

## Mary Arenz Merchant (1841 – 1921)

Mary Arenz Merchant was born on February 28, 1841 in New Berlin, IL the fourth of ten children born to Francis and Louisa Arenz of Arenzville, Cass County, Illinois. Her father Francis was a pioneer born in Blankenberg, Prussia who engaged in the mercantile business in his native country. He came to the United States in 1827 and spent the first two years in Kentucky. He then moved to Galena, IL in 1829 to work in the lead trade. Following this, he became a naturalized citizen and went into merchandising and real estate in Beardstown, IL. In 1833 he bought land near Morgan County and moved his family there in 1839. This land later became known as Arenzville in 1852, named in honor of its owner. Arenzville became the center of a thrifty agricultural community composed largely of Germans, among whom Francis exercised large influence.

Mary went on to study at the Methodist Female College in Jacksonville, IL, now known as MacMurray College. On February 14, 1860 Mary married Ira Merchant, son of a prominent businessman of Cass County, and they had one daughter named Ella. Her husband Ira was born near Morristown, New Jersey, was raised on a farm, and received a common school education. In 1869 he was the first “city engineer” of Bloomington and held that position for thirteen years. He improved the city greatly through repaving the streets and sidewalks, directing the first sewers, and overseeing the digging of the city water well and the building of a pipe water system.

The Merchants lived in Bloomington for 35 years at their home located at 403 E. Front St. During this time, Mary joined Second Presbyterian Church and became a working member of the congregation.

In 1867 Mary was appointed to take charge as superintendent of the first temporary home of the Illinois Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home, later called the Illinois Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Children’s School. The home was located at 1207 N. Main Street in Normal, Illinois. In 1864 a group of area residents met at the McLean County Courthouse in Bloomington to discuss their concern about the welfare of children of disabled veterans or those orphaned children of veterans of the U.S. Civil War. The result of this discussion was a “memorial” being sent to the Illinois state legislature to urge lawmakers to create a home for orphans of soldiers. In 1865 legislation was passed which established the Soldier’s Orphan Home “to provide care and education for indigent children of Illinois Civil War Veterans.”<sup>1</sup> When this legislation was passed, Jesse Fell, a well known businessman and founder of Illinois State Normal University, organized a group of local citizens and business owners to raise the funds necessary to place a bid for the newly founded Town of Normal to be selected as the location for the Home. Fell was able to secure \$50,220 in money and land to win the bid to locate the home in Normal in May of the same year. Not only was Fell’s tenacity and generosity instrumental in Normal being selected as the location for the Home, but the 80 acre tract of land donated by Judge David Davis was a major deciding factor for Normal winning the bid.<sup>2</sup>

Mary came from Springfield and received the first children on August 5, 1867. The house was filled with 54 children who were housed and cared for under Mary’s supervision until the permanent home opened in June 1869. This new home was located

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Cobb. *A Place We Called Home*. (Normal, IL. Printing Services, Illinois State University, 2007) 1

<sup>2</sup> Cobb, *A Place We Called Home*, 5

north-east of Normal on what is known as Beech Street today. At one time there were 63 children which prompted the opening of another temporary home at the corner of North (now Monroe) and Prairie Streets, where 40 children were housed.

Mary had no precedents to follow when she was appointed superintendent. She had to come up with her own methods in organization but was helped by the resident trustee Jesse Wilson and Dr. N.B. Cole, the physician at the orphans' home. At one time there were fourteen children sick with the measles and two with scarlet fever. They all had to be cared for while simultaneously protecting the children who were not ill from succumbing to these illnesses. The house in which they all lived was built for an ordinary family; four rooms above and below, a narrow hall on each floor and one kitchen. This was not an easy environment to care for so many children. However, each child was brought safely through their illness and turned over to the permanent home healthy, well-trained, and polite. Mary made all purchases of supplies and materials used, kept her accounts, and made reports to the trustees. She was tireless in her efforts of running the home and personally saw that her instructions were carried out in relationship to the children's welfare. The trustees unanimously tendered to her the position of superintendent of the permanent home but she declined because of her daughter's health.

On November 27, 1902 Ira suddenly died in bed when he started violently coughing and apparently choking after a hearty Thanksgiving dinner and having spent the day conversing with friends and family. The convulsions were apparently the result of apoplexy, a term historically used to describe any sudden death that began with a sudden loss of consciousness, especially one where the victim died within a matter of seconds after losing consciousness.<sup>3</sup> After the death of her husband, Mary moved to California and lived with her daughter, Ella.

Mary passed away on April 5, 1921, at the home of her daughter, Mrs. Ella McWharton, in Los Angeles, California. Ella accompanied her mother's remains to Bloomington where she was buried in the Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

By: Sarah Yoo, 2008

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<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia.org, 2008, "Apoplexy"