

Secor's Minnie Vautrin, 'Goddess of Mercy'

Born, raised and educated in Central Illinois, Christian educator Minnie Vautrin was an eyewitness to one of the most horrific and cruel tragedies of the 20th century—the Nanjing Massacre of 1937-38.

As Japanese soldiers laid waste to the Chinese city of Nanjing (formerly Nanking), killing and raping tens of thousands of civilians, Vautrin protected an untold number of women and children, and by doing so became known as the “Goddess of Mercy.”

Wilhelmina “Minnie” Vautrin was born in 1886 in Secor, a Woodford County community situated between El Paso and Eureka. A gifted student, she attended Illinois State Normal University, and though her studies were interrupted several times due to the need to work, she graduated in 1907.

For the next three years, Vautrin taught mathematics at LeRoy High School. From there she headed to the University of Illinois, earning a bachelor of arts. Yet to the surprise of her friends, she decided to embark on a career as a Christian missionary, and was sent to China through the Foreign Christian Missionary Society and the help of LeRoy Christian (Disciples of Christ) Church.

Vautrin would then dedicate her life to China, only returning to the U.S. for extended “furloughs” to continue her graduate studies. After her first six years in China, for instance, she came back to earn a master’s degree in education at Columbia University in New York City.

During her extended stays stateside, Vautrin often came home to Central Illinois to visit friends and speak at churches and to various groups in Bloomington and elsewhere.

When she returned to China after the first furlough, she settled in Nanjing, a major city in eastern China on the Yangtze River. There she taught at Jinling (now Ginling) College, founded in 1913 as the first school to offer bachelor’s degrees to women in China.

For her part, Vautrin didn’t view her missionary work in China through a paternalistic or patronizing lens. She exhibited a deep respect for the Chinese people and their culture, and concentrated her efforts more on the education of girls and young women than saving Christian souls.

She also found fault with U.S. foreign policy. “It is very difficult for western diplomats to forget their investments, their profits and their business interests when they are dealing with a weak and

comparatively helpless nation,” she observed in a 1927 letter to friend Maude Cline of LeRoy. “I wonder how much big business and the dictation of businessmen is determining our present policy in Mexico, China and the Philippines. We would probably be shocked if we knew, and the church of the West would be surprised.”

Vautrin well understood the driving force behind Chinese foreign policy. “China feels that she must not be controlled by western nations thru unequal treaties and concessions; she feels that she must have a self-respecting place in the family of nations,” added Vautrin in her 1927 letter.

The Nanjing Massacre, also known as the Rape of Nanjing, occurred during the Second Sino-Japanese War, a prelude of sorts to the global conflict a few years away. With the Japanese Imperial Army marching toward the city, Vautrin, who was then serving as Jinling College’s acting president, helped orchestrate the evacuation of faculty and students. She remained behind, though, to keep watch on the school grounds. Japanese troops entered the mostly undefended city in December 1937. The worst of the looting, burning, raping, brutalizing and killing lasted six weeks, leading to the deaths of upwards of 300,000 Chinese soldiers and civilians.

A group of foreigners in Nanjing, led by German businessman John Rabe and including Vautrin, organized the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone in city’s Western quarter. This “safety zone”—the borders of which were marked by Red Cross flags—offered some measure of safety for thousands upon thousands of Chinese civilians fleeing the charnel house of the fear-soaked and blood-drenched city.

Although Japanese soldiers generally left foreigners unmolested, that didn’t stop them from raiding the safety zone to wantonly rape and kill. “Last night up to 1,000 women and girls are said to have been raped, about 100 girls at Ginling College ... alone,” John Rabe recorded in his diary on Dec. 17, 1937. “You hear nothing but rape. If husbands or brothers intervene, they’re shot.”

Vautrin spent much of her time racing from one corner of the school grounds to another to halt incursions by Japanese soldiers. She was armed with nothing more than a letter from the Japanese embassy ensuring the protection of those within the safety zone. “Some soldiers were fierce and unreasonable and most of them had their bayonets out ready for use and on not a few of them I could see fresh blood stains,” noted Vautrin.

At one point, the number of civilians seeking refuge on the Jinling College campus grew to an estimated 10,000. “I personally feel that I cannot leave,” Vautrin wrote in her diary. “Men are not asked to leave their ships when they are in danger and women are not asked to leave their children.”

Once a semblance of normalcy returned to Nanjing, a physically exhausted and mentally shaken Vautrin headed back to the U.S.

Secor residents prepared to welcome their town's favorite daughter with a "Minnie Vautrin Day," but organizers had to postpone the county-wide reception when she suffered a nervous breakdown. One can only imagine the demons tormenting a traumatized Vautrin. "The constant scene that seems to run through her mind," her physicians noted at the time, "is that she brought it on herself because of certain alleged mistakes that she thought she had made."

A 54-year-old Minnie Vautrin took her own life on May 14, 1941. For her efforts protecting civilians, the Chinese government posthumously awarded Vautrin the Emblem of the Blue Jade.

Today, Jinling (now Ginling) Women's College is part of Nanjing Normal University. Nanjing itself is a city of more than 8.2 million residents, a commercial and cultural hub of eastern China with one of the largest inland ports in the world. Vautrin is remembered with memorials in the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall and on the Ginling campus.

Her story has been kept alive in the U.S. as well. She figures prominently in "The Rape of Nanking," a 1997 best seller written by American journalist Iris Chang. In 2002, Roanoke Boy Scout Troop 71 erected a memorial in the front of the Secor Community Center. And the University of Illinois Press published "Terror in Minnie Vautrin's Nanjing," a collection of her diary entries and correspondence from 1937-38 edited by scholar Suping Lu.

William Furry, Illinois State Historical Society executive director, has expressed interest in the erection of an official state historical marker in Secor commemorating Vautrin's life and legacy, though such a project is dependent on local participation and financial support.

"Had I ten perfect lives," Vautrin recorded in her journal not long before taking her own life, "I would give them all to China."