

## The Contributions of Women to Martin County's History

When reflecting upon Martin County history, specifically in reference to those individuals who were instrumental in shaping our local heritage, it becomes readily evident that much of the documentation characterizing those historical figures is indicative of what was once called a "man's world." However, it is equally important to be aware of the fact that women have also had a substantial impact on local history and the development of Martin County as we know it today. The following is a compilation of the accomplishments of some of the women representative of our local history and a reflection of what they accomplished relating to the evolution and development of Martin County.

Female pastors in the ministry may be considered somewhat of an anomaly historically. However, it's worthy of mentioning that the first female pastor to serve a church in Fairmont, and perhaps Martin County, was Pastor Ada Forster in 1907. She served the Christian Church and was paid \$500.00 for one year beginning September 7, 1907. She remained as Pastor until 1911. During Pastor Forster's ministry, temporary church services were held in Daniels' Hall for a number of years, Sunday School attendance exceeded 100, and church service attendance was over 200. One of the church members at that time stated in a historical article that she "proceeded to do some of the best and most patient work ever done for the congregation."

Another local leader, particularly in terms of public service, was Maud Brodt. She was instrumental in organizing the Fairmont Community Hospital, she worked for the county library in an effort to better serve rural residents, she served on the Martin County Fair Board which in turn made her the first woman to serve on a Fair Board in Minnesota, and she organized the Rural Sunshine Club for World War I work. In addition to numerous other activities, she was also influential in the founding of the Martin County Historical Society in 1929 and served as vice-president on its first board of directors.

Mabel Hall, born in 1886, was the daughter of a Civil War veteran who staked a claim on the south side of Elm Creek in 1864. She attended country school and worked for her room and board while attending Fairmont High School, graduating in 1905. She attended college through correspondence courses from the University of Minnesota, the University of Wisconsin, and eventually received her teaching certificate from Mankato State College, now known as Minnesota State University, Mankato. Mabel Hall was a teacher in a number of small schools in southern Minnesota. She also worked for Martin County for fifty-two years, fifteen as County Superintendent of Schools and thirty-seven as Clerk of Probate Court. She retired in 1972 at the age of 86.

Hilda Thurston Taylor is remembered for her 4-H and Extension Homemaker programs in Martin County for some three generations. She came to Martin County in 1935 to be the first 4-H agent with the Martin County Extension Service and found there was a great need for her services. She attended Stout Institute at Menomonie, Wisconsin, and was employed by U. S. Steel in Bessmer, Alabama, to teach in the company operated schools for nine years. She is remembered for her work with 4-H and as a dynamic teacher as well.

Lorraine A. Swearingen, a Minnesota territorial pioneer, was the first teacher in the first school in Fairmont in 1860. She was born in New York and moved with her family to Minnesota in 1857 when she was seventeen. In the fall of 1860, a three month school term was held in the home of B. C. Hinkle, which consisted of a log hut barely twelve feet square, in which Mrs. Swearingen was the teacher. Later, a log house was built in which she taught in Fairmont. In 1861, she taught school in a shack like structure near Huntley where a number of settlers had located. Mrs. Swearingen passed away in Fort Dodge, Iowa, in 1926.

Luella Keithahn, born in 1910, attended rural school and graduated from Fairmont High School. After high school, she attended Normal Training School in Fairmont, Winona State Teacher's College, and the University of Minnesota. She was a teacher in rural schools, and eventually became an Associate Professor at Bemidji State College. In 1948, she became an elementary/junior high principal for the U. S. Army in Germany. Following that venture, she taught in Latin America from 1950-1972. She enjoyed the many years she spent there under the State Department, and upon retirement in 1972, she received a special citation from the U. S. Government for her years of service in Brazil. The citation stated in part, "the list of your accomplishment 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," from the *Keithahn Family in America, Vol. II.*

Many will remember Annabel Webb and her KSUM radio show, "*A Date with A. Webb.*" Known as the "Queen of Segue" for her ability to ease from interviews to commercials, her interviews included both everyday citizens and high profile movie stars and political figures such as Joan Crawford, Bob Newhart, Hubert Humphrey, Liberace, among others as well. A Carlton College graduate, she was a teacher for a time before becoming active in the community and working in radio. Annabel Webb was unique in her unconventional delivery of entertaining interviews to the listeners of Martin County over the course of her thirty years in radio.

Pauline Welcome was born in 1896 in Rutland Township. She worked for a time at Fairmont Railway Motors, attended Normal Training, and then was a teacher for six years. She married Earl M. Welcome in 1928. Pauline Welcome moved to Fairmont in 1951 after Earl passed away. Mrs. Welcome was a very civic minded individual. She wrote *"The History of Welcome, Minnesota," "Manyaska Township," "Welcome Methodist Church,"* and the *"Welcome Village Cemetery."* As a result of her keen interest in Martin County history, she furnished a complete room in the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont, the Welcome Room, with displays of artifacts from her home in Welcome and her historic family heirlooms. Being very generous and a contributor to many organizations, she was named "Philanthropist of the Year" by the National Board of Health in 1973 and was named Martin County's Outstanding Senior Citizen in 1974.

Although Gail Garber, an actress, was born in Manhattan, she has a distinct connection to Martin County. She began her career in acting at the age of four. She later moved to California and worked with "Our Gang." During her lengthy career, she also worked with Jackie Gleason, Burt Lahr, Clark Gable, Robert Young, Debbie Reynolds, Lucille Ball, Dick Van Patten, Dan Daley and many other notables of that era in show business. She also appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show and NBC Theater. Garber, whose birth name was Jacqueline Briggs frequently visited her grandmother in Fairmont. She was very fond of this area and eventually chose to retire in Fairmont.

These are but a few of the many women from the past that were significant in having made a positive impact on the history of Martin County. Were it not for the efforts and contributions of women in the evolution and development of our county, many of whom which have gone unnoticed, we would not be where we are today. Their contributions to our local heritage were very important in the past, and continue to be reflected in today's local society. Currently, the efforts of those pioneering women of yesterday are being capably advanced by many other accomplished female leaders in the Martin County we know today.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

# Annabel Webb



# Gail Garber



# Lorraine Swearingen



# Mabel Hall



# Maud Brodt



# Pauline Welcome

