

OUR HISTORY



Ruth Gilfry

1906-1974

By Judy Bablitch, Anne Klesmith, and Susan Rutta

Ruth Gilfry, the first county health nurse in Portage County, was a woman of conviction. Working to improve the public health of area residents through a combination of advocacy and action, she was known to drive rural roads looking for houses with diapers on the clotheslines, where she would stop and offer help. In this essay, colleagues Anne Klesmith, Susan Rutta and Judy Bablitch create a portrait of a tireless advocate for improved public health.

In 1913, the Wisconsin State Legislature passed the County Nurse Law, which required a public health nurse in each county. The state provided \$1,000 per county to fund this mandate. In the April-June 1927 issue of the Wisconsin State Board of Health Bulletin, the front cover featured a nurse and the statement "The Public Health Nurse is the central factor in applying practically what we know scientifically as to preventing of disease and the building up of community health." Then, in 1937, a physician's widow with one child to support, public health nurse Ruth Gilfry, came to Portage County.

Times were hard for all county residents in terms of money, services, and modern conveniences. For rural residents, electricity was at a premium and indoor plumbing was scarce. A woman "knew her place". It was in the home and with her husband and children. Men controlled the money, the power, and the decision-making processes. In this context, Ruth began her public health nursing career with the county. The city had its own public health nurse, but she was pregnant and was asked to terminate her position. The City Fathers felt confident that, since Ruth already worked in the county and, additionally, was a widow, she could take on the role of both county and city

nurse. In this capacity, Ruth truly became the first county-wide nurse. She was given a "luxurious" office, a desk next to the furnace in the old Courthouse!

Today, there are many county nurses, and they are held in high regard by our residents. This was not always the case. Professional women like Ruth were a tiny minority and were either accepted with great reservation into the community or were shunned. After a week of employment with no one welcoming her, Ruth began stopping at houses with diapers on the clothes lines, confident that she could help and, in doing this, gain some acceptance.

With the exception of rural school teachers and public health nurses, women did not own or drive vehicles. Ruth was required to own and operate a car with a valid driver's license. One winter's day, Ruth's car got stuck on a snow-covered county road. She walked to the nearest farmhouse and asked for help. As the farmer was hitching up his horses, Ruth heard him mutter under his breath that women should stay home where they belonged (expletives omitted).

Ruth was gentle in nature but fierce in spirit. She had a strong sense of right and wrong. While she knew she had to work within the established power base, Ruth found ways around situations that worked to her benefit and, therefore, the community's. For example, the Nursing Department was governed by the Board of Health, and Ruth met with them monthly to give program updates and report on budget issues. County board members scrutinized budgets carefully. They weren't yet completely in favor of a county nurse, fearing her examinations might turn up more illnesses than county taxpayers wanted to treat. Many times, Ruth exclaimed, the best way to work with board members was to give them treats (coffee and cookies) and to make meetings short. She didn't want to cloud their minds with details and thus bind her to a rigid path.

Ruth's great love of people encompassed fellow employees as well as the public. You knew where you stood with Ruth. If a person asked her to keep something confidential, and she could morally and legally do so, the secret was safe. Countless people confided in her and benefited from her consultation. She encouraged county employees to fight for better working conditions and espoused the need for unions.

Ruth helped all families but emphasized services to women and children. To begin to curb infant mortality, Ruth started public immunization clinics with her own funds. These clinics went against the wishes of some local physicians, who opposed what they viewed as "socialized" medicine. Sometimes, even residents were at odds with Ruth on maintaining their family's care. Citizens were usually very grateful when Ruth showed up at their door to give a child a missed immunization, but some resented her "interference" in their family's personal life. This did not deter her.

A cornerstone of public health is investigations and treatment of communicable diseases. Ruth worked with local doctors, visiting patients and their families, providing instructions for the patient's care, delivering and placing quarantine placards on the home, and followed up with family members. This work also took her into the county's

"red light" districts. Sexually transmitted disease control mandated that Ruth and a local doctor see the prostitutes on a routine basis. Ruth had great empathy for women forced into this way of life.

Another of Ruth's concerns was tuberculosis, which early Portage County settlers had brought with them from Europe. Ruth developed a close working relationship with the director and staff of River Pines Tuberculosis Sanatorium. Through Ruth's extensive effort, the county paid for x-rays and treatment. Ruth and her public health staff did routine TB testing in the schools. The state began providing portable x-ray buses to assist counties in providing routine chest x-rays. In the coldest winter months, Ruth enlisted local garage mechanics to keep the buses running. Needless to say, people flocked to take advantage of these services.

Portage County's medical community consisted of general practitioners. Specialists were a rarity, especially in the rural areas of Wisconsin, and, when used, were expensive. Therefore, their care was not available to most rural residents. Often, Ruth had to decide between no care or out-of-county physician care. To her, there was no choice. She found the needed care for the disabled at the University of Wisconsin - Madison and for those with mental health problems at St. Joseph's Hospital in Marshfield. Then she worked tirelessly to help the county develop local resources such as a Community Industries Corporation and local mental health and chemical dependency services.

Ruth was reasonable in her expectations as to what the county could or could not afford and how much she could ask for in the way of staff and services. During her tenure, Ruth offered University of Minnesota Public Health Nursing students an opportunity for an internship while obtaining up-to-date nursing skills for the county at no charge. Students learned advocacy and improved the well-being of the community as a whole. County board members learned to trust Ruth's judgment and allowed her to choose her own staff. In addition, the county board gave Ruth permission to use county funds to enhance the nurses' public health education. Finally, good public health services were recognized, accepted, and valued.

At the age of 65 (mandatory retirement at the time), Ruth was given a one-year extension to prepare her staff to continue without her. And even after that, Ruth continued to be available as a resource to staff, unpaid, of course!

Those who knew and worked with Ruth always called her a special person with empathy for everyone needing health and social services regardless of cultural differences, economic status, or religious affiliation. She was a teacher, a leader, a friend, and a pioneer in laying the groundwork for improved public health in Portage County. She was admired by those she served, by her staff, and by the county's governing officials. In her honor, in 1978, the Health and Human Services Department building was named the Ruth Gilfry Center.

Ruth Gilfry lived the definition of public health - "protecting and promoting the health of all residents."

"Ma" Gilfry
By Anne Schierl

What do I remember about his woman who, as a young adult with a small child, arrived in Portage County to be the first public health nurse?

I remember her devotion to the people of Portage County, but Judy, Anne, and Susan have written about that.

I remember how devoted she was to me and my friends. "Ma" Gilfry, as she was lovingly called, always had time to listen to a teen's problems. Our apartment was a favorite hangout-especially for the boys. During the school year, she transported us to every basketball and football game and, in summer, to the Indian Crossing Casino on dance nights. She touched so many. She rejoiced with us when we were happy and wiped tears when we were troubled.

Her salary surely did not make her a wealthy woman, yet I remember she encouraged my medical education with never a word about whether she could afford it.

I remember, after my marriage, her three grandsons were her pride and joy. I'm grateful I lived here so she could enjoy them, because I have a hunch the days hadn't always been easy when she was raising me and single moms were a minority. I never heard a word about that either.

Most importantly, my mother gave me something one can't put a price on- positive self-esteem. I am so very proud to have known this lady who surely made her world a better place.