



Williamsport Mothers

Williamsport
Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

A look back through history

By MARY L. SIEMINSKI and JANET McNEIL HURLBERT
Special to the Sun-Gazette

As we celebrate a special day to honor mothers, it is important to realize that there always have been women who met different definitions of "mother." Mothers may exert their influence by controlling, nurturing, or guiding, as well as by being the one who leads. Here are the portraits of four women who contributed their own special brands of motherhood to our community's history.

Madame Montour 1667-1753

Madame Montour was the first documented mother to settle in Lycoming County. In 1727, she founded a village at the mouth of Loyalsock Creek near present-day Montoursville with her Iroquois husband, Carondowana, and two of her children, Andrew and Margaret. The village was called Otstonwakin.

Born Isabel Couc, she was most likely the daughter of a French fur trader and an Algonquin woman, although she sometimes claimed that she was a French woman who had been captured and raised by the Iroquois.

What is known positively is that she was an experi-

enced and effective interpreter and negotiator between the Native Americans, European settlers and the government, translating for the governors of both Pennsylvania and New York. She was fluent in French, German, English and several Native American languages, including Iroquois and Algonquin.

Her son Andrew also was an important interpreter, and Montoursville is named for him. Her daughter Margaret and Margaret's Mohawk husband, Kararionlecha, founded another village in Lycoming County at the mouth of Lycoming Creek. Called French Margaret's Town, it is part of present-day Newberry.

It was not until almost 50 years later that the first European woman, Susan Scutter, settled with her husband, John, near Muncy. In 1771, she gave birth to a daughter, Mary, called by John Meginness the first "white child" born in the county.

Jerusha Bailey 'Mother' Mussina 1813-1887

"A mother of Israel has fallen," proclaimed the obituary of Jerusha Bailey Mussina. Mussina was the



"mother" of the temperance movement in Lycoming County and also was the mother of five sons and three daughters — Joseph, Sylvester, Laurette, Helena, Mary, Jacob, Samuel and Thomas — all of whom survived her. Her husband, Jacob Lyons Mussina, was a jeweler and a prominent citizen of Williamsport.

Jerusha Mussina was praised for her church and charitable work. The Williamsport Sun-Gazette characterized her as "a representative woman, and distinguished for her piety and devotion of Christian duties." She was a Sunday school teacher at the Pine Street Methodist Church for 50 years.

At age 60, with her children grown, she led the "Woman's Crusade" in

Williamsport. This was a daring venture. From March through June of 1874, groups of several to a dozen women paraded from one saloon or hotel to another in Williamsport, kneeling, praying, and asking the male owners to stop selling alcoholic beverages.

The assembly that kicked off the crusade was the largest gathering ever held in Williamsport to that date. To further her cause, Mussina would become president of the local chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

Prohibition finally was enacted into law in 1920 and remained in force until 1933.

The Mussina family continues to be well known in

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PHOTOS PROVIDED
Clockwise from top left, is Sarah Troup Hall, holding an infant and surrounded by her family, 1939; Carrie Eddinger and her children Lila, Raymond and Vernon; Jalaine Whaley with her grandchildren, Shelley Ortiz (in her arms) and Janice Todd, 1959; Kaschalk mother and infant, 1951; Elizabeth Engle Barner with two of her sons, Grant and Lawrence; Mayre M. Iga and daughter Charlott, 1959; Lemoyne Fryland children, 1939; American War Mothers, an organization open to mothers whose children served in the armed forces. All photos courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society, except Hall and Whaley photos, which were from private collections.

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Lycoming County.

Eva Vanderbilt Emery Gray 1840-1905

Eva Vanderbilt Emery Gray was a 19th century mother who not only influenced her own children but also guided hundreds of students educated at Dickinson Seminary. One adjective assigned to her was "sainted." Often, when her husband, the Rev. Edward Gray, was mentioned in Methodist church records, his "capable" wife was mentioned as well.

Gray was born in Wellsboro and later educated in Williamsport, graduating from the former Dickinson Seminary, now Lycoming College, in 1857. She met her husband there and served as a devoted minister's wife before becoming his "co-laborer" during his presidency at Dickinson Seminary.

For 31 years (1874-1905), Gray nurtured the intellectual and cultural life of students at the seminary, influencing their educational system and living environment. The Grays interacted closely with the young people, since the president's quarters were in the same building as those of the boarding students. She created and supervised activities for the students, including the Dickinson Seminary Young Ladies Band, a branch chapter for the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, the Dickinson Seminary Prohibition Club and the Temperance and Pure Speech Society. She also was largely responsible for designing the surroundings of the school and supervised many of the support services.

Gray modeled service to others by being active in the Williamsport community. She was on the boards of the Home for the Friendless and the YWCA, founded the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Mulberry Street Methodist Church and helped organize

the Clio Club.

The mother of two grown sons endured what no mother should. Two daughters, Grace and Edith, died in infancy. Her third daughter, Eva Clara, died in her arms at the age of 15 from heart failure. Young Eva, described as "lovely and accomplished," had been extremely popular with everyone on campus, where she was a student. The whole community grieved over her death.

Gray died unexpectedly after minor surgery. She is described in her obituary as having lived a loving and useful Christian life well spent.

Sarah Theonita Bierly 1877-1959

Miss Sarah Bierly never married or had her own children, yet she was a mother to hundreds of children and a daughter to hundreds of elderly women. Many of those children considered her their "real" mother.

From 1920 until her retirement in 1952, Bierly was the matron of the Home for the Friendless, which later became the Williamsport Home.

Matron was a paid position, which put Bierly in charge of the daily activities of the children who lived at the home, sometimes for months or years. Children were placed at the home by struggling families that were not able to care for them, often because of the injury, death or desertion of a parent. Many children gratefully remembered for the rest of their lives the stability and care they received at the home.

Bierly had the additional responsibility of managing the care of elderly women who, once they sought and were granted admission, remained at the home until their deaths. The home provided for their daily needs, managed illnesses and eventually arranged their funerals.

In 1950, former residents held a surprise 73rd birthday party for Bierly at the Campbell



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown are the column authors with their families. At top, Janet McNeil Hurlbert poses with her daughters, about 1958. Shown from left, are Holly, Janet, Heidi and Heather. At left, Helen McMunn Sieminski, center, is shown with her daughters, Ann, left, and Mary. When this photo was taken in 1944, Adam Sieminski was serving in the Navy.

Street Home, which also was her own home.

Among the guests were many people whose mothers or fathers had been home residents when they were children. Bierly was praised by residents and board members alike for her devotion to the home and its residents. Forty-four boys under Bierly's care served in the Armed Forces during World War II, as did one Wac and one

Wave.

Bierly was 74 when she retired. The Williamsport Home stopped serving children in 1958, when other agencies took over child placement. Bierly died one year later.

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