

New history series to focus on stories about city women

Williamsport women

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Mary Sieminski said people have told her that “all my friends are 19th-century friends.”

As project manager for the women's history initiative that is a cooperative community undertaking between Lycoming College, the James V. Brown Library and the Lycoming County Historical Society, Sieminski has a passion for the stories of Williamsport women.

These stories will become the basis for a new monthly feature that Sieminski will write for the Sunday Lifestyle section that highlights the lesser-known women of Lycoming County.

Sieminski said she has thousands upon thousands of hours of research throughout the five years she has been actively working on the project. The first part of the initiative focused on women who were influential during the years 1875-1925, but Sieminski said that timeframe has been expanded for this series to tell more stories.

“These stories intrigued me,” Sieminski said. “This project is about the people who have emerged from looking at the primary sources.”

Sieminski said little is known about many of these women because they were not public figures or married to wealthy lumber barons.

The first story, which appears today, focuses on Kate Ault Fribley Snyder, who joined the Freedman's Relief Association and went to Nashville, Tenn., where she taught in a school for the newly-freed slaves. She said other women she plans to highlight include Myrtle Miller Anderson, Margaret Hagan, Julia Collins and

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Kate Ault Fribley Snyder

By MARY L. SIEMINSKI
Special to the Sun-Gazette

Lycoming County men who served in the Civil War have had monuments erected in their honor. They are memorialized in written histories, remembered in battle reenactments and featured in the Civil War sections of local historical societies.

Less is known or remembered about the women — women who stayed home, managed the farms while their husbands were away, the mothers, the nurses and even the wives of the officers.

Catherine “Kate” Ault is one of many Lycoming County women who participated fully in the war. What we know about Kate is pieced

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together from just a few sources — but, perhaps, by putting her story into writing, we will inspire others who know her story to come forward and we will have a more com-

plete narrative of one young woman's contributions.

Much more is known about Kate's husband, -

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Jerusha “Mother” Mussina.

Sieminski said she is expanding on many of the stories found in the Women's History Collection at www.lycoming.edu/library/lcwhc/.

“The stories, in many ways, are outlines,” she said. “Snippets of information that someone else can use to put in the correct settings ... these women have fascinating stories.”

For example, Sieminski said Mother Mussina was the head of the Temperance Movement in Williamsport and Myrtle Miller Anderson was a local woman who lived for 40 years on the Rosebud Indian Reservation with her husband, photographer John Anderson.

Margaret Hagan was a businesswoman who owned a spa in the city that did electrotherapy, Sieminski said, adding that she also was bi-racial.

Sieminski said many of the families have assisted her with documents and records because many still are in the area and well-established.

“Census records show that people in West Virginia and Pennsylvania have the highest number of people who stay from one census to the next,” she said.

Aside from the Ault and Mussina families, none of the other women come from prominent families, which makes them more difficult to research.

Although there are many primary documents in local repositories, Sieminski has used information from other researchers, genealogists and historians, along with census records and local newspapers.

“I'm a librarian, so research comes naturally,” she said.

Sieminski said some of the difficulty in obtaining information comes from how information about women was cata-

logged in the past.

“Some portraits just say ‘anonymous women’ on the back and they don't have names,” she said, adding that Kate Ault Snyder's obit only mentioned that she was the wife of Jesse Snyder and that she had died.

“A lot of women's obits were like that at the time,” she said.

Sieminski hopes that her monthly story will help get the word out so that others can come forward or have stories to fill in the gaps.

“This is an addendum to the history project, which last month had 5,000 hits,” she said. “Because it's searchable from the Web and Google, people have been finding it.”

Sieminski said the archives are such a rich treasure but in the past were almost inaccessible because of limited hours and staff at the various institutions.

“There are letters and

diaries, some photos,” she said. “Some of the things were surprising, like letters of resignation from the Ku Klux Klan by women in Jersey Shore.”

Sieminski admits that much of her knowledge of history is self-taught, but she has used the information available to her, such as yearbooks from Lycoming College and Potts Business School and archives from the YWCA, the Home for the Friendless and the Williamsport School of Nursing.

“A lot that has emerged is not just individual women, but clubs and organizations,” she said. “If you can get the minutes, you can see how the organization worked locally and the issues that came up.”

Sieminski said she wants to identify other women's organizations in Williamsport so she can find their archives and preserve them.

What also is interesting is

how the project has had “spin-offs,” such as Lynn Estomin's research about the mill workers that looks into the life of working women in the Williamsport mills and Dr. Amy Rogers's teachers' curriculum guide for educators in Intermediate Unit 17.

Those who have information to donate to the project or who are interested in volunteering may contact Sieminski at www.lycoming.edu/library/lcwhc.html. Additional funding also is needed to keep the project going.

Although Sieminski has years of research in this project, she said they have been “pleasantly spent.”

“I think my husband knows these people as well as I do,” she joked. “But I have an interest in history and women's issues. They have been under-represented in the history books and they are fascinating to me.”

Kate Ault Fribley Snyder

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Col. Charles W. Fribley, a Civil War hero who was the commander of the 8th Regiment of the United States Colored Troops and was killed in the Battle of Olustee, near Jacksonville, Fla. There is a handsome portrait of Col. Fribley hanging in the Thomas T. Taber Museum of the Lycoming County Historical Society.

Kate was 20 years old and Charles 26 when they were married on Dec. 10, 1861. Kate Ault was the daughter of Adam Ault and Mary Reighard, both from well-known local families. Ault family members had fought in the Revolutionary War.

The Fribley family, originally from Germany, had lived in the Muncy area for two generations. When Kate and Charles were married, Charles was just beginning his second enlistment as a sergeant with Company “F,” 84th PA, a company of white soldiers.

The photograph of Kate and Charles taken on their wedding day seems somber, although it is typical of the photography of the period. Charles is in his uniform — he looks tall, dark-haired, bearded and very serious.

Kate has her straight hair pulled back with a single braid and looks tiny beside him. Sitting for the portrait, she does not even come up to his shoulders. In her voluminous dark-colored gown, she looks like a child dressing up in her mother's clothes.

We know very little about Kate and her family. She grew up in Newberry, where her father was a carpenter. She had four brothers and two sisters.

At least two of Kate's brothers had enlisted in the Union Army, as had three of Charles's brothers.

We know more about Charles — he grew up on a farm in Muncy and attended Dickinson Seminary (now Lycoming College). He was a man of the world — he had gone west to seek his fortune, experienced life in “Bleeding Kansas,” and made two trips down and back on the Sante Fe Trail, before returning to Muncy as a school-teacher.

Charles and Kate seem to have been deeply committed to each other during their short marriage. Charles faithfully kept a diary, and Kate is mentioned in almost every entry.

He carried an ambrotype (a early type of photograph) of Kate with him wherever he went during the war.

Kate often accompanied Charles when he was with the 84th Infantry. She supported him when he decided to ask for the command of a regiment of “colored” troops. Charles passed the required exam, attained the rank of colonel, and, on Nov. 23, 1863, was appointed commander of the newly formed 8th Regiment of the United States Colored Troops.

Kate and Charles surely knew the risk that he was taking when he asked for the assignment.

The colored troops were all new recruits, often ill-trained and ill-equipped for battle. The Confederate Congress had approved the death penalty for any captured white commanders of African-American troops.

Kate stayed with Charles at Camp William Penn, just northwest of Philadelphia, where the local African-American troops were trained. The camp was located near the home of noted abolitionist Lucretia Mott and a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The camp attracted well-known abolitionists and

Underground Railroad conductors such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and William Still. Living there was surely a new and interesting experience for the young lady from Williamsport.

When the Regiment was ordered to the Front, in January 1864, Kate went with Charles, the 544 men, and 21 officers as far as Hilton Head, S.C.

In February, Col. Fribley and the troops were ordered to participate in the Florida Expedition under Gen. Truman Seymour. Charles was shot and killed very early in the bloody battle, along with 87 of the new recruits.

Although the Confederates would usually have treated the bodies of officers killed in battle with respect, the officers of regiments of colored soldiers were so despised that Charles's body was never positively identified.

Some say that he was buried in a mass grave along with his troops, but there is no proof of that. Kate herself bravely made the journey to Florida later in February and tried to retrieve his body, but the Confederate commanders refused her request.

Years later, his watch, a letter, his diary and the ambrotype of Kate that he had carried with him were recovered and sent to Kate.

Kate returned home to her family in Newberry. She had been married less than three years and, at 23, was a widow, but she was not finished with her war work.

Kate honored Charles by joining the Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association, one of many regional groups established after the Civil War with the aim of assisting freed African-Americans.

Kate, along with her

sister, Anna Ault, and friend Lizzie Shoemaker from Muncy, traveled to Nashville, Tenn., where the three young women taught in a school for the newly-freed slaves.

Their school was called the William Penn School. W.P. Mitchell of the Freedmen's Association noted that Mrs. Fribley “came South to aid in teaching and elevating the race for which her husband had sacrificed his life.” (Nashville Board of Education, Annual Report, 1869.)

Lizzie Shoemaker wrote to her family in Muncy that the William Penn School “was filled to overflowing with blacks eager to be taught, and sometimes there were three generations present, the grand-par-



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ents as anxious for ‘book learning’ as the children.” (Mary Jane Levan, “Now and Then,” April 1891.)

By 1868, Kate was back in Williamsport and married Jesse Snyder, a local man who also had served in the Civil War. Kate and Jesse had two children — Charles Fribley Snyder and Lucie Duncan Snyder. Sadly, both children died at an early age and Kate herself died in June 1882 at the age of 41. Kate, Jesse and the two children are buried in Wildwood Cemetery.

These snippets from Kate's life — in Newberry and Muncy, at

Camp William Penn, Hilton Head, in Florida in a desperate attempt to retrieve her husband's body, in Nashville teaching school while the county was still at war — provide us with a small window into the life of one young woman during those difficult times.

The commitment of these Lycoming County women and men — Kate, her husband, friends and family — to the preservation of the Union, the abolitionist cause, and the advancement of the newly emancipated African-American slaves is truly notable and their stories should be told.