

WHO WAS SARAH E. I. VAN TASSEL?

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Sarah E. I. Van Tassel's portrait, painted by local artist Eleanor Herre, hangs between the two checkout counters in the Bloomsburg Public Library. On the second floor of that library, the preschool area is sectioned off by a drawbridge and an authentic-looking gray stone wall which serves as the entrance to the "Castle Van Tassel."

Who was Miss Van Tassel? Most people do not know she was on the library board, and that during her life she gave generously of her time and money to keep it solvent. Upon her death at age sixty-seven in May 1937, a trust fund of around \$19,000 from her sizable estate of \$218,000 was established. The interest from that trust kept the Bloomsburg Public Library in business many times over the following years until the federal grants started coming through to aid small town libraries. Miss Van Tassel's trust is still in existence in 1999.

Another little known fact about Sarah Van Tassel is that when the Columbia County Historical Society was granted its charter on December 7, 1914, there were fifty-three original members, and her name is listed first. Also, she was elected its corresponding secretary.

Obviously, she was well thought of and consulted. A letter written by Mrs. W. M. Robbins of Lightstreet and dated March 24, 1914, sent Miss Van Tassel names of potential society members.

In May of 1999, Kathryn Graham, aged seventy-eight, who once resided at 433 Iron Street in Bloomsburg, visited the Columbia County Historical & Genealogical Society's room on the second floor of the Bloomsburg Public Library. Mrs. Graham recalled that Sarah Van Tassel lived nearby at Three East Fifth Street (Center and Fifth Streets, S. Law Groner's childhood home.) She owned an electric car, believed to be the first one in Bloomsburg, which was upholstered with green plush and which had a black exterior. The vehicle had no steering wheel but a "guide stick" like an airplane. As a child Kathryn was delighted when Miss Van Tassel took her and the neighborhood kids, including Mary Helen Mears, Lou Rutter and Tash Betterly, for a "quiet" ride.

A CCH&GS volunteer, Pat Moyer Parker, now of Fernville, tells of her maternal grandmother, Mrs. Samantha White, who lived at 356 Center Street and who was pregnant with her sixth child (Pat's mother). One day she met her neighbor, Miss Van Tassel, who said she would be most pleased if Mrs. White would name the child "Wilhelmine" which she did. Wilhelmine White Moyer blamed Sarah Van Tassel all her life for suggesting that name and for having to spell it!

Pat also remembers Miss Van Tassel always donned a hat and wore "old lady clothes," not those in fashion. Her childhood mind's eye pictures Van Tassel dressed in black most of the time.

Sarah Van Tassel was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, and her parents died when she was just a child. She spent her youth with her maternal grandmother, Mrs. Sarah Clark in Catawissa.

She came to Bloomsburg about 1892 and resided at the home of a relative, H. J. Clark until his death. It is interesting to note that he is the same Henry J. Clark who owned the "Exchange Hotel" in Bloomsburg when it burned in 1869. She then lived with Bruce Clark, another relative, until he died in 1909.

A prominent local woman, Miss Van Tassel gave to many charities. In addition to the Bloomsburg Public Library, she was also active in the Red Cross, the Episcopal Church, the Bloomsburg Hospital, the Fort McClure Chapter of Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Century Club.

For some time following the death of Messers. Clark, Miss Van Tassel was the owner of the business block at Main and Center Streets which for years housed Gelb and Mayer, advertised in 1923 as "the most up to date department store in Columbia County." Later on she disposed of her holdings.

For a single lady there is no doubt that Sarah Van Tassel was ahead of her time. Arrangements for her funeral services were made more than twenty years before her death. In November 1916, she wrote out the instructions for the rites, providing that the Episcopal service be conducted as quickly after her death as possible. She also instructed that the service be private and that burial be made in the New Rosemont Cemetery.

According to her *The Morning Press* obituary of May 20, 1937, "In providing that no marker be erected on her grave, Miss Sarah E. I. Van Tassel merely put into writing one of her outstanding characteristics – the unostentatious manner in which her benefactions were made."

Bloomsburg continues to gain from Miss Van Tassel's having lived here.

