encie had two sons. Peter Herdic, Jr., was born in 1865, and Harry Maynard Herdic was born in 1869. Also in the family was Flora Herdic, Peter’s daughter from his marriage to Amanda Taylor.

The world must have changed for Encie and the rest of the Herdic family when Peter went bankrupt in 1878.

He had stretched his credit to the limit. His bankruptcy stemmed in part from the “Panic of 1873,” a national and international financial crisis that sent many into bankruptcy. Peter’s holdings — on paper, worth two million dollars — were auctioned off in 1878.

Fortunately for Encie, her father, Judge Maynard, who had backed Peter financially, bought the house and the furnishings.

He also bought two hotels, the Herdic House and Peter’s splendid Minnewinna Hotel, in Canton, along with many of Peter’s other holdings. Encie continued to live in the home after the bankruptcy, and even after Peter’s death 10 years later. Encie was with Peter when he died at the Hotel Glenham in New York City. She had been staying there for the winter.

Encie’s second marriage

The pink mansion on West Fourth Street continued to be Encie’s home until she married prosperous businessman Henry Ravel, two years after Peter’s death, when she was 55. They moved into the Ravel Cottage, called “Fairfield,” off what is now Longstreet Mall in Fairfield Township.

Nine years later, Henry Ravel died, and Encie moved from place to place, living with one son and then the other. Her last years were spent living in an elegant suite of rooms in the former Herdic House, once owned by Peter.

Encie died in March 1919, in the 83rd year of her life,” according to the Gazette and Bulletin. Her funeral was held at Trinity Church, the church Peter had built. Her two sons and a granddaughter survived her. Encie Maynard Herdic Ravel left her personal affects, clothing and jewelry to her granddaughter and namesake, Encie Herdic Row.

There was no mention in the obituary of Amanda Taylor’s daughter and Encie’s stepdaughter, Flora Herdic. Flora had a tumultuous life and will be the subject of next month’s “Williamson Sun-Gazette” feature.