Martha Shank, a Williamsport woman of firsts

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Special to the Sun-Gazette

Martha Shank, 1876 to 1955, was a woman of firsts. She was the first full-time female journalist for the Williamsport Sun, with a career that spanned 49 years. In 1919, Shank was the first woman to fly over Williamsport in a plane. She also was the first woman to climb a 150-foot smokestack at the Avis railroad yards in pursuit of a story.

Martha was the daughter of W.W. Shank, a prominent railroad man, and Mattie Baker Shank, who was listed in the census as a teacher. Mattie died the year of her daughter's birth, possibly in childbirth.

Martha Shank's name appeared in newspaper lists for the roll of honor at Williamsport High School, and her name would continue to appear in the newspaper not only with her articles but also because of her total immersion in community activities.

A job becomes a career

Martha studied kindergarten education and then taught briefly in Atlanta, Georgia, but her father persuaded her to return home. An article by Lou Hunsinger in a 2004 Webb Weekly, titled "Dorothy Deane: Journalism Pioneer," tells us that her father contacted his friend Elmer Person, editor of the Williamsport Sun, about finding a job for his daughter. The job description for her position as social editor was "write what you see wherever you find it."

Of course, it was indelicate for a woman to use her own maiden name in a public forum at that time, so she became Dorothy Deane to her growing number of fans.

Martha's columns informed and entertained decades of newspaper readers. She was known for writing from the depths of her heart as much as from logic. Her well-researched articles were written with a mission of telling the woman's side of a story, focusing on kindness and service in our community.

Children delighted her and were often the subject of her columns. Her writing was personal and conversational, exuding great warmth.

An article pasted into the 1923 to 1924 Home for the Friendless scrapbook describes how 4-year-old Baily Jones, who had been taken to Philadelphia so that surgeons could remove a quarter that he had swallowed, got his cleft palate corrected at the same time. Baily had been considered "dull," but after the operation he talked constantly, trying out new words.

"This little fellow will have his chance in life," concluded Shank.

Current researchers cite her newspaper articles when writing about such topics as the Lycoming Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution and Mary Slaughter and her memories of slavery.

Community activist

Martha thoroughly involved herself in the life of Williamsport and its women. She was a lifelong member of the Girl Scouts, served locally with the Red Cross and was an active parishioner at Pine Street Methodist Church, where she taught Sunday school and supported the missionary ministry.

She also was superintendent of elementary work for the county Sabbath School. The Williamsport Civic Club awarded her a lifetime membership because of her many contributions, and she was listed in the Clio Club directory.

Her name appears often in YWCA scrapbooks, and she served on numerous community committees, such as the 1913 Home and School League to supervise the Riverside Park playground. She was a member of the Woman's Suffrage Association, selling their souvenirs from a Suffrage Booth at the Hughesville County Fair in 1915.

Her passion for equal rights was apparent in her writings, speeches and personal life, and she would continue to pursue her political interests later in life with the Lycoming County Council of Republican Women, often volunteering for the publicity committee.

Martha was a popular speaker on a variety of subjects throughout her career. During World War I, she spoke about food conservation on many occasions in different venues for the U.S. Food Administration. In 1912, she was a presenter at the County Grange Open Meeting in Hughesville on the topic "How far are women justified in following the current fashions — what about the men." And in 1948, she addressed City Council on the topic "Publicity Helps."

Final tributes

At the time of her death, Martha was living with her stepmother, Lucy Updegraff Shank, at 330 Park Ave. The April 1, 1955, death announcement for this "most widely known woman," as she was called in the headline, appeared on the front page of the Sun-Gazette. The accompanying article described her as the "first woman to do a great many things which a half-century ago were by custom reserved for men."

An opinion piece in the newspaper on the same day gave testament to the impact Martha had on the lives of others. Not only did she have a "special, almost indefinable, place" in women's organizations around town, but she also inspired both young men and young women as they embarked on journalistic careers in the Sun editorial room.

The editorial concluded, "The record she wrote in the columns of the Sun's social pages... will remain unmatched for a long time."