

Myrtle Miller Anderson: How a Williamsport woman came to live among the Sioux

By MARY L. SIEMINSKI
Special to the Sun-Gazette

Myrtle Miller was 21 in 1893 when John Alvin Anderson asked her to marry him. He had one big condition for Myrtle, though. He asked if, after they were married, she would go with him — for just two years, in his words, “until we got a start” — to the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota, where he had a job managing the J. P. Jordan Indian Trading Post.

Myrtle Miller had grown up in the Salladasburg area with her father, Henry, a schoolteacher and Civil War veteran; her mother,

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Amanda; and two brothers, Harry and Orville.

In those days South Dakota, 1400 miles away from the quiet hamlet of Salladasburg, was very much the “Wild West.”

Perhaps she hesitated, but Myrtle did say “yes” — both to the marriage proposal and to the two years on the Reservation. We wouldn’t know much

about Myrtle’s life if she hadn’t written a short memoir for the South Dakota Federated Women’s Club. That piece is now part of the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society and is online in the Lycoming County Women’s History Collection at www.lycoming.edu/lchw.

John Anderson had emigrated from Sweden with his family as a toddler in 1870. When he was 10, his mother died and he came to Lycoming County to live with his older sister, Amanda, and her husband, Gustav Carlson.

When John was 17, his widowed father, taking advantage of cheap land prices in northern Nebraska, moved the entire family to the small town of Valentine.

John bought a camera, apprenticed himself to a photographer, and soon was employed by Gen. George Crook of the U.S. Army as a civilian photographer charged with documenting the transition

of Native Americans from life on the open plains to life on the reservations.

John continued to travel back to Williamsport, and on one trip, he and Myrtle Miller became engaged.

“Just before Mr. Anderson left [for the West] we became engaged. Two years later he came back and we were married and left at once for South Dakota. That was in the fall of 1895. There were no fast trains in those days but we finally reached Valentine, Neb., at one o’clock in the morning. I had never been out of Pennsylvania before and when we woke up in the dark streets of Valentine,

it all seemed pretty strange to me.”

Kept her promise

The young bride kept her promise to stay for “those two years,” until they “got a start” and added 40 more years to the promise — Myrtle and John stayed in Nebraska for 42 years. Myrtle recalled those days as the happiest of her life. She noted in her memoir that, “I am D.A.R. and I think my ancestors must have left me a little of their pioneer spirit.”

The Rosebud Indian Reservation was established (See MYRTLE, Page E-3)

Lifestyle

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lished in 1889 and was the home of Sicangu Lakota, part of the Sioux nation. When John and Myrtle arrived there only six years later, the people were in dire straits. The buffalo were gone; the people were starving. The last generation of chiefs and warriors was now confined to the reservations. Myrtle recalled that in their first years there, “the Indians were pretty wild then, as it was shortly after the Wounded Knee outbreak, so I had thrills every day.”

Myrtle grew to love both the prairie and the people. She was a friend to the Native American women; she mentored them and taught them the skills they needed to survive in their changed world — how to live confined in a cabin, how to clean that cabin, how to cook the unfamiliar foods. John eventually took over ownership of the Jordan Trading Post, and his skill in photography continued to grow.

Soon Rosebud became a family affair — multiple friends and relatives from the Williamsport area went to work and live on Rosebud. Myrtle’s parents taught at the Red Leaf Day School; her brothers worked on the reservation in various capacities. John’s sister, Amanda, came, as did cousins and neighbors. Many lived there for a while and then returned to Pennsylvania; others stayed and established lives on Rosebud.

Myrtle and John’s son, Harold Roscoe Anderson, born two years after their marriage, was raised on Rosebud.

As a teenager and young adult, he worked in the store and as a teller at the bank. He married Mildred Whitehead, and they had a son, also named Harold Roscoe.

Sadly, Harold Roscoe Sr. died when he was just 27 years old. Harold’s young son, Roscoe Jr., came to live with his grandparents on Rosebud for several years. Roscoe Jr. died in a motorcycle accident as a young man.

Was a teacher

Myrtle and John were first and foremost teachers. They did everything they could to help the native people be successful in their new circumstances. Ben Reifel, who was from Rosebud and was the first Native American elected to the U.S. Congress, credited John and Myrtle with giving him his start.

“Buffalo Bill” Cody was a friend of the Andersons. Cody recruited former chiefs and warriors from Rosebud for his traveling Wild West Show.

Cody paid a good wage to those who worked for him, and that wage was sent home to support struggling families. Buffalo Bill brought his show to the fairgrounds in Williamsport in 1901, during a time when Myrtle and John were visiting. The Williamsport Sun-Gazette reported that John raised lots of eyebrows when he and Myrtle chatted with the Indian performers.

In 1935, the Andersons, no longer in good health, moved off the reservation to Rapid City, S.D.

The local newspaper, the Tribune, reported, “it is very doubtful if any man or woman ever came this near of having the entire friendship of every member of the community as they do.”

The Andersons opened a museum showcasing many of the artifacts they had collected over the years, a collection that eventually went to the Smithsonian Museum.



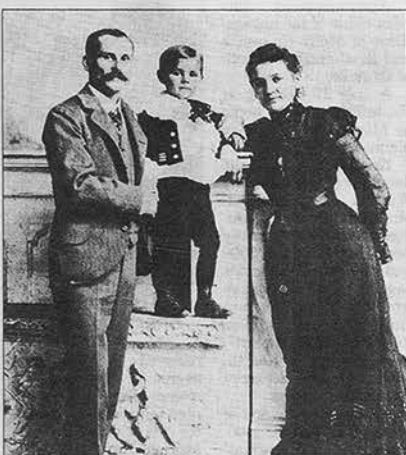
Later they moved to California, where John died in 1948 and Myrtle in 1961. They are buried in Salladasburg, alongside their son, Harold Roscoe, and Myrtle’s parents.

Left a legacy

John and Myrtle Anderson each left a legacy. John Anderson’s photographs, taken over those 40 years, document the tremendous changes that took place on the reservation while the couple lived there. Considered the definitive photographs of the Rosebud Reservation, the photographs are held by many museums, including the Smithsonian.

In addition to providing the intangible gift of friendship to the women on the reservation, Myrtle Miller Anderson authored a beautiful book of simple poems about the people she lived among called “Sioux Memory Gems,” (Chicago, 1929).

Illustrated with John Anderson’s photographs, the book is a part of the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Top left is a photo taken by John Anderson, of Roscoe Anderson and his dog on the Rosebud Reservation. Top right is a photo of John and Myrtle Miller Anderson and Roscoe, around 1901. This photo, from “The Sioux of the Rosebud: A History in Pictures,” is said to have been taken at the Anderson and Schempp studio in Williamsport. The above photo, also from “The Sioux of the Rosebud,” shows Sarah Blue Eyes, left, and Myrtle Miller Anderson.

and is online in the Women’s History Collection at archive.org/details/siouxmemorygems00ande.

Myrtle’s poems honor the native families and traditions and mourn their loss.

In the preface, she states simply, “we are only trying to make known the fact that God breathed into the thinking Indian a soul, which the public at large knows little nor has ever tried to understand.”

In turn, the people of Rosebud honored Myrtle.

There is a window in the Episcopal Church in the small town of Mission, S.D., honoring her, John, and their son, Roscoe, for their contributions to the community.