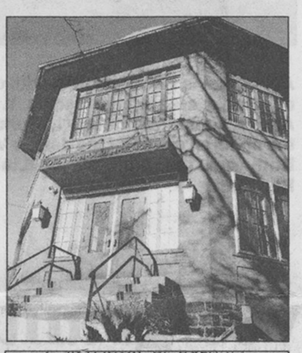
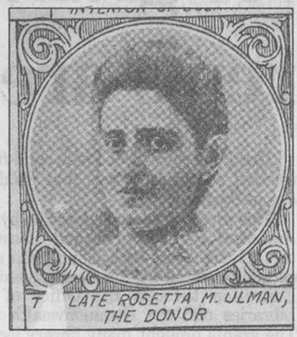
Rosetta M. Ulman: 'Charity never faileth'

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI





PHOTOS PROVIDED

At top, is the Rosetta M. Ulman Memorial solarium as it looks today. Above is a photograph from the Lycoming County Historical Society of Ulman from a newspaper clipping in the scrapbook of the Home for the Friendless.

Charity defines Rosetta M. Ulman's life and legacy. She was generous during her lifetime (1859-1922) and made bequests that continue to affect lives and institutions today. Visitors to the physicians' offices at the corner of Rural Avenue and Campbell Street might have noticed the words "Rosetta M. Ulman Memorial" engraved in the stonework above the entrance to the glass-sided solarium.

Rosetta was a member of one of the first Jewish families to settle in Williamsport, arriving in the small town just as the lumber industry did. The youngest of the three children of Moses Ulman and Caroline Strassburger, Rosetta was born in Williamsport on April 2, 1859, joining older brothers Hiram (1855-1912) and Lemuel (1857-1936).

Moses Ulman came to the United States from Germany when he was 19 or 20. Some of Moses's 13 brothers and sisters already had immigrated to America, and several had settled in Williamsport. Moses first lived in Liberty, working as a peddler and then as a clerk in a clothing store. In 1856, he opened a clothing store near the corner of Fourth and Market streets, a store that remained in business until the 1970s.

Rosetta's mother, Caroline Strassburger, also was born in Germany. As a young girl, she immigrated to Baltimore with her family. Caroline and Moses were married in 1854.

CHARITY AT HOME

With her charitable inclinations, Rosetta would be following in the footsteps of her mother and father. When Rosetta was 10 years old, her mother founded the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Association. The charity provided assistance to new Jewish immigrants to the city, the needy and the sick. The organization's first meeting was in the Ulman home; the first officers, in addition to her mother, were Clara Ulman, Theresia Kuhn and Caroline Myers, all Rosetta's aunts and cousins.

As with other Williamsport Women, we don't know very much about Rosetta's personal life. To our knowledge, no letters, diaries or other documents have survived. We must rely on newspaper stories, public records and various histories of Temple Beth Ha-Shalom, of which her parents were founding members. The one known photograph of Rosetta, published after her death at the time of the dedication of the solarium, shows her to be an attractive woman, with dark eyes.

Rosetta was among the 13 graduates of Williamsport High School in 1877. She may have attended Dickinson Seminary, as did her brothers along with several Ulman cousins, nieces and nephews. They were among a number of "Hebrew" students at the Methodist institution.

After living at first in rooms near the clothing store, Rosetta and her family moved to 117 Market St. and then to 634 W. Fourth St. Now known as the Smith/Ulman House and used as the rectory of Annunciation Church, the house

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was built about 1880 by Isaac Hobbs. The old carriage house, at the corner of Walnut and Edwin streets, is now the home of the Woman's Club of Williamsport.

MILLIONAIRE'S ROW

By the time Moses died in 1905, he had become known for his charity and was one of the richest men in the city. In addition to his clothing business, managed by his sons, he had large real estate holdings and shares in local banks and the Lycoming Electric Light Co. When Caroline died in 1907, the Daily Gazette and Bulletin noted that she was "One of the city's best known women, active in church work and identified with all the local charities."

After her parents' death, Rosetta continued to live in the Fourth Street home, as did her brother Hiram, who became a city councilman. Lemuel moved into the majestic brownstone at 411 W. Fourth St., now the Peter Herdic Inn.

During her lifetime, Rosetta M. Ulman's gifts frequently were mentioned in local newspapers. In January 1913, Rosetta donated the money for the supplies needed by the Home and School League to teach sewing to young girls. In 1917, she made a generous wartime donation to the Red Cross. In 1925, when the Civic Club held a Christmas party for the residents of the City Home (Poor House) in South Williamsport, club members provided a basket with fruit, nuts and raisins for each of the 20 female and 22 male residents. "A special gift was presented to each inmate by Miss Rosetta Ulman. These gifts consisted of the three handkerchiefs in special boxes."

BEQUESTS

When Rosetta died on Nov. 20, 1922, at the age of 63, she was living at the Hotel Netherlands in New York City. Her funeral was held at Temple Beth Ha-Shalom, and she is buried in the Henry Ulman Mausoleum at Wildwood Cemetery.

Her bequests, totaling close to $250,000, were intentionally divided between Jewish and gentile charities. She donated $109,000 to various charities in Williamsport, including $50,000 to the Williamsport Hospital, now Williamsport Regional Medical Center, to build a new wing, which

PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown in this photo, from the historical society, is the Ulman home, 634 W. Fourth St.

carried a bronze plaque reading, "This building is erected in memory of Rosetta M. Ulman. CHARITY NEVER FAILETH."

Her $25,000 gift to the Home for the Friendless was used to build the solarium on the south side of the building for the use of the elderly women residents; her brother Lemuel and cousin Hanna Ulman Rosenbaum donated funds to build a solarium for children on the north side of the building.

She bequeathed $1,250 each to the Children's Aid Society, Home for Aged Colored Women, Salvation Army, Girls' Training School and Boys' Industrial Home. Continuing to carry out her mother's goal of helping the needy, she established several funds with the Social Services Bureau, including the "Needy Old Men and Women's Fund" and the "Milk, Ice and Fuel Fund." Not forgetting her family, she left $44,000 "for needy relatives."

Gifts to Jewish charities included $45,000 to the former National Farm School, now Delaware Valley College in Doylestown. The Rosetta M. Ulman Dormitory still houses students, at least a few of whom come from Lycoming County. At the time of the donation, the Farm School provided a free education in scientific farming to city children. Her $10,000 gift to Temple Beth Ha-Shalom was used to build a religious school and community center. Her $1,000 gift to the Temple Sisterhood sponsored yearly services for her parents and brothers.

She donated $25,000 to the Philadelphia Jewish Hospital. Her bequest to the Jewish Publication Society was used to underwrite a history of the Jewish people that would educate not only Jewish people but also others so that, according to the publisher, Jewish people "might be better understood and more equitably recognized, by those holding different views from us." The one-volume history by Max Margolis and Alexander Marx, History of the Jewish People (Jewish Publication Society, 1927), is an acknowledged landmark in Jewish historiography and has been reprinted many times.

One little-known fact I discovered in my research is that the famous actors Douglas Fairbanks (b. 1883) and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. (b. 1909) were among the Ulman descendants. Lazarus Ulman, an older brother of Moses, was the great-grandfather of Douglas Fairbanks Jr.

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A special edition of West Branch Life featuring Sieminski's stories will be published and included with the Sun-Gazette on March 25.