

Minnie Taylor: From county's farmland to Chile, England

By NANCY E. BAUMGARTNER

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Minnie Viola Taylor was a country girl, but unlike the one in the song lyrics by Dottie West, Minnie did not remain a country girl. Her journey led her from the farms and fields of Cogan House Township to the coastline of Chile, the shores of England and much of the United States. Her life was edged in tragedy, energized by her passion for learning and framed by a sense of duty to serve others.

On Oct. 29, 1876, Ellis and Mary Ann Alexander Taylor welcomed Minnie into the world. The Taylors lived between Liberty and Nauvoo, in Tioga County, at that time. Within three years the family had moved to Cogan House Township, bought a 100-acre farm near the village of Beech Grove and added a son to the family tree. Minnie was later enrolled at Beech Grove School, just a short walk from her home.

Perhaps that was the beginning of Minnie's passion for learning and awareness of its possibilities for a girl like her. Much later, as a student at Dickinson Seminary (now Lycoming College), she wrote an article for the Dickinson Union newspaper entitled "Dux Femina Facti" on the importance of educating women. Roughly translated it means "a woman led."

Appetite for education

Minnie's eight years at Beech Grove School whetted her appetite for education. In 1891, she was led to enroll at the Muncy Normal School, where she completed a summer course, earning a temporary teaching certificate. She returned to Cogan House Township and taught at the Buckhorn Mountain School in 1892/93, the Beech Grove School in 1896/97 and the Summit School (a.k.a. White Pine School) in 1899.

Interspersed with teaching, Minnie pursued further education at Dickinson Seminary from 1893 to 1896. She graduated with a bachelor's degree and gave the valedictorian address at commencement exercises on June 18, 1896 in the Lycoming Opera House. She was just 19 years old.

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Tragic loss

Family legend has not carried down the reason the young couple did not marry soon after Minnie's graduation. A combination of scarce finances and family obligations is the most likely explanation for the delay. During the autumn of 1900, Owen found an opportunity to join the logging operation of R. E. Woods in Sandy Huff, West Virginia. It is likely that, at age 25, he was becoming anxious to accumulate enough money so that he and Minnie could marry.

On Jan. 10, 1901, a train loaded with large logs hurtled down a treacherous West Virginia mountainside. Suddenly it derailed, spilling its cargo into a ravine. Owen and several other lumbermen were riding in the engine compartment. Owen was thrown beneath the train and killed instantly. Despite the distance and winter conditions, Owen's body was returned to Cogan House Township and buried on Jan. 13, in the Summit Cemetery beside the White Pine Church. The tragedy changed Minnie's life and altered her direction.

In 1902, she enrolled at Syracuse University, graduating four years later with a bachelor's degree. Then she accepted a position at Santiago College for Girls in Chile, teaching English and Bible to young Chilean women. She remained there for five years and, according to diary entries, came to terms with her grief. On the eighth anniversary of Owen's death, she wrote: "I went up and sat on the rocks alone a long time today and thought. I believe at last I can say, 'thank God for some troubles.' I did not think I could ever reach that distance, but thank God again, it has come."

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MINNIE VIOLA TAYLOR

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Return from South America

After her return from South America, she worked for the International YWCA, took graduate summer classes in social work at Columbia, Syracuse and Bucknell universities, traveled to and lectured at various venues, cared for her aging parents and arranged higher education for her brother's children. According to her nephew, she may have been one of the few women of that time to drive her own Model T Ford.

Between 1918 and 1930, Minnie's desire to follow a life of service was evident. She served as the first executive secretary of the Social Service League, with offices at City Hall on Pine Street. She was a member of Pine Street United Methodist Church and its Women's Christian Temperance Union. She also remained a loyal alumna of Dickinson Seminary, where she served as the dean of women from 1930 to 1933.

After her parents' deaths in 1934 and 1940, her health declined. She sold her home on High Street and moved to Canandaigua, New York, where her brother's family took care of her. To the very last, she was determined to give learning opportunities to women. In her will, she bequeathed money to the College Club of Williamsport and directed that it be used for education of girls from Cogan House Township. The Minnie V. Taylor AAUP Endowed Fund still exists at Lycoming College.

To signify that part of her heart remained reserved for Owen, Minnie continued to wear his ring until the end of her life. She died on August 17, 1944 at age 67 in Rochester, New York, and is buried in the Salem Lutheran (a.k.a. Harts) Cemetery, in Liberty, Tioga County.

— *Nancy Baumgartner is a freelance journalist and the author of the book Cogan House Township — The 1900s. Her work has been published in state and local newspapers and national magazines.*

