

Luella Keithahn – One of Martin County’s Unsung Heroes

There are many individuals that significantly impact our society and well-being in ways most of us will never know. They quietly go about their business without fanfare or notice, they’re neither in the news nor are they household names, yet they contribute greatly to the benefit of many within the culture in which they live. One of these “unsung heroes” of everyday life is a Martin County native, Luella Keithahn.

Luella Keithahn, twin sister to Alveda, was born on April 22, 1910. She attended rural school and then Fairmont High School. After high school, she attended Fairmont Normal Training School for teacher’s training. This certified her to teach in rural schools until she decided to attend Winona State Teachers’ College.

In 1935, she decided to attend the University of Minnesota in order to complete her BS degree, graduating Summa cum Laude. She went on to complete an MA degree during the summers. In her early years of teaching, she taught 6th grade in Rochester; she taught as a Normal School teacher in Rushford; and she served as an Associate Professor at Bemidji State College.

In 1948, she was asked if she would be interested in serving as an Elementary/Junior High Principal with the U. S. Army in Germany. She interviewed, obtained a leave of absence from Bemidji State College, and accepted.

She crossed the Atlantic in a Liberty Ship that had no portholes and slept in bunk beds in a large room in the lower part of the ship. She was destined for Bamberg, an old city east of Frankfurt with little industry, that had not been bombed much during the war. She taught in half of a German school which at first posed some problems, particularly among American junior high boys who would pick fights with the Germans. During her vacation time, she was able to travel to many places in Europe before school was let out in June.

Luella then returned to Bemidji and taught for another year. However, things would soon change as she received a call to teach in Latin America. She accepted, and consequently, from 1950 to 1972 she taught in Paraguay, Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, Venezuela, and Brazil as a technical assistant under the Institute for Inter-American Affairs Point Four Program and Alliance for Progress.

It was apparent that Luella thoroughly enjoyed her time in South America. She once wrote, “I gave training courses to the teachers and visited many schools, often traveling by DC-3 plane, jeeps, or horse. The people were most appreciative of the help they were getting.” She spoke and wrote Spanish and Portuguese, giving lectures in Portuguese to Brazilian teachers. During her sixteen years in Brazil, she served as a language arts advisor; curriculum development; teacher training and adult literacy; and as an advisor on the writing of teacher’s manuals and text books for elementary and secondary education.

One of Luella’s most memorable moments in Brazil was when, on behalf of President Kennedy, she presented the Brazilian government with a check for one million dollars for the Alliance for

Progress Program. The fact that Luella was given the honor of presenting the check was indeed a testimony to the respect she had acquired in her profession.

In addition, she states that she also had a wonderful social life while in South America. In the book, *The Keithahn Family in America, Volume II*, she states: “All during the twenty-two years I worked in South America, I had a wonderful social life. Since the program was under the State Department, I was invited to many receptions. I had a full-time maid and would put on buffet dinners for up to thirty people. My menu always included Brazilian ham and apple pie. I would help with the cooking up to party time and then turn everything over to the maid and a hired waiter who would serve the drinks and dinner.”

Upon her retirement in 1972, she received a special citation from the U. S. Government for her years in Brazil. The citation said, in part, “the list of your accomplishments would be lengthy but none of the items would surpass the lasting effect that you will leave resulting from your example of dedication, hard work, and humble desire to help the Brazilian children have an opportunity for a better life through education.” Luella Keithahn retired in Sacramento, California, and did volunteer work, was active in church work, traveled extensively, and chaired many boards. She passed away after a short illness in 1996. She was cremated and her ashes were buried in Lakeside Cemetery in Fairmont.

Luella Keithahn was a Martin County native. But what did she really accomplish? She wasn't a powerful influence on corporate boards, she didn't amass a fortune in wealth, she wasn't famous, she wasn't an influential political figure, and she didn't provide lasting legacies within Martin County. No she didn't do any of those things, she did far more. She extended the values she acquired growing up in Martin County to the world in making it a better place. The positive influence she had on the many lives she touched in her work in Germany and South America are truly immeasurable. Her life exemplifies the lives of a great many Martin County, and American, citizens. She went about her business quietly, unselfishly making a difference in a positive manner in everything she attempted while influencing and touching the lives of many who are better off for her efforts. There is no monetary value, level of fame, or political prestige that can come close to the impact on society those individuals, such as Luella Keithahn, have made through the efforts of their lifetime endeavors. As a result, many lives have been changed for the better.

The book, *The Keithahn Family In America, Volume II*, located in the Research Library of the Pioneer Museum served as the primary resource for this article. For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.



LUELLA MAGDALENA KEITHAHN
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