

## The Life and Times of Lydia W. Drinker

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It has been a decade since the publication of my book on Bloomsburg native, art professor, and wild animal trainer George Keller. It was the culmination of years of research, which included an attempt to verify, especially from his days growing up in Bloomsburg, the stories he told in his 1960 autobiography *Here Keller, Train This*.

To me the most noted story of his boyhood was when he and his brother Charles organized and ran the Keller Brothers Wild West Circus and Animal Show, held annually from 1907 to 1912. And the most memorable part of that experience was when he borrowed his neighbor's pet cat Fluffy to be one of the "trained" cats in his animal act. George shaved it to resemble a lion, drew the wrath of the cat's owner, and promptly got the "blooming daylights" whaled out of him by his father.

One fact I wanted to verify was the true identity of the neighbor, described as a maiden lady (called Miss Frazier in Keller's book) who lived directly across the street from the Keller home. I determined the house was 239 West Fourth Street and according to the 1910 census the owner's name was Lydia W. Drinker. Whether or not she ever actually owned a cat named Fluffy is another matter.

Until researching this article that was just about all I knew of Miss Drinker, but feel now is the time to give Lydia her due. It turns out she was connected to or crossed paths with, in one way or another, many of the noted families, institutions, and events in Bloomsburg's history. This is also a look at how an unmarried woman from a well-to-do family lived in and made contributions to the community during this era.

As background, the Drinker family came to America from England in 1635 and had already been in this country for more than 200 years when Lydia's father Edward R. Drinker, then fifteen years old, arrived here from Luzerne County in 1846. He quickly found employment as an office boy in one of the burgeoning concerns of the day, the iron industry, with the Bloomsburg Iron Company.

In 1859 Edward married Martha Mendenhall, a member of a well-known Columbia County family. They had two sons, Edward W. and Richard C., before Lydia W. was born in 1867. At the age of ten she was enrolled in the premier school for children in the county, the model school at the Bloomsburg State Normal School (BSNS), where her father served on the Board of Trustees.

Lydia completed her schooling in 1885 at the age of 18. Although technically the model school was for younger children, some students, including those with fathers who were members of the trustees or the faculty, could use it to complete their high school education. A later example was 1967 Nobel Prize winner Haldan Keffer Hartline. The Normal School awarded high school equivalencies because of the large number of rural students who did not have a high school available in their communities. The students were then ready to continue on to receive their teacher training.

Lydia's father had a successful career with the iron company, being promoted to bookkeeper and finally superintendent. He also served on the Town Council and was very active with St. Paul's Episcopal Church. But the iron ore played out and by the 1880s the company's assets were sold off. Eventually the section of town called Irondale, off of Iron Street, became the property of the water company, whose treatment plant remains there to this day. The furnace off of Old Berwick Road was demolished and replaced in 1901 with the trolley company's powerhouse and car barn, now home to the Goldstar Trucking Company.

The iron company also owned land west of Bloomsburg on the north side of Fishing Creek. In November 1882 it was purchased by Edward R. and his brother Francis under the name of Ferncliff Farm. Whether it actually operated as a farm is not known, but by 1890 the property was subdivided into lots, which were gradually purchased and the area developed into what became known as Fernville. The main road along the creek became Drinker Street, thereby immortalizing the family name in the community.

In September 1892, the Bloomsburg *Daily* publicized the growth of Fernville when it stated, "Many of our readers are not aware of the great strides the village across the creek is making. It will shortly have a store of its own and later on other conveniences that go with a progressive town." By 1914 Fernville was estimated to have a population of 300 living in 55 homes.

The sale of lots in Fernville continued for many years, especially after the death of Edward R. in 1893. While the income his sons Edward and Richard derived from the land sales was supplementary to that earned in their careers (railroading and engineering, respectively), for Martha as his widow and Lydia as an unmarried and non-working daughter it was much more important. For example, in May 1901 she sold two parcels in Fernville/Hemlock Township for a total of \$315.



*The house at 220 West First Street that Lydia lived in until 1904, seen here in 1985.*

During the 1880s the family lived at the mansion in Irondale and in the early 1890s moved to a new home at 220 West First Street. After Edward's passing, Martha and Lydia continued to live on West First until 1904. On August 3 of that year, the \$4,000 sale of their home to Clara Small was recorded. She was the wife of attorney Christian Small, who would soon be elected and serve ten years as county district attorney. Three days later on August 7, Martha's purchase of 239 West Fourth Street was filed, bought for \$3,150 from local jeweler George Rosenstock, who built it in 1893.

This would be the home mother and daughter would live in until Martha's death on November 5, 1907, at the age of 73. The house became Lydia's, and it was there that her cat (possibly) became the object of George Keller's unwanted attention. She not only acquired the house immediately following her mother's death, but for a nominal sum her brother Edward sold her additional land in Center and Main townships. This was an important component of her financial security.

Lydia's story is one that was common for the era, of daughters from families of means who did not marry. While a few may have engaged in some sort of career, such as becoming a teacher (which was appropriate only for single women, since those who did marry were forced to give up their profession), it was not an issue with Lydia. There is no evidence that she ever worked and instead lived off resources derived from her family.

What she did do in her younger days is what is often seen in movie depictions of wealthy women in the 1800s. While men were out earning money, the ladies of the household would be at home sewing, drawing, painting, or playing music. In other words, demonstrating a cultured upbringing. An example of one outlet for the arts that Columbia County has had for more than 150 years is the Bloomsburg Fair. In 1886, Lydia had four prizewinning entries, for which she received \$3.25. In the embroidery category a handkerchief case, in lacework a drawn work tidy and a duster bag, and for painting she submitted the best watercolor. In terms of music, 30 years later she played the wedding march from Wagner's *Lohengrin* at her cousin Eva Mendenhall's wedding.

What Lydia would spend most of her time doing was being active in the community with a number of organizations, the most prominent being her decades-long association with the Century Club. In the autumn of 1893, Lydia attended a lecture on literature held at the Normal School. She headed home with six other young women, who soon began meeting together regularly to discuss topics of the day. In three years, after additional members joined, the group became known as the Century Club.



*Lydia Drinker, at left, and Mary Sharpless, at Charter Member Day of the Century Club, 1947  
(Morning Press Negative Collection)*

According to the 1915 Beers' history, the original purpose of the club "was for social and literary work and for the establishment of a library." The latter effort was successful and on June 18, 1903,

Lydia was one of those attending the opening of the Bloomsburg Public Library, located in the rear of the Clark Building on Center Street. Her specific duties that day involved serving on the "Committee to Explain the Workings of the Library to the Guests."

The greater ease of travel in the last half of the 1800s, brought about by the creation of an extensive nationwide railroad network, meant that it was far easier for families to stay in touch. While Lydia remained in Bloomsburg with her parents, Edward went off to Wilkes-Barre and Richard settled in Bethlehem. They came home for holidays, including Christmas and the Fourth of July, first by themselves and later with their families as they married and had children.

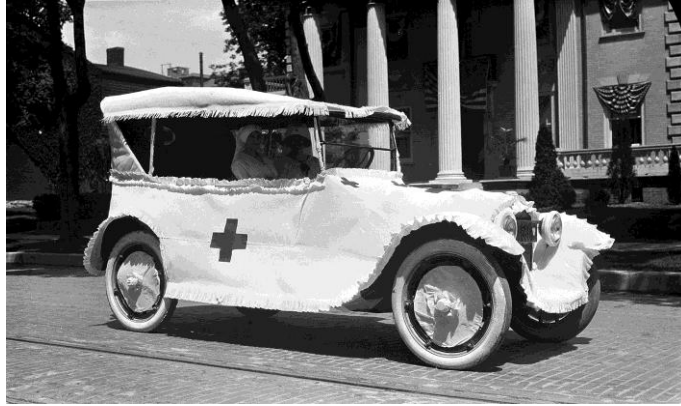
Following her father's death, Lydia and her mother traveled together. They visited her brothers, first to Wilkes-Barre and then Bethlehem. There were also longer and more distant excursions. In August 1894 there was a month-long trip to West Virginia, then six years later it was a summertime excursion to Bailey's Island off the coast of Maine.

Lydia continued to broaden her civic involvement in the years after 1900. Also a member of the Civic Club, for several years beginning in 1903 she served as treasurer. A third club she joined was the Fortnightly Club, a national organization for women that stressed intellectual discussions and community volunteerism. Then in January 1918, Lydia attended the annual meeting of the Columbia County Historical Society (four years after its founding) and became a member.

She would make it a point to become involved in historically notable events in the history of Bloomsburg and its institutions. In 1902 the Civic Club was charged with creating a museum, or Historical Loan Exhibition as it was called, for the centennial celebration of Bloomsburg. Located in the former Presbyterian church in the 200 block of Market Street, it was the hit of the festivities. Put on display were many historical items documenting the history of the community and Lydia was responsible for one of the most important categories, that of pictures, where she supervised ten assistants.

There were other noted events. In July 1916, she went up the hill overlooking the Normal School to the current site of Redman Stadium for the opening of the newly established Bloomsburg Country Club. That December, Lydia was involved in a new phase in the history of BSNS. Up until then a private institution, the school had been purchased by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. She had inherited some of the original stock issued in 1866 to finance the construction of what is now Carver Hall and was financially compensated for the shares.

It was in 1917 and 1918 that Lydia made her greatest contribution to the community through her work with the Red Cross during the First World War. She donated to the war fund; knit clothing; in August and September 1918 worked at its headquarters, located on Market Street in the former Tustin Mansion; and was placed on the honor roll of the Red Cross county women's committee, which raised money for the war effort. She kept involved even after the fighting had stopped, taking a ten-lesson first aid course in 1920.



*Two Red Cross nurses in a car opposite their headquarters on Market Street, c.1917 (Harry Keller negative)*

Lydia's life stayed fairly stable until she was nearly 50, then for almost 30 years there was constant change in terms of where she lived. While she had at times taken trips that sometimes extended for weeks, in March 1915 she was referred to in the *Morning Press* as a former resident, even though she still owned her home on West Fourth Street. The house would be sold in January 1920 for \$1 (any additional compensation is not known) to Norman Crawford and his wife Edith. They had just moved to Bloomsburg so that Norman could work as a clerk at the Magee Carpet Company.

This began an odyssey of more than 20 years where Lydia, as an unmarried woman with some means, moved continually from home to home, primarily but not always in Bloomsburg. It appears that immediately upon vacating her home at 239 West Fourth, she moved into the 49 West Main Street house (currently the site of the Salvation Army building) of the widowed Sarah A. Grotz. This was the person who headed the overall efforts to create a museum of artifacts for the Bloomsburg Centennial in 1902. Later on she was the first chair of the Historical Society's Relics and Curios Committee when the organization was founded in 1914.

Lydia would have known Sarah Grotz socially through the Society and other organizations. This is where her social contacts served her in good stead over the years, finding out who had a room to rent, usually a widow in a home they owned which needed to be maintained. Sometimes Lydia was the sole renter, but depending on the size of house there could be one or two others. There is no record, unfortunately, of why she took on this nomadic lifestyle and moved so often.

In 1921 the *Morning Press* wrote that Lydia was now in Philadelphia and for the next decade there was little mention of her being involved in Bloomsburg social events. By 1927 she had become a resident of Brooklyn, New York, although the following year did return to town briefly. She resided at 325 Market Street, originally the Ikeler mansion and currently the Dean Kriner Funeral Home, as the lodger of Miss Cora Bird. Bird rented the house after having moved to Bloomsburg from Shamokin in 1920.

Lydia soon left town again and in 1930 was living with her widowed first cousin Matilda Drinker Shannon at 430 Madison Avenue in Scranton, in a house now used by students attending the nearby University of Scranton. By 1933 Lydia had returned to Bloomsburg for good, although over the course of the next ten years lived in at least five different locations, all within a few blocks of each other.

First it was 49 East Fifth Street, the home of Nellie Ent Mears, widow of Howard Reber Mears, who had managed the Bloomsburg Brick Company. Nellie owned the home and following Howard's death in 1922 had a number of tenants over the years. By 1936 Lydia had moved across East Street to 300 Chestnut Avenue (where she would stay at least two years) which another widow, Mary Gearhart, rented and obtained additional income by taking on lodgers.

Then in 1939 Lydia moved barely a block to the west and 322 East Street, which was another home owned by a widow. Emma Wolfe's husband William had died in 1929 and she immediately began taking on boarders. Lydia was there only a short time and in 1940 moved a bit farther west to 27 East Third Street. This situation was different than all the rest as for the first time she was staying in a home owned by a married couple, H. Frank and Hattie Strauser.

Frank worked as a salesman and had rented space in the house ever since his son moved out. In 1940 Lydia was the only boarder and then the following year a truck driver and his wife joined the household. After decades of living with another home owner or renter, by 1943 Lydia was again on her own. She moved around the corner to an apartment at 305 Center Street and remained there until her death.

The return to Bloomsburg for the last nearly 20 years of her life allowed Lydia to fully become involved once more in the social fabric of her native community. These included new venues as well as the familiar Century Club, Fortnightly Club, Historical Society, Red Cross, and the Union Missionary Society. At a 1937 missionary meeting, she urged support for the local African Methodist Episcopal church, as well as spoke out against the evils of gambling.

As for her new associations, in 1932, just a year before the repeal of Prohibition, Lydia became active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Then, although still participating in activities at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, in 1933 Lydia began an association with Bloomsburg's Methodist church. This included mission work, Sunday school, World Day of Prayer services, and Bible classes.

Lydia still took trips, including one by motor car to Maine in 1934. She went with Miss Sarah van Tassel, an ardent supporter of the public library, and Hattie Knies, recently widowed from her husband John, who worked for many years as manager of the Leader Store. At this time all three women lived within a half-block of each other on East Fifth Street. In addition, on at least four occasions, the first in 1908 and again three times from 1936 to 1940, a favorite spot for Lydia to visit was Massachusetts, where her brother Richard had moved from Bethlehem. She especially went to Milton, the home of her niece, Eleanor Haussermann.

Even with her other commitments, Lydia's loyalty during the last two decades of her life was to the organization she had helped found, the Century Club. It continued to educate and about once a year she was responsible for the program. These were on topics as varied as book reviews, a discussion of a pamphlet on crime by the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover, modern Peru, Australia, Boston, and Pennsylvania. In 1943 she performed in a play and was present at a 50th anniversary celebration along with three other original members. From 1946 until less than a month before her death she attended nearly every one of the meetings held weekly each fall and spring.

In later years Lydia had health issues. She was admitted to Bloomsburg Hospital twice in 1918, then again in 1937, 1941, and 1945. It was there she died of heart disease on February 7, 1951, at the age of 83. In her will she left all her remaining worldly possessions to her niece Eleanor. So ended more than 70 years ago the life of the last surviving local member of a prominent family that had been a part of the Bloomsburg community for more than a century. Although long gone, every time someone visits Fernville or hears about a home in the flood zone being torn down, thanks to its main street they are reminded of Lydia Drinker and her family.



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*Lydia Drinker's grave marker in Old Rosemont Cemetery. The Drinker family plot is next to that of Lydia's uncle, Elias Mendenhall.*