

Celebrating women trailblazers of Langlade County

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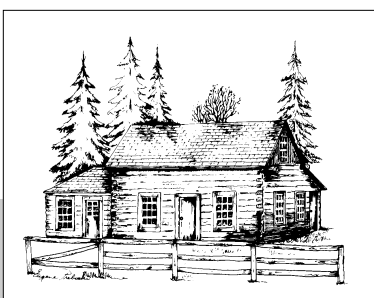
March is Women's History Month, dedicated to commemorating and encouraging the study, observance and celebration of the vital role of women in American history. So it is appropriate that we consider some women from Langlade County who made significant contributions in a variety of fields.

Bernice Stewart, as a child in the early 20th century, followed her father, a timber cruiser, to lumber camps in northern



Bernice Stewart in the Antigo High School yearbook of 1911 the year she graduated.

Wisconsin and the Michigan Upper Peninsula. Upon graduation from Antigo High School in 1911 she enrolled at University of Wisconsin-Madison, majoring in English. Her major professor, Homer Watt, was a Shakespeare



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scholar but he encouraged his students to write about their personal experiences and what they knew best.

Stewart's writing about logging camps and various Paul Bunyan myths fascinated the Shakespearean scholar and he encouraged her to continue. In fact, he collaborated with her for a talk and scholarly article on Paul Bunyan legends and their origins.

Both Stewart and Watt intended to continue their academic research on Paul Bunyan myths and their origins. She spent some time in the Chippewa Valley adding to her collection of tall tales gathered during her travels with her father. But other matters intervened in both their lives. Watt accepted a position at New York University and although he continued to collect stories with an eye towards publishing a book he never got around to it. Stewart, after working at the University of Wisconsin Press for a brief period, moved to Washington D.C. where she nursed soldiers returning from World War I. She married one of them, an insurance executive, and moved to New York City.

Both Stewart and Watt continued their interests in Paul Bunyan but neither published further. Still, Stewart's research on the folk tales about Paul Bunyan, which she heard as a child, and her collaboration with Watt on a 13 page article was one of the first academic studies of local folklore and still is considered a seminal study.

About the time when Stewart was graduating from Antigo High School Helen Benishek was entering. She was the daughter of a mayor of Antigo, John Benishek, and graduated from Antigo High School in 1914.

After a year working at the public library and studying landscape gardening she entered the University of Wisconsin majoring in a four year program of landscape gardening. Landscape architecture was a relatively new academic discipline and its boundaries were poorly defined. She was one of a few women in the field nationwide and may well be the first woman landscape architect in the state of Wisconsin.

She returned to Antigo after graduation to practice her profession. One of her first commissions was designing and landscaping Elmwood Cemetery, a project that



Helen Benishek in the Antigo High School yearbook of 1914, the year she graduated.

drew a lot of praise. In 1920 she married L.P. Tradewell who, like her father, had been a mayor of Antigo. She continued to work as a landscape architect in spite of raising a daughter and four stepchildren from her husband's previous marriage.

Many of Antigo's larger and

try. Her plans were not implemented at the time but years later formed the basis of a detailed renovation plan.

One of her landmark projects was planning and designing Antigo's City Park, including the bandstand. Her plan is still in place today and enjoyed by the many people who attend the music in the park concerts during the summer.

Tragically, Benishek-Tradewell died at age of 34 after a brief illness. In her short life and career she was not only a pioneer woman working in the field of landscape architecture but was also an inspiration. One of her stepdaughters and a grandson ended up becoming landscape architects.

Dr. Elizabeth Steffen was the daughter of Dr. Lyman Steffen, a pioneer Antigo physician and early mayor of Antigo.

Dr. Steffen, like her father, combined medical practice with community service. Born in 1921 she graduated from the University of Michigan in 1942 then attended medical school at McGill University in Montreal Canada. She interned in Chicago and did a



Dr. Elizabeth Steffen practicing medicine in Racine.

finer homes had their grounds designed by Benishek-Tradewell. She also worked on a plan to beautify the shoreline of Kellogg's Pond (Antigo Lake) which was blighted by a once thriving lumber indus-

residency in Philadelphia.

It was a time when very few women practiced medicine. In 1949, her training complete, she moved to Racine and practiced

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obstetrics and gynecology until her retirement in 1990.

At various times in her career she served as president of the Racine County Medical Society, Chief of Staff of St. Luke's Hospital, Chief of Obstetrics and Gynecology at St. Mary's Medical Center and President of the Wisconsin Obstetrician and Gynecological Society. She was also a clinical professor with the Medical College of Wisconsin.

Like her father, she was active in many civic organizations. She sought to help disadvantaged people receive medical care and helped found the Family Planning Association of Racine (a forerunner to Planned Parenthood). In 1967 she also did a nine week tour on the ship U.S.S. Hope (Health Opportunities for People Everywhere) which travelled to underdeveloped countries tending to medical needs of the local population. In 1972 she did another tour on the U.S.S. Hope in Brazil.

After her official retirement she opened the Health Care Network, a clinic in Racine which offered health care to those without health insurance and ineligible for

Medicaid. She donated her office and clinic building to the organization.

Dr. Steffen's interests extended beyond medicine. She served as president of the Racine Humane Society, was on the Racine Salvation Army board, and on the board of trustees for the Racine Y.M.C.A and Lawrence University. She was a trailblazer in encouraging women entering medical practice and in extending medical care to disadvantaged.

Marie Berner ended up in her chosen profession through the influence of her husband Artemas Berner and father-in-law Henry Berner.

She was born in Kansas City, Kan. in 1912 and moved with her family to Neopit, where her father held a position with the federal government on the Menominee Indian Reservation. She attended high school in Antigo, graduating in 1929.

It was the depths of the Depression and she was unable to attend college. While working at the Langlade County Register of Deeds office she met Artemas Berner, an attorney, whom she would later marry. Artemas was involved with the Antigo Daily Journal, a paper founded by his father Henry Berner

and his uncle Fred Berner. Artemas took over the newspaper and upon his death in 1963 Berner took over as owner of the Berner Brothers Publishing Company which operated the Antigo Daily Journal.

With no formal education beyond high school and little newspaper

being reduced to weekly publications. Even large city publications faced difficulties.

She continued to be active in the day-to-day operations of the Antigo Daily Journal for almost 50 years. In an age when people relied on television and then social media for their news the Antigo Daily Journal still continued to be a vital part of the community.

Her achievements were acknowledged in 2009 when the Wisconsin Newspaper Association named Berner to the Wisconsin Newspaper Hall of Fame for her role as a community leader and for her success in advancing the newspaper industry across the state.

Her involvement in the community extended beyond the newspaper through her involvement on the board of directors at the hospital and its Community Health Foundation and her involvement on the Antigo Public Library Board.

The accomplishments of these four women, Bernice Stewart, Helen Benishek, Dr. Elizabeth Steffen, and Marie Berner, were in a wide variety of fields and recognized throughout the state and beyond the state's borders. They all worked in an era when not much was expected of women outside the home but they definitely exceeded expectations.



Marie Berner, longtime publisher of the Antigo Daily Journal.

experience Berner was able to take over and run a daily small town newspaper in an era when many local newspapers struggled, being bought by large corporations or



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