

Augusta “Gussie” Becker (1882-1982)

Augusta Becker, known as “Gussie” to most, was born in Berlin, Germany on November 13, 1882, to Carl and Amelia (Klawitter) Becker. Gussie was one of four children born to the couple. She had two sisters (Adeline “Lena” and Bertha “Bessie,”) and one brother, William.¹ The young German family immigrated to the United States in 1887 when Gussie was just five years old. The family joined Amelia’s brothers, Fred and John Klawitter, who were residing in Bloomington. Fred had immigrated to Bloomington in 1881.² John came to Bloomington with his young daughter and wife in 1873.³ Gussie’s father, Carl, died shortly after arriving in the States; leaving her mother, Amelia, behind to care for their four children—all under the age of seven—in a foreign country.

There is little information about the family prior to 1893. By then, Gussie’s mother was working as a janitress at Bloomington High School, located at 500-516 E. Washington St. (at the corner of McLean and Washington Streets).⁴ Around town, Gussie and her sisters all worked as live-in domestics (maids). In 1900, 17-year-old Gussie worked for Ralph Sellman, a horseshoer on West Grove Street in Bloomington who also ran a boarding house.⁵ Her younger sister Bertha (who was 15 years old at the time), worked for the Trotter family. In 1902, Adeline worked for Edward and Frances Sellman at their home in the Whites Place neighborhood; and in 1904, she worked for the grocer Henry Behr and his wife Minnie.⁶

By 1907, Gussie began training at Presbyterian Hospital in Chicago for nursing, although she did not complete her training. Instead, she went on to teach kindergarten and first grade in Park Ridge.⁷ It is not clear exactly when Gussie returned to Bloomington, but from 1915 to 1917, Gussie was a maid for Mrs. Mary Probasco, who lived at 909 N. Main St.⁸ In 1920, she worked as a domestic for former Illinois Governor Joseph Fifer, who lived at 909 N. McLean St.⁹ By 1922, she was living with her mother and brother at the family’s home at 1618 W. Locust St., most likely to take care of her then ailing mother. On July 11, 1925, Gussie’s mother died at the family home due to complications from an unknown disease. Amelia was a member of Holy Trinity Catholic Church where the service was held on July 14.¹⁰

Around 1928, Gussie began working at the Illinois Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home (renamed the Illinois Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Children’s School, or I.S.S.C.S, in 1931) in Normal, Illinois.¹¹ She obtained a job as a housemother, a position that her nurses training and experiences as a teacher most likely helped her obtain.¹²

¹ “Mrs. Amelia Becker Dies at Home Here,” *The Pantagraph*, July 13, 1925, 5.

² “Fred Klawitter, 79, Dies at Home Here,” *The Pantagraph*, November 19, 1930, 5.

³ “Death Takes Two at Luverne Over Period of Week,” *The Pantagraph*, October 29, 1946, 1.

⁴ Carol Straka, Researcher Notes, 2017; *Bloomington City Directory, 1915*, 24.

⁵ United States Census, 1900, Ancestry.com, date accessed July 31, 2018.

⁶ Straka, Researcher Notes.

⁷ “80 Year- Old ‘Gussie’ Walks 5 Miles a Day,” *The Pantagraph*, April 1, 1962.

⁸ *Bloomington City Directory 1915*, 127, 501; *Bloomington City Directory 1917*, 127.

⁹ *Bloomington City Directory 1920*, 254.

¹⁰ “Mrs. Amelia Becker Dies at Home Here.”

¹¹ Ruth A Cobb, *A Place We Called Home: A History of Illinois Soldiers' Orphans' Home 1864-1931, Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School 1931-1979* (Normal, IL: Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School Historical Preservation Society, 2007), viii.

¹² Straka, Researcher notes.

The I.S.S.C.S. (or “the Home,” as it was often referred to) has a 114-year history, to which Gussie contributed almost 25 years.¹³ The origin of the Home began on January 19, 1864 when McLean County residents met to express their growing concerns “for children of deceased soldiers” and indigent children of Illinois Civil War veterans.¹⁴ The citizens sent a “‘memorial’ to the Illinois State legislature to urge them to create a home for soldiers’ orphans.”¹⁵ The following year, the Legislature established the “Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home” to provide care and education for indigent children of Illinois Civil War veterans as called for, but did not allot any funds for the creation of said home. Between 1865 and 1867, efforts were made to solicit subscriptions and donations for the Home, but failed. In March 1867, the Illinois State Legislature finally appropriated about \$100,000 (or about \$1.7 million in 2017) for the purchase of land, the construction of buildings, and for operating the Home.¹⁶ In April that same year, Jesse Fell, who was a significant figure in the founding of the Town of Normal and Illinois State Normal University (today known as Illinois State University), organized a group of citizens who raised pledges in the amount of \$50,000 (or over \$800,000 in 2017) in land, cash, and other considerations to campaign for the Home to be located in Normal.¹⁷ One month later, Fell’s dream came true when Normal was selected for the site.¹⁸

The Home was located on a large tract of land in northeast Normal (today at the corner of Lincoln and Beech Streets). While the Home was being constructed, two temporary homes were established in Bloomington and a third in Springfield, Illinois. Finally, on June 17, 1869, the new building for the Home was dedicated in Normal. The four-story structure housed all activities and had 180 children residing there.¹⁹

As the needs of the Home grew (which included housing more children), new buildings and facilities were added throughout the years. In 1872, new buildings including a kitchen, laundry, boiler house, and steam plant were constructed. A school, later named McKinley Hall, was also built east of the main building.²⁰ Nine years later, a hospital was added. In 1889, the State Legislature appropriated additional funds for the construction of a chapel, dining hall, playrooms, and bathrooms in the main building, along with a new boiler room, laundry, kitchen, and bakery. A primary school and kindergarten were also added.²¹

Sadly, it was not uncommon for children to arrive at the Home with experiences of neglect or abuse. Many had previously stayed at other institutions, at which they had also possibly endured neglect or abuse. A lot of the children arrived with very little knowledge or understanding of their situation. And in some cases, like four children who came from Hidalgo, IL, just a note of instruction was among the few valuables the children carried with them.²² Under disheartening

¹³ Cobb, *A Place We Called Home*, vii.; “Augusta Becker,” *The Pantagraph*, June 16, 1982, 28.

¹⁴ John H. Burnham, George P. Davis, and Ezra M. Prince. *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume II: School Record of McLean County with other papers*. (Bloomington, Illinois: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Co., 1903) 195.

¹⁵ Cobb, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid*; CPI Conversion factors 1774-2027,

<https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/polisci/faculty-research/sahr/inflation-conversion/pdf/cv2017.pdf>, date accessed July 30, 2018.

¹⁷ Cobb, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 1

²⁰ *Ibid*, 1, 12.

²¹ *Ibid*. 1.

²² *Ibid*. 31.

circumstances like these, many children were desperate for the affection and care of thoughtful employees such as Gussie Becker.

Known around the Home as “Ma,” Gussie was beloved by the children under her supervision because of her kind and caring nature.²³ As a means of gaining employment at the Home, Gussie stated she was born in Philadelphia in multiple census records.²⁴ When she came to the Home in 1928, she was put in charge of the girls who lived in Logan Cottage.²⁵ Gussie recalled later in life that she “had charge of some 50 girls in her cottage” when she first started at the Home.²⁶ Gussie cooked, baked (which she learned at age nine), and sewed for her girls. She also found many of those girls, in grades kindergarten through eighth, foster homes. Her salary in 1929 was \$720.00 (or a little over \$10,000 in 2017 figures).²⁷

The cottage parents, like Gussie, tried very hard to make life in the Home as normal as possible for the children. On Fridays, the children were rewarded with a movie—first held in the chapel, and later, by the 1930s, held in the school auditorium.²⁸ Another favorite was heading to Tom Manning’s Store, located at 507 Pine St. in Normal, to buy candy and other treats.²⁹ For many years, beginning in 1929, the representatives of every single American Legion post in Illinois made a “pilgrimage” to the Home and visited with the children. Activities during this day included a picnic lunch, games and amusements, and small gifts for the residents of the Home.³⁰ For Christmas, everyone enjoyed a gift from Santa. Gino, a child who was living at the Home from 1933 to 1942, fondly remembered seeing Santa coming down the street with a bag of presents the children, which they had picked out from a Sears catalog.³¹ Sports were also an enjoyable activity for many of the children. During the 1940s, basketball, badminton, softball, and many other recreational activities were popular. The 1950s brought intramural field hockey and volleyball for the girls. Swimming (at an outdoor pool from about 1925 until 1937 when the indoor pool was completed) was also greatly enjoyed by many of the residents.³² Activities such as these allowed the children to grow and play as all children should.

Gussie would have helped care for hundreds of girls during her almost 25-year career at the Home. And, many of those girls remembered Gussie long after they had grown up and left the Home. In 1962, Gussie told a reporter from *The Pantagraph* that she received as many as 200 cards or more at Christmas time from her former charges, clear evidence of the positive impact

²³ Ibid, 19.

²⁴ Straka, Researcher Notes; United States Census Records, 1930 and 1940. https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?qh=EufAO%2Finnnttl5gJHBbPNxw%3D%3D&gl=allgs&gss=sfs28_ms_f-2_s&new=1&rank=1&msT=1&gsfn=Augusta%20&gsfn_x=0&gsln=Becker&gsln_x=0&msypn_ftp=McLean%20County%2C%20Illinois%2C%20USA&msypn=1963&msbdy=1882&catbucket=rstp&MSAV=0&uidh=mo3 accessed July 31, 2018.

²⁵ *Bloomington City Directory 1928*, 89; “80 Year- Old ‘Gussie’ Walks 5 Miles a Day”; Cobb, *A Place We Called Home*, 11; Logan Cottage was named after John A. Logan, an Illinois native, Civil War Veteran, and U.S. Congressman who served before and after the Civil War. He was also remembered for his contribution in establishing May 30 as Decoration Day (today known as Memorial Day).

²⁶ “80-Year-Old ‘Gussie’ Walks 5 Miles a Day.”

²⁷ “751 in county get \$585,047 from State,” *The Pantagraph*, April 29, 1930, 9; CPI Conversion factors 1774-2027, <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/polisci/faculty-research/sahr/inflation-conversion/pdf/cv2016.pdf>, date accessed July 30, 2018.

²⁸ Cobb, 6.

²⁹ Ibid, 115.

³⁰ “Legion Coming on Pilgrimage,” *The Pantagraph*, June 17, 1937, 10.

³¹ Ibid, 79.

³² Ibid, 69- 70; Email correspondence from Ruth Cobb to Candace Summers, August 9, 2018.

Gussie had on their lives.³³ And at her 99th birthday party, former residents of her cottage were invited to attend as well.³⁴

One girl in particular who Gussie left an impression on (who was not one of her charges) was Jeannine, the daughter of Gussie's coworker Lucinda Brent Posey—the first African American to be an institutional secretary in the State of Illinois. In 1999, Lucinda wrote about several of the cottage parents for an I.S.S.C.S. survey. In one instance, Lucinda recalled that Gussie asked her if her daughter Jeannine, who was the same age as many of the Logan cottage girls, could stay the weekend. What was supposed to be just a weekend turned into three weeks. Anytime the cottage girls went on an outing or trip, “Ma” asked if Jeannine would like to join them. After Gussie passed away in 1982, Lucinda and Jeannine discovered a savings account made by “Ma” for Jeannine. Gussie had “many children,” despite the fact she never married or had any children of her own.³⁵

While Gussie cared deeply for the children in her charge, she had a watchful eye and made sure that her charges behaved appropriately and followed the rules. Another one of Gussie's girls, Oma (Douglas) Foehr, who lived at Logan Cottage between 1938 and 1939, told the story about how she and her friend “Bucky” got into trouble for sharing a piece of gum that they had been given as an afternoon treat. Oma stated that, “Miss Becker didn't approve, so for punishment, we got to sit under the table with soap in our mouths.” It was Oma's opinion that “Miss Becker was molding our character.”³⁶

The Home also had a very distinguished visitor while Gussie was working there. On November 10, 1937, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited some 700 children at the Home. This was the first time that the First Lady had ever visited Normal and McLean County. It was reported by *The Pantagraph* that, “Mrs. Roosevelt made the trip on her own volition, and also because of her interest in child welfare work.” During the short 30-minute visit, the First Lady toured Lincoln Cottage, Horner Hall, the Nursery, Washington Cottage, and the hospital.³⁷ The next day, the First Lady gave a speech at the Scottish Rite Temple for the Business and Professional Women's Club and the community.³⁸ Her visit was probably an event that Gussie and the children at the Home never forgot.

After almost 25 years at the Home, Gussie retired in the early 1950s.³⁹ The Home continued to provide a place for children to live until it closed down in 1979 in a shift to privatized care.⁴⁰

But even in retirement, Gussie continued to lead a very active life. She was well known around town for her health and various activities. She became a member of the Golden Agers Club—a senior citizen social group that was started in 1956 by the Altrusa Club (an international nonprofit club dedicated to community service).⁴¹ The Golden Agers Club was established for anyone who was 60 years of age or older and provided its members with companionship and activities. Activities for the club included workshops held on the second Monday of each month

³³ “80-Year-Old ‘Gussie’ Walks 5 Miles a Day.”

³⁴ “To Mark 99th Year,” *The Pantagraph*, November 3, 1981, 17.

³⁵ Cobb, 87.

³⁶ I.S.S.C.S. Reunion booklet, 2011, I.S.S.C.S. Collection, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives.

³⁷ “First Lady Visits School,” *The Pantagraph*, November 10, 1937, 7; “First Lady Visits School on Trip,” *Felmley Junior High Flashes*, November 24, 1937.

³⁸ “First Lady Visits School”

³⁹ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1951*, 21

⁴⁰ Cobb, 126-127.

⁴¹ <https://www.altrusa.org/clubs/>, date accessed August 7, 2018.

for members to learn crafts like painting and basket weaving, and birthday parties for members on the last Saturday of each month.⁴² Most of the events were held at the Bloomington Y.W.C.A.⁴³ In 1956, Gussie was the chairman of entertainment, and up until 1958, she was Chief Coffee Maker for the Club.⁴⁴

In 1961, Gussie moved into the Jessamine Withers Home for Aged and Indigent Women.⁴⁵ The Home was located on 305 W. Locust St. The Withers Home admitted women of “respectability or reduced circumstances” who were at least 65 years of age, or at the discretion of the board of trustees.⁴⁶ According to Gussie, she still did her own laundry and ironing, but the staff of the Withers Home did her dishes. Gussie was 80 years old, health conscious, and leading a very active life. She was a vegetarian and walked five miles each day. She would walk to her church, Trinity Lutheran (approximately 20 blocks away from the Withers Home), on Sundays and to Miller Park Zoo.⁴⁷ And she remained as wonderful and caring towards others as she was at I.S.S.C.S. Gussie enjoyed visiting other Golden Agers Club members in hospitals and nursing homes. All of her visits were on foot or by bus. She brought those she visited gifts such as yarn, magazines, and embroidery. She washed several patients’ hair and wrote letters for them. She also went to the Y.M.C.A. to see the children in the nursery. Gussie enjoyed attending Listening Hour, an adult education program at the Withers Public Library. Her hobbies included sewing, reading, and writing letters.⁴⁸

Though Gussie paid an initial fee for lifetime care, the Withers Home closed in 1963 for the construction of Holy Trinity High School (today the site of Corpus Christi Catholic Junior High School). However, the Board (which was operated by Second Presbyterian Church) still honored her payment, and she was able to receive proper care at Heritage Manor Nursing Home in Bloomington after the Withers Home closed.⁴⁹

While living at Heritage Manor, Gussie was involved in a car accident on February 13, 1966. She was a passenger in a taxicab that collided with a car driven by Margaret T. Wochner of 2804 E. Oakland Avenue. Gussie was admitted to St. Joseph’s Hospital the same day.⁵⁰ Gussie sued the taxicab driver, Ralph Smith of the Bloomington Yellow Cab Company, and Margaret Wochner for \$50,000 each for personal injury damage (which would be almost \$380,000 in 2017).⁵¹ Gussie claimed negligence on both drivers, and that the cab company “should have known that Smith had a bad driving record.” She claimed that she suffered from total disability because of injuries sustained in the accident.⁵² After almost five weeks, she was released from

⁴² “Fun for the Golden Agers,” *The Pantagraph*, March 18, 1956; “Golden Agers Back in School,” *The Pantagraph*, June 3, 1956.

⁴³ “Tea for Foreign Students Culminates Altrusa’s Week,” *The Pantagraph*, October 23, 1956.

⁴⁴ “Golden Agers to Have a Party,” *The Pantagraph*, July 22, 1956.

⁴⁵ “To Mark 99th Year,” *The Pantagraph*, November 3, 1981, 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ “They’ve Always Walked: 50-mile Hike Fad Not For These Bloomingtonians,” *The Pantagraph*, February 17, 1963, 21.

⁴⁸ “80 Year- Old ‘Gussie’ Walks 5 Miles a Day.”

⁴⁹ “Too Mark 99th Year.”

⁵⁰ “Hospital Notes,” *The Pantagraph*, February 14, 1966.

⁵¹ CPI Conversion factors 1774-2027,

<https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/polisci/faculty-research/sahr/inflation-conversion/pdf/cv2016.pdf>, date accessed August 10, 2018.

⁵² “Woman Sues 3 Parties for \$50,000 Each,” *The Pantagraph*, May 4, 1966, 23.

the hospital on March 22, 1966.⁵³ The injuries she sustained were likely substantial, evidenced by the extended stay and her advanced years. In April 1967, the case was dismissed by stipulation of settlement.⁵⁴

On November 13, 1981, Gussie celebrated her 99th birthday. A reception was held at Heritage Manor Nursing Home where she had lived for the past 18 years. Beloved students from I.S.S.C.S. were invited to help their former House Mother celebrate.⁵⁵ Seven months later, Gussie passed away on June 15, 1982, at St. Joseph's Hospital after a lengthy illness. Gussie outlived all of her siblings, but was survived by two nieces. She was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery near her parents after a short graveside funeral service.⁵⁶

For a more in depth examination of the Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School, please see *A Place We Called Home: A History of Illinois Soldiers' Orphans' Home 1864-1931, Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School 1931-1979* by Ruth Cobb, available in the library at the McLean County Museum of History.

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⁵³ "Hospital Notes," *The Pantagraph*, February 14, 1966, 23; "Hospital Notes," *The Pantagraph*, March 23, 1966, 21.

⁵⁴ "Court Notes McLean County," *The Pantagraph*, April 29, 1967, 21.

⁵⁵ "To Mark 99th Year."

⁵⁶ "Augusta Becker."