



BICENTENNIAL BULLETIN No. 32 **—Sheffield Celebrates 200th Birthday**

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HARRIET ROOT (1885-1975)—a life of humanitarian service

*H*arriet Root was a remarkable woman. Born in Sheffield on August 27, 1885, her life and career accomplishments can serve as an inspiration to all. For 68 years she dedicated her life to unselfish service to her community and to her country. On her 80th birthday, Rich Bloom of the *Lorain Journal* interviewed Harriet. When asked how she decided to undertake a career of service, she reflected, “*I guess I became interested in community work while I was a senior at Wellesley College and taking a course on immigration. We would go down to the port of Boston to talk with the many immigrants coming to the United States.*” From these conversations, she found within her the desire to help others whenever and wherever it was needed.

Harriet traced her family history back to the early 17th century. “*In the 1630s my ancestors got in trouble in England and it was a case of either getting their heads chopped off or leaving the country. They chose the latter. The Roots, along with other families, left their home in Sheffield, England and began the tedious journey which ended with the founding of Sheffield Village near French Creek.*” Her branch of the Root family had one more step to go before the journey was finally completed. They moved closer to the lake. At the foot of Root Road, her grandfather, William Henry Root (1803-1889), built a grand Greek Revival-style home in 1850. Her father, Orville Root (1837-1919), was raised in this house as was Harriet, who lived there all of her life except when she was on missions of mercy throughout the world.

When Harriet was 9 years old, Tom Johnson constructed the first steel mill on the Black River on land annexed by Lorain from Sheffield Township. At the same time Lorain also annexed a portion of Sheffield along the Lake Erie shore, extending from about Kansas Avenue eastward to Root Road, leaving the Root Homestead just inside Sheffield. Then in 1920 Lorain acquired an additional 330 feet east of Root Road—thus, Harriet’s home was no longer in Sheffield and she became a resident of the City of Lorain.

Harriet’s charity work began in 1907 after she graduated from Wellesley College. Returning home, she started a sewing class for daughters of steel mill workers in South Lorain, teaching over 100 girls how to sew. Soon after she started a settlement house—an institution in Lorain’s inner-city providing educational, recreational, and other social services to underprivileged residents of the community. In 1910 she joined Associated Charities, Lorain’s first formal welfare organization that was founded that year. When the first rumblings of war in Europe were heard, Harriet lost no time in starting a class in surgical dressings. During this time Harriet was also busy managing the 120-acre family grain and stock farm on the lakeshore.

Portrait of Harriet Root in the 1920s



When World War I came, Harriet went to France with the Wellesley unit of the Red Cross. She served 18 months in Bordeaux caring for displaced refugees and wounded service men. She recalled, *“In France we worked with refugees in trying to keep the families together and finding a place for them to live. Later we were transferred to an American Army evacuation point just outside Bordeaux to aid injured soldiers in adjusting to their return to the United States.”*

After the war, she returned home and was named secretary of the Lorain Chapter of the American Red Cross. In 1924 she played an outstanding role in the rehabilitation of Lorain following the devastating tornado of June 28. This work gained her a national reputation, resulting in her appointment on the National Disaster Staff of the Red Cross. She served in several major disasters, including Mississippi River floods, Florida hurricanes, the California dam tragedy, Midwest tornados, and the Kentucky drought.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Harriet helped distribute food to the needy and organized women of the community in canning and preserving thousands of jars of fruits and vegetables for this cause. As times improved, Harriet spearheaded a beautification program in Lorain by chairing the Lilac Tree Committee and she was instrumental in the original Rose Garden at Lakeview Park. Modesty was one of Harriet’s outstanding characteristics. When given *The Lorain Journal* “Best Citizen Award” in 1931 for her work during the Depression, she didn’t think she deserved it.

Washington, D.C. recognized Harriet’s abilities. Representatives of President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked her to direct the newly founded U.S. Government Information Service in 1934. The Office started as a few upstairs rooms, but under Harriet’s leadership it grew so rapidly that a whole building was constructed to house the agency. As World War II raged in the Pacific, she traveled to Australia and New Zealand to set up U.S. Information Libraries to help their citizens better understand America. One of the interesting aspects of the job was advising foreign war brides what life is like in the United States and preparing them for the transition. She remained in Australia for three years, where she also helped Jewish refugee families find new homes when the war ended.

Harriet Root, director of the U.S. Library of Information in Australia during World War II, advises Australian women, recently married to U.S. servicemen, about their new homes in America



Lorain High School graduation photograph of Harriet Maria Root, June, 1903



Returning home in 1946, Harriet jumped back into civic activities without taking a breather. She was an active member of the Community Chest, United Appeal, YWCA, and Salvation Army, to which she was named life board member in 1963. In 1967 Lorain’s Quota Club as its “Woman of the Year” honored her. Although her seemingly perpetual reservoir of energy was somewhat curtailed when she entered her eighties, Harriet continued to spend much of her time reading, entertaining guests, and keeping abreast of current issues. Harriet Root died on February 28, 1975 in St. Joseph Hospital at age 89. She is buried in the Root Family Plot in Garfield Cemetery in Sheffield Village.