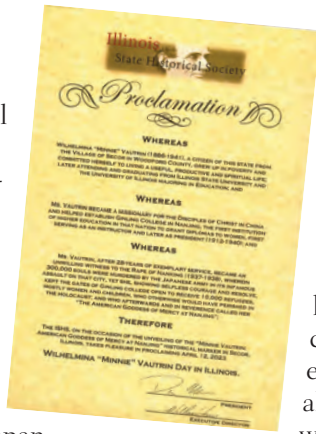


Minnie Vautrin Day

By Robert Sampson and William Furry

On Wednesday, April 12, in the tiny village of Secor (population 325, according to Village president Bob Wilkey) about three dozen people gathered to honor “the American Goddess of Mercy,” as she was known in China during that nation’s second war with Japan, dedicating the “Minnie Vautrin: Goddess of Mercy at the Rape of Nanjing” historical marker. In this hamlet—perhaps as tiny as the village of Bethlehem—Minnie Vautrin was born, the daughter of a French immigrant and blacksmith. Minnie graduated in a high school class of six,



went on to Illinois State University, the University of Illinois, Columbia University, and other institutions to become a teacher and leader. She needed the leadership part more than ever in Nanjing, China (also known as Nanking), in the closing months of 1937 and early 1938 as all around her one of the worst atrocities of the era occurred—the Rape of Nanjing.

In a few short months, Japanese troops slaughtered at least 300,000 children, women, and men—literally on Minnie’s doorstep. It is estimated at least 80,000 Chinese women were raped in day after day of unbridled brutality.



The ISHS catered a luncheon and served this commemorative cake at the dedication.

At great personal risk, both physically and as later became clear, mentally, Minnie Vautrin fought back. As the interim president of Ginling College, a Disciples of Christ mission in Nanjing, she gave refuge to some 10,000 Chinese women and young girls at the height of the terror, sometimes putting her own body between the victims and the Japanese troops at the gates.

Day after day, she and other foreigners in Nanjing worked and plotted and improvised and risked their lives to save those they could. In Minnie Vautrin’s case the price was not death but mental despair. She kept diaries and notes and, when returning to the United States in 1940, hoped to warn the world. But she could not. The Japanese government tried desperately to suppress Vautrin’s diaries, as well as others who wrote unblinkingly about the Rape of Nanjing, but her journals and others’ survived the war, and were corroborated by survivors’ testimonies.

Alas, Vautrin’s mind was obsessed not with those she saved, but those she was unable to protect. As she slipped into deep depression, she voiced frustration that she had not been able to save more lives. Finally, physically worn down, unable to sleep, she turned on the gas in a friend’s apartment in May 1941 and ended her life.

The gathering in Secor last month was long overdue recognition of this remarkable woman in the form of an Illinois State Historical Marker unveiling. Consul General Zhao Jian of the Peoples’ Republic of China in Chicago and three members of his staff drove across the prairie to praise Vautrin and recall the deep ties of friendship between the Chinese and American



Consul General Zhao Jian of the Peoples’ Republic of China Chicago spoke of Minnie Vautrin’s unselfish courage during the Rape of Nanjing.

Photos by William Furry



ISHS director Bob Sampson and former president Dan Monroe came to Secor for the unveiling.

peoples. William Furry, the executive director of the Illinois State Historical Society, who worked long and hard for this day, told the honoree's remarkable story. The archivist of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society drove from Vancouver B.C. to be on hand for the unveiling and village residents, including one whose mother knew Minnie Vautrin, sat and listened under a warming sun.

Secor Community Park, where the marker stands, existed in Vautrin's time.



Filmmaker Carol Liu speaks with a reporter from the Bloomington Pantagraph.



The crowd of nearly three dozen listened attentively to Consul General Zhao's remarks.



Secor Village President Robert Wilkey and St. John's Lutheran Church administrator Judy Hinthorne helped with preparations and cleanup!

Minnie Vautrin historical marker donors and contributors

Disciples of Christ Historical Society
 Chinese Consulate of the Peoples' Republic of China in Chicago
 The William G. Pomeroy Foundation
 Kathryn Haynes Egan
 Village of Secor

Contributors

Kayleigh Reed	Jane Marawar	Weinan Xiong
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Robert Wilkey	Feng Lu	Tom Chudy
Judy Hinthorne	Sharon Test	William Furry & Paula
Erika Holst	John Chen	Romanoux
Kimberly Jones		

Caterer

Hawaiian Barbecue, Springfield



Minnie Vautrin's "neighbors" from Secor, Gridley, and El Paso were delighted with the sunshine and the commemoration of "Minnie Vautrin Day in Illinois."

As a child she likely played on this grassy space beneath the warm, spring sun. The high school, long abandoned for educational uses, is divided now into apartments, the house Vautrin grew up in has disappeared.

The prairie wind that once caressed her cheeks and tousled her hair still blows through this small place, one like so many others working to find a new role in the world. Those who stop by to read the memorial plaque in Secor should know the prairie wind swept through here more

than a century ago, carrying a young girl to greatness.

The ISHS took the occasion of the marker dedication to declare April 12 "Minnie Vautrin Day in Illinois," sharing a state proclamation from Illinois Senator Doris Turner (D-48th District) likewise celebrating the day. Another sponsor, the William G. Pomeroy Foundation of Syracuse, New York, sent a letter of congratulations. Following the ceremony, the Society initiated a petition seeking an honorary posthumous doctorate for Minnie



Eureka Christian Church historian Cindy O'Neill and Disciples of Christ Historical Society archivist Shelley Jacobs met for the first time at the marker unveiling.

Vautrin from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, recognizing her lifetime of teaching in Nanjing and her selfless commitment to human rights during the Rape of Nanjing.

The Society's historical marker program, established in 1934, seeks to tell Illinois narratives that advance the Prairie State's story throughout the nation and the world. To find out more about the program, visit the ISHS website at www.historyillinois.org.

Markers that will be dedicating in coming months include:

- East St. Louis Race Massacre of 1917, East St. Louis
- Booker T. Washington Children's Home, Bloomington
- Simon Malone Home, First African American Residence in Bloomington
- Atkinson Cemetery, Mt. Vernon
- MacMurray College, Jacksonville
- Filmmaker Oscar Micheaux and Entrepreneur Annie Turnbo Malone, Metropolis
- William Costley, USCT 29th Regiment, Pekin
- Nance Legins Costley, Pekin

