

Harriet Alexander

Harriet Wright was born in Newport, Kentucky on September 27, 1881 to John D. Wright and Cora Davis. The family moved to New Castle, Indiana when she was four. After graduating from high school, she received a scholarship to Oxford College in Ohio and had planned to start as a sophomore because of her advanced studies in Latin and Mathematics. But unexpected events suddenly changed her path dramatically.

Harriet's father died, and instead of college, she took over her father's work: City Treasurer, treasurer of the Fire Department and bookkeeping for the family grocery business, while she was still in her teens. In 1905, her family became concerned that she had taken on too much, and sent her to Salida to rest. After "puttering around" for a few months, Harriet applied for a job at Alexander's Pharmacy and Jewelry Store. Two years later, she and William Alexander married. Harriet later joked, "Mine is a typical success story. I married the boss."

Besides working part-time at the store, Harriet became very active in social and civic affairs, and other good causes. She was a charter member of the Salida Women's Club, and a member of the Tuesday Evening Club, serving as president from 1909-1910. During WWI, she helped to operate a canteen at the Monte Cristo Hotel, serving trainloads of soldiers who were passing through. A talented dancer, she performed a Russian Dance at the State Federation of Women's Clubs at the Denver Convention in 1919.

Around 1920, she became volunteer chairman of the Home Service of the Chaffee County Red Cross, during which she cooperated with the Salvation Army and County Welfare Agency to provide food, clothing and other necessities to needy people. Her service to veterans would grow into a lifelong mission. She relayed telephone messages between local families and military personnel serving overseas through several wars, and checked on military personnel if their families has not had heard from them in some time.

Harriet and William were active politically. They hosted three state governors, and held a reception for President Hoover. In 1912 and 1913, Harriet was appointed a delegate to the National Conference of Charities and Corrections by Governor John Shafroth. Later she would tour every penal institution in Colorado. In 1932 she was invited by Governor William Adams to attend the Colorado-White House Conference on Child Health and Protection.

Shortly after William's death in October 1941, Harriet took in her sister and aunt while continuing to run the pharmacy. Both were invalids and Harriet cared for them for 12 years. These tasks did not seem to slow down her community involvement. She became President of the Salida Women's Republican Club. She continued to be active in the Presbyterian Church, the Episcopal Ascension Guild and did research for the Chaffee County Historical Society. A life-long lover of literature, she was also a member of the AAUW book club.

In 1953, she ran for City Council, and elected - the first woman to serve on council. She served from 1953 to 1963. During her tenure, she became chairman of the committee to establish a

museum. With the help of Byrd Fuqua, they opened the museum in the front part of the Salida Hot Springs Building in 1954 and included items from her personal collection, Byrd's artifact collection and loans and donations from the public.

In the late 1950's, the Chamber started a push for airport construction and, Harriet felt it was important for the area to have an airport. The FAA did not approve of the old airport, a private field near Poncha Springs and large tracts of appropriate land were disappearing. Airport organizers managed to raise money to secure the site, and additional funds came from the county and federal government to pay for the project. While she was still a member, the City Council voted to name the field after Harriet to honor her efforts. Normally a modest woman, it's been reported that being hard of hearing, she did not hear the motion and didn't object. The field was dedicated June 15, 1964, and by the end of the month, hosted a fly-in during FIBArk.

In 1966, Harriet was named one of three Colorado Women of Achievement. In 1968, she donated a ground-to-air communications system to the airport. In 1971, she was recognized by the Red Cross for 50 years of service and in July, she was feted by the city for paying off the debt on the terminal at the airfield. Harriet died a few days later, on August 3, 1971 of a stroke, having left a large impact on the history of Salida. But, she had one last good cause outlined in her will. She bequeathed \$10,000 to build a permanent home for the museum, which was completed by the City with additional funds from the Colorado Centennial- Bicentennial Commission, Chaffee County and public subscriptions. That museum is where you are standing today.

References:

2009 Mountain Mail article by Arlene Shovald

1966 Nomination Form for Colorado Women of Achievement

Museum website, articles and other information from the collection

Articles from Donna Nevens' archives