

'Miss Bess' and 'Miss Edith' — Founders of Williamsport's Froebel Kindergarten

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

In September 1895, Elizabeth Gaus and Harriet Beugler, two recent Williamsport High School graduates, established a private kindergarten in rented rooms on West Fourth Street. Their first class had 14 children. The kindergarten curriculum used by the young women was based on the educational teachings of renowned German educator Friedrich Froebel, and the school simply was called "The Froebel Kindergarten."

Sixty-five years later, in June 1961, the last Froebel Kindergarten class "graduated" and the school closed. By that

time, Bess Gaus, or "Miss Bess" as she was called by her students, was 86 years old; her younger sister Edith Caroline Gaus, who had replaced Beugler in 1900 and was known as "Miss Edith," was 82.

Over the decades that the sisters operated the school, hundreds of Williamsport families sent their children to Miss Bess and Miss Edith. Among the families that enrolled three generations of students in the kindergarten were the W. Van Person family, the George Foreman family and the George Lamade family. The kindergarten's popularity



was such that the Gaus sisters were besieged by requests from parents to put their newborn children's names on the waiting list. "We finally had to make the rule," Bess Gaus said in a Sun-



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At left is 426 Center St., the location of the Froebel Kindergarten. Above is a sign that was retrieved from the kindergarten when it closed. Photo courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society.

Gazette article, "that a child must be two years old before we accept his name for our waiting list."

Exactly how the two young women organized and financed their new business is not known, but they may have had help from the community. An article in the 1894

issue of the national publication Kindergarten Review noted that a "Kindergarten Association" had been formed in Williamsport; its officers were Mrs. N. Burrows Bubb, Mrs. George S. Maxwell and

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Mrs. J. Walton Bowman. Perhaps these women helped with the establishment of the school, which the Kindergarten Review called "experimental."

The kindergarten was successful right from the start, but Gaus and Beugler always were trying to improve it. "It didn't take us long to realize that we needed training ourselves," recalled Bess Gaus in a Sun-Gazette article, "so Harriet and I went to school for kindergarten courses. One of us would stay here while the other was at college." Beugler enrolled in Miss Fannie Smith's Training School in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Bess Gaus attended Temple College Kindergarten Normal School in Philadelphia, graduating with the class of 1898.

Friedrich Froebel

Friedrich Froebel was the inventor of kindergarten in the most literal terms — he coined the word. "Kinder" in German means "child," and "garten" means "garden."

After a long period of study, he opened his kindergarten in Bad Blankenburg, Germany, in 1837. Froebel was one of the first to recognize that significant brain development occurs before the age of three. Believing that play was an integral part of learning, he designed education play materials known as Froebel Gifts, which included colored balls of yarn, geometric building blocks and pattern activity books. These "gifts," arguably the first educational toys, are still available today.

"Because he recognized that education begins in infancy, Froebel saw mothers as the ideal first teachers of humanity," according to the Froebel Society website. "Women, he believed, were best-suited to nurture children and became the Kindergarten teachers (for his schools)." The website goes on to provide what is a very apt description of the Gaus sisters: "The Kindergarten attracted ambitious, intelligent women, who received advanced educations and developed businesses of their own."

Froebel's theories inspired Maria Montessori and other early childhood educators, as well as such luminaries as the architect Frank Lloyd Wright and the artist Paul Klee. Karen Woland Payne, retired director of the Children's Learning Center at Penn College, was surprised to learn about the Gaus sisters' school. "In Penn College early childhood education courses, we have always taught about Froebel as the father of the kindergarten, but I never knew that there was a Froebel Kindergarten right here in Williamsport," she said.

Gaus sisters

Elizabeth Gaus was born in Lock Haven in 1874; her sister Edith Caroline, in 1878. Their father, John Gaus, had emigrated from Germany and was a bag agent for the Pennsylvania and Erie Railroad. Their mother, Parmelia Harlan, was from Montoursville. Along with their older sister Mary, the girls and their parents lived in Lock Haven, Jersey Shore and finally Williamsport, at 426 Center St. In 1932, after their parents had died, the Gaus home became the



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Above are photos that ran with a story in the Sun-Gazette celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Froebel Kindergarten. At top is the Gaus anniversary and above is the Gaus first class.

site of the Froebel Kindergarten. The Gaus sisters never wanted a large building. "We wanted to get to know each child and the children to know each other," Edith Gaus said in a Sun-Gazette article.

In 1951, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the school, former students organized a reunion on the grounds of Ashurst Manor in Muncy. The Williamsport Sun-Gazette reported, "The high point of the afternoon came when the 'morning ring' of kindergarten children formed with Miss Bess and Miss Edith and they sang songs and played some of their traditional games." Students presented the sisters with a box of letters from former students and a memory book with the names of all the former students.

Edith and Beth Gaus were active in local organizations, and for their efforts they were given the Brotherhood Award by the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Edith Gaus was on the board of the Home of the Friendless/Williamsport Home and of the auxiliary of City Mission's Boys' Industrial School. The sisters were members of Pine Street United Methodist Church and taught classes there. They had to have been physically active, too, because on July 27, 1911, the Sun-Gazette reported that the sisters were part of a group of five women who "left yesterday to walk to Eagles Mere. They expect to reach

the 'Lake of the Eagles' sometime today. They will return by train."

Kindergarten closes

By the time the Froebel Kindergarten closed in June 1961, the Williamsport public schools had begun to offer kindergarten classes. The Kane Republican published a story on the closing of the school in its June 5, 1961 issue, saying "In its day the Froebel Kindergarten was favored by the city's gentry. Many of the prominent townsmen gathered for a little farewell party and there was many a fond and wistful tale of bygone days when the city was the hub of the thriving north central Pennsylvania lumber industry." The article lamented the breaking of another link with the past.

Bess Gaus died in 1967, six years after retiring; Edith died in 1971. Both sisters spent their last years at Sycamore Manor and are buried in Wildwood Cemetery. Their home, the site of the Froebel Kindergarten, still stands on Center Street, inspiring fond childhood memories among many Williamsport men and women.

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