

Uncovering the Stories of the Pioneer Women of Pipestone County

Trava Olivier, 2022

The Pipestone County Historical Society exists to interpret and preserve the story of Pipestone County. One of the ways this is accomplished is through researching and understanding the lives individuals who once called Pipestone County home. These stories often lie hidden by time. When uncovered, the stories can be both tragic and inspiring. The following stories highlight the lives of several pioneer women from Pipestone County. They represent women who broke traditional gender roles while leaving their mark on Pipestone County's past.

Louise Gerber was born in Monroe, Wisconsin in 1868. Upon graduation from high school, she followed the route many young women of the era took and completed normal school training to become a teacher. She taught a few years but had another calling. She entered medical school in 1889 to study medicine, surgery, and pharmacy. She completed her education and graduated with honors in 1893. She completed post-graduate work at the Poly Clinic in New York City, and set up practice in Jasper, MN in 1900. Over the next 30 years she served the community and the surrounding area traveling to her patients via horseback. She built a home, the second story of which served as Jasper's first hospital. She also worked to overcome unsanitary conditions in Jasper and was recognized by the Mayo brothers of the Mayo Clinic as a leading diagnostician and obstetrician. She wrote several medical papers that were published in medical journals and was widely respected in her field. Louise Gerber was united in marriage to Lewis Dietmeier of Jasper in 1919. Louise continued to practice medicine into the 1930s. Dr. Gerber suffered a weakening of her nervous system and entered St. Peter Hospital for the Insane on May 8, 1936. She passed away at that location two months later and is buried in Old Woodlawn Cemetery, Pipestone, MN.

Winifred Bartlett was born just outside of Cazenovia, MN in the fall 1885. When she was ten years old, her father abandoned the family and Winifred and her mother moved to Pipestone. She graduated from Pipestone High School in 1903 then attended normal school training. She taught in Pipestone for a short time then took secretarial training. She worked for several attorneys in both Pipestone and Sioux Falls, was active in the Republican party, helped start and was elected the first president of the Pipestone Suffrage Club. She worked tirelessly for the creation of the Pipestone National Monument. She also loved history and helped establish the first home for the Pipestone County Museum then worked to secure the Old City Hall building as the Museum's permanent home when it became available. Winifred spent 44 years working with the Red Cross aiding more than 4,000 Pipestone County families during her tenure with that organization. She was involved with the library board, the Civic and Commerce Association, the Progress Club, and the Girls Scouts. She died August 11, 1982, at the age of 96 and is buried in Pipestone's New Woodlawn Cemetery. In 1984, she was posthumously name Minnesota Woman of the Year by Hamline University.

Jessie Walkup was born in Pipestone in 1882 and graduated from Pipestone High School in 1901. She attended normal school and taught 6th grade in Pipestone. In 1912 she ran for and was elected the Superintendent of the Pipestone County Rural Schools. She served as the secretary of the Pipestone County Agricultural Society from 1910-1914 and was the first woman delegate to the State Ag Committee. She helped organize the Pipestone County Suffrage Club and served as the

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first secretary for that organization. She went on to be named a state officer of the Minnesota Women's Suffrage Association and moved to Minneapolis. In 1917 she married Loran Bowker and the couple settled in California where she continued to be active in women's rights through the California Federation of Women's Clubs and the Henry M. Roberts Parliamentary Club. She died in Los Angeles in 1974 and is buried at the Rosedale Angeles Cemetery in that community.

Katey Harrison was born in Germany in 1858 and came to America at age 6. She married Civil War veteran Jeremiah Harrison on February 25, 1880, and the couple came to Pipestone County less than a week later. Six months after their arrival, the "long winter" began. Records kept by Katey tell how they twisted the prairie grass to fuel their fire, how blizzards lasted several days and came up suddenly making hunting virtually impossible and how they ground barley to supplement their dwindling coffee supply. Katey and Jeremiah went on to have 5 daughters. When Jeremiah died in 1908 Katey moved herself and the girls to a home in Pipestone. Four months later, daughter Francis died from a ruptured appendix. Katey's youngest daughter, Alice, was 13 years old at the time. Alice grew to adulthood and married and had two children before committing suicide. The three other daughters lived long lives, two of them remaining in the Pipestone area. Many of Katey's descendants remain in Pipestone County today. Katey died on July 1, 1948, and is buried in Old Woodlawn Cemetery, Pipestone.

Adelaide Bennett was born in New Hampshire and was highly educated. Her love of poetry led to a curiosity about the red rock Longfellow mentioned in his poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*. She wrote a letter to Pipestone that made it into the hands of town founder, Charles Bennett. A letter writing courtship began and the couple was married in 1878. The couple made Pipestone their home and Adelaide began writing poetry in earnest. Many of her poems were published in publications such as *Good Housekeeping* magazine. She also collected samples of the native grasses and flowers of the Pipestone prairie which she donated to Pipestone High School where it hung in the science wing until being destroyed by the Pipestone school fire of 1917. Adelaide was a charter member of the Pipestone Presbyterian Church, first President of the local chapter of the Women's Relief Corp, and the Chaplain of the Order of the Eastern Star. She became ill in the spring of 1911 and died October 10th of that year. She is buried at Old Woodlawn Cemetery, Pipestone.

Nellie Dodd was born in Edgerton, MN and attended rural schools in the area before completing high school in Pipestone in 1909. She then attended Winona State College and graduated in 1914. She taught school in the Jasper area before teaching in Pipestone from 1924-1926. She ran for and was elected Superintendent of the Pipestone County Rural Schools in 1926, a role she held until retirement in 1945. Nellie was also active in the Presbyterian Church, served on the National Monument committee, and served on the Board of Directors for the local Christmas Seals Association. She became ill suddenly in 1961 and passed away at the Ashton Memorial Hospital on October 15, 1961. She is buried in Old Woodlawn Cemetery, Pipestone.

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Elizabeth Butman was born and raised in rural Wisconsin. Following her marriage to Eugene Butman on January 1, 1883, the couple came to Eugene's homestead in Troy township. Elizabeth went on to raise 8 children while boarding rural schoolteachers and hired men in the family home. She churned butter and sold eggs to supplement the family income and was known to hitch her own horse and buggy and travel 12-miles one way across the prairie to sell her products. The couple's farm was successful, and Elizabeth was able to keep house in a home that included a kerosene generator to provide electricity, running water, an indoor bathroom, and a telephone! Upon retirement the couple moved to a new home in Pipestone. On May 24, 1946, Elizabeth fell and suffered a broken hip. She was taken to the Ashton Memorial Hospital where she died two days later. She is buried in Old Woodlawn Cemetery, Pipestone.

Mary Belle Brown was born in Pipestone in 1901. When she was 11 years old her mother died and Mary Belle was raised by her father, Dr. Alex Brown, and several cousins and housekeepers. She enjoyed a lavish childhood complete with attending plays at the Ferris Grand Opera House, the earliest silent movies in local theaters, hosting tea parties for friends, and her own Shetland pony. She graduated from Pipestone High School in 1919, attended the University of Minnesota then transferred to Wellesley College in Massachusetts and graduated in 1925. She then earned a master's degree from the University of Chicago. She returned to Pipestone, cared for her father, and was involved with the Girl Scouts, Red Cross, American Association of University Women, and the Presbyterian Church. She died at the Pipestone County Skilled Nursing Unit on April 30, 1994, at the age of 92 and is buried at Old Woodlawn Cemetery in Pipestone.

Clara Skailand was born in Pipestone in 1900 and graduated from Pipestone High School with the class of 1916. She attended Button's Business School and went to work for Pipestone County Agent, E.H. Ganrud. She earned a reputation as a skilled employee that led to Pipestone County Recorder, George Nash, recruiting her to be his assistant. When Nash passed away, Pipestone County commissioners appointed Skailand as his replacement. She later sought and won election to the office, a role she served from 1922-1932. She was the first woman in the State of Minnesota to hold that position. Following her tenure as County Recorder, she worked for the Federal Land Bank and then was a legal aid for a local law firm until her retirement in 1963. She was active in her church and enjoyed gardening and crocheting. She died at the Pipestone County Medical Center in March 1990 and is buried at Old Woodlawn Cemetery, Pipestone.

E. Stella Perrigo came to Pipestone County in 1886 with her husband Myron. They settled outside Hatfield and Stella began practicing as a homeopathic surgeon. In 1889 she was named the Pipestone County physician and was the only practicing female physician in the county. She was appointed to the Board of Directors of the Chicago College of Medicine, Surgery, and Hygiene in 1901. Stella continued to provide medical services in the Pipestone area into the 1930s and was a member of the American Institute of Homeopathy and the Minnesota State Medical Association. She died on March 25, 1936, at her niece's home in Mound, MN and is buried at Hillside Cemetery, Edgerton.

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Clara Wietjes was born in Germany and came to American with her family, settling in Burke township. She married John Wietjes, Jr. in 1897. The couple's first child died at birth in 1899. Two years later, daughter Alvena joined the family and four years later twins, Irma and John III, completed the family. When the twins were 10 days old, husband John went to Pipestone on business. As he was returning to the homestead, a storm came up on the prairie and he was struck and killed by lightning. Clara was widowed with a four-year-old and 10-day old twins. Clara remained on the family homestead for several years with the help of her brother then moved the family to Pipestone where she went to work for a local grocer. In 1919, son John, contracted Influenza. He survived but suffered from frail health until his death in 1922. Clara became ill in 1925. She had an operation in Sioux Falls, SD in 1925 but continued to decline. She was taken to the Ashton Memorial Hospital in 1926 where she died 6 weeks later. Clara is interred at Old Woodlawn Cemetery, Pipestone.

Maggie Dowd and husband James farmed in Sweet Township, along the South Dakota border, where they raised a fine stock of work horses. The couple's daughter, Mary Jane, was born in 1898. Weeks later, James became ill and passed away from cancer. two days after Mary Jane turned one. Maggie continued the farm with the help of hired men. One of those men, Peter Swenson, became infatuated with Maggie. Maggie turned away those advances and had to fire him. He was later seen in Pipestone purchasing a gun. He drove to Maggie's homestead, called her outside and when she met him, he shot her in the neck. She made her way to her back doorstep where she collapsed and bled to death. The next day, Maggie's uncle discovered the scene. Swenson was named a suspect and was located at his brother's home near Woodstock the following day. He was taken to the Pipestone jail. Four days later, his attorney arrived at the jail to discuss his case prior to a hearing. Upon entering the cell area, Swenson was discovered hanging from his own suspenders in his cell. Headlines read, "Suicide is Confession." Maggie was buried at Old Woodlawn Cemetery, Pipestone and her assumed murderer, Peter Swenson, was also buried at Old Woodlawn Cemetery—directly behind and to the right of Maggie.

These stories are but a handful of the stories of both women and men who once called Pipestone County home. The Pipestone County Historical Society archive is available for individuals to research and learn more about their family history. If interested in learning more about the types of resources available and research fees and policies, you can visit the Museum's website at www.pipestonecountymuseum.com or call the Museum at (507) 825-2563.