

‘Angel of the West Side’ met daycare needs a century ago

Ah, the good old days when all fathers were breadwinners and all mothers were homemakers.

Well, those days were never so simple, nor were they so good, at least for the many working class families whose mothers had to earn a living outside the home. Although it may come as a surprise to many traditionalists who yearn for an American past that never was, the lack of daycare for working mothers was an issue that goes back more than a century.

Locally, such a need led independent, reform-minded women to establish Bloomington’s Day Nursery (what we would call a daycare center today) on the city’s working-class west side.

Back then the west side included the Chicago and Alton Railroad Shops and the McLean County Coal Co., both of which employed a large number of foreign-born men. And many of their wives and other working-class women had factory floor jobs at local candy maker Paul F. Beich Co., also located on the west side.

The Day Nursery, opened in early 1908, provided a safe, professionally run and low-cost daycare center for working mothers. From its very beginning the nursery also doubled as a settlement house, a type of social service center patterned after Progressive Era reformer Jane Addams’ Hull House in Chicago.

The Bloomington Day Nursery and Social Settlement Association (as it became known) eventually offered immigrant and neighborhood families a wide range of programs. In addition to childcare, there were cooking, sewing, “physical culture” (exercise), art and folk dance classes. Other services included a branch of the public library and an employment bureau that matched west side residents with “requests for help from the east side” (these usually entailed calls for domestic work—housekeepers, nannies, chauffeurs and the like).

During its formative years no one was more closely associated with the Day Nursery than Jane “Jennie” Lynd Thompson. Mary McDowell, a contemporary of Addams who ran the University of Chicago Settlement House on that city’s south side, was known as the “Angel of the Stockyards.” Keeping that in mind, one could just as well call Jennie Thompson the “Angel of Bloomington’s West Side.”

The Day Nursery was first located in a small, wood-frame residence on the 1200 block of West Mulberry Street. Five years later the nursery moved into roomier quarters a block west on the same street, and two years after this former single-family home was substantially remodeled and

enlarged. Remarkably, the house is still there today looking much as it did nearly 100 years ago, though it's now back to serving as a private residence.

In order to meet growing expenses, Day Nursery supporters established the Women's Exchange in downtown Bloomington. This enterprise involved local women selling cakes, pies and various baked goods, as well as needle and other "fancy work," with profits going to nursery and settlement house operations.

Many area women took understandable pride in the fact that both the Day Nursery and Women's Exchange were managed and operated entirely by the supposedly "fairer sex."

"Miss Jennie," as Thompson would be called by a generation of west side children, was a beloved figure in the Twin Cities. Neighborhood women valued her know-how, patience and temperament as they came to depend on her uncanny ability to smooth over the many wrinkles in their working-class lives.

The West Mulberry Street center eventually included a health clinic, though they called it a dispensary, with local physicians and nurses volunteering their time. Patients were charged a nominal fee, based on ability to pay, or nothing at all. Minor surgeries were even performed there, including many tonsillectomies.

The Day Nursery and Social Settlement Association was established at a time of de facto segregation in the Twin Cities. Black residents and visitors were not allowed to stay at downtown Bloomington hotels or eat at downtown restaurants, and were directed to separate seating areas in local theaters. By the end of World War I the locally run homes for orphaned and neglected children were even segregated by race—black children were sent to the McLean County Home for Colored Children while their white counterparts resided at the Girls' Industrial Home or Victory Hall in Normal.

That being said, African Americans had access to some (though apparently not all) nursery and settlement house services. In her 1915 report, Thompson called for the establishment of a parallel day nursery to meet the needs of working African-American mothers. It wasn't until the 1940s, though, that the Day Nursery could promise black working-class families a welcoming place in which "no color line is drawn."

Too often Day Nursery backers, many of whom were well-intentioned middle- and upper-class mainline Protestants, adopted a patronizing tone when referring to working-class west side residents, many of whom were foreign-born or Catholic—or both.

“English is making individuals out of these foreigners,” declared settlement house language instructor C.F. Schreiber in early 1909. “The foreigner lives in groups and he has a group thought. As soon as he learns enough English words to dare to venture into a conversation with an American and gets into our sphere of thought, then he becomes an individual ... Let us see how many Americans we can make out of these immigrants.”

Many programs were designed with such “Americanization” goals in mind, especially during the “super-patriot” agitation of World War I and the reactionary politics of the early 1920s. The Day Nursery was even home to a chapter of the Children of the Republic, a Boy Scouts-like organization established by the Daughters of the American Revolution. This group aimed at inculcating in the children of immigrant parents “patriotism, the creed of the flag, the meaning of the salute and other lessons tending to make them true Americans when they grow up.”

The Day Nursery remained in operation on West Mulberry Street until 1968. That year the nursery relocated to 315 N. Stilwell St. and became known as the Day Care Center of McLean County. In 2008, it was renamed the Milestones Early Learning Center and six years later a new home was opened on Six Points Road. One-hundred-and-eight years after its founding the old Day Nursery is still helping those in need!

Jennie Thompson passed away on Jan. 13, 1924, at the age of 63. Her death was called “a bewildering blow” to the Day Nursery, “so great was her worth in her special line of settlement work and so rare and beautiful her character.”

It was fitting that her earthly remains laid in state at the West Mulberry Street nursery and settlement house, where hundreds of west side folk could say their final goodbyes to “Miss Jennie.” They knew as well as any east side do-gooder philanthropist that Thompson had played an instrumental role in making the Day Nursery “an outpost of humanity, radiating love, help and encouragement.”

Thompson is one of eight characters featured in the McLean County Museum of History’s annual Evergreen Cemetery Walk. This popular event, which has become an autumn tradition for many area residents and families, will be held the weekends of Oct. 1-2 and Oct. 8-9. For information and tickets, contact the Museum at 309-827-0428.