

## **Augusta “Gussie” Becker (1882-1982)**

Augusta "Gussie" Becker was born on November 13, 1882, in Berlin, Germany, to Carl and Amelia (Klawitter) Becker. She was one of four children, with two sisters named Adeline (Lena) and Bertha (Bessie), and a brother named William. When Gussie was just 5 years old, her family moved to the United States in 1887. They settled in Bloomington, Illinois, where Gussie's mother's brothers, Fred and John Klawitter, already lived. Fred had moved to Bloomington in 1881, and John arrived with his wife and daughter in 1873. Sadly, Gussie's father, Carl, passed away soon after they arrived, leaving Amelia to care for their four young children in a new country.

Not much is known about the family before 1893, but by that time, Gussie's mother worked as a janitress at Bloomington High School. Gussie and her sisters worked as maids in local homes. By 1900, 17-year-old Gussie worked for Ralph Sellman, a horseshoer in Bloomington who also ran a boarding house. Her younger sister Bertha worked for the Trotter family. In 1902, Gussie's older sister Adeline worked for the Sellmans and later the Behr family.

In 1907, Gussie started training to become a nurse at Presbyterian Hospital in Chicago, but she didn't finish her training. Instead, she became a teacher, teaching kindergarten and first grade in Park Ridge. It's unclear when Gussie returned to Bloomington, but from 1915 to 1917, she worked as a maid for Mrs. Mary Probasco, and in 1920, she worked for former Illinois Governor Joseph Fifer. By 1922, Gussie was living with her mother and brother to take care of her sick mother. Amelia passed away in 1925 at the age of 42.

Around 1928, Gussie started working at the Illinois Soldiers' Orphans' Home in Normal, Illinois, which later became the Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School (I.S.S.C.S.). She worked as a housemother, a job that suited her nursing training and experience as a teacher. She worked at the Home for nearly 25 years. The Home was founded in 1864 to care for the children of soldiers who died during the Civil War, and it was located in northeast Normal, Illinois (today at the corner of Lincoln and Beech Streets).

At the Home, Gussie became known as “Ma” and was loved by the children for her kindness. She was in charge of the girls in Logan Cottage, taking care of about 50 girls. She cooked, baked, and sewed for them and helped find foster homes for many of the girls. Gussie earned a salary of \$720 a year in 1929, which would be about \$10,000 in 2018.

The children at the Home were given special treats, like movies and candy, and enjoyed sports and activities like swimming. Gussie took great care of the girls, and many of them remembered her even after they left. One girl, Jeannine, became close to Gussie and her family. Gussie even saved money for Jeannine in a special savings account.

Even though Gussie was strict about the rules, she cared deeply about the children and wanted them to learn good behavior. One former resident, Oma, remembered how Gussie punished her and a friend for sharing a piece of gum by making them sit under the table with soap in their mouths. Oma said it helped shape her character.

In 1937, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Home to see the children and learn about child welfare, a visit Gussie and the kids would never forget.

After working at the Home for almost 25 years, Gussie retired in the early 1950s but stayed active in her community. She joined the Golden Agers Club, a group for senior citizens, and helped organize events. In 1961, she moved into a retirement home (the Jessamine Withers Home for Aged and Indigent Women) and continued to lead an active life, walking five miles a day and staying involved with the community.

When the Withers Home closed in 1963, she moved to Heritage Manor Nursing Home in Bloomington and continued living there the rest of her life. At the age of 99, she passed away on June 15, 1982, after a long illness, outliving all her siblings. She was buried near her parents in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.