Looking Back: Ellen Gates Starr, an overlooked public servant

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By Harriett Gustason For The Journal-Standard

Although Jane Addams and her friend, Ellen Gates Starr, could be considered a case of "opposites attracting," together they managed to found one of the first settlements in the country, Hull-House, in Chicago. But one achieved world fame, and the other, not so much.

Both women were raised in small Illinois towns, Jane of course in Cedarville, and Starr, in Durand. It is amazing that these two together were able to pool their resources and plunge into that huge project in a place like Chicago in the year 1889. It was Addams' money, but it took the energy and ingenuity of both. Jane's father, John Addams, owned a profitable mill in the village of Cedarville and became a state legislator and a person of distinction in Stephenson County.

For several weeks we have been discovering what made Jane Addams tick. This week we'll explore who Starr really was and what her social contributions were. Our source is a book titled, "Ellen Gates Starr, Her Later Years," by Suellen Hoy, published in 2010 by the Chicago History Museum. The author points out that "Addams's international reputation and Starr's unrecognized legacy suggest the differences between these women, even during the years when they were closely bound by mutual interests and affection."

A Starr is born

Both women grew up in rural communities in northern Illinois and both of their families valued education.
Starr was the third of four children born to Caleb Allen Starr and Susan Gates Childs Starr, who had come to northern Illinois in 1855 from Massachusetts. Ellen Starr attended a one-room country school for her elementary grades and then graduated from high school in nearby Durand. Addams and Starr met and became friends when both were students at Rockford Female Seminary. "Due to financial pressures, Starr left school after a year and took a teaching job in Mount Morris." Shortly thereafter, states the text, "Starr's parents sold the family farm and moved to Durand, where her father bought a pharmacy and went into business as a druggist."

Like Addams, Starr "was very much her father’s daughter and as a child enjoyed their relationship. Later in life she recognized the profound influence of his public spirit, socialist principles, and reformer beliefs."

In 1879, Starr left the farm towns of northern Illinois to begin a teaching career in Chicago. She soon secured a full-time position at the prestigious Miss Kirkland's School for Girls on the city's north side, the biography states. She taught a variety of subjects "including her own specialties of art history, art appreciation and drawing."

During this time Starr and Addams maintained their friendship through letters and visits. Addams, meanwhile finished college in Rockford and in 1885 took a trip to Europe, financed by her parents.

"Two years later," we're told, "Addams invited Starr on a second European trip, offering to help pay her expenses. The seven-month tour proved pivotal in the lives of both women." They returned with the idea they would open a settlement for the city's poor. The author acknowledges that Addams was the primary force behind the plan, but claims "that without Starr’s persistent prodding and lively encouragement, it is doubtful that Addams would have done what was necessary to realize their dream. Starr's many contacts, largely the prominent parents of the Kirkland students, proved useful. Thus, while she may have deferred to Addams even as they launched their project, Starr was not a silent partner."

Interesting is the following paragraph: "An avid participant in the burgeoning Arts and Crafts movement, Starr's mind was influenced by the writings of the English critics and craftsmen... The movement was not entirely aesthetic and romantic, attempting to restore a simple world of
craftsmanship and celebrating the artistic and religious creations of the Middle Ages. It was also a protest against materialism, against the apparent heartlessness and indifference to any values but efficiency and moneymaking, which characterized the heroes of the new industrial world."

"Yet Starr was not a romantic rebel," the author states, "a bohemian artiste concerned only with the health of her soul, nor was she one to shrink from hard work or controversy." The author had testimony from some of the professional workers at Hull-House that Starr expressed her opinions freely often appearing brusque and intimidating or difficult, but they considered her "hilariously witty with a sense of humor unequaled by anyone" and "exceptionally generous."

**Starr departs Hull-House**

However, after years of teaching, Starr decided to leave that profession and take up a craft in which "instead of talking about art . it would be a great deal better to make something myself."

A lover of books, Starr went to London where she trained and worked in bookbinding. With financial help from a lifelong friend, Starr lived, learned and worked at a bindery in London. Eventually, Starr returned to Hull-House where she opened a bindery and taught the craft to small select classes. She earned a good share of her living that way until closing the bindery in the 1920s.

But bookbinding was not all that Starr was doing. She became a formidable activist in labor issues. The practices of hiring children in factories was a thorn in her side. She was known to deliver speeches for those causes and march in picket lines. She was even arrested in 1914 for her part in a restaurant workers' strike.

Starr joined the Socialist party in 1916. Throughout those years, along with her association with Hull-House, Starr became an activist in the labor issues of the nation. Shocked by the child labor conditions, as well as various other labor issues, she gave speeches, joined picket lines and furnished food and clothing for the picketers. So her life, like her friend Addams's, was filled with serving whom she thought mistreated.

Starr was able to pay occasional visits to Hull-House until 1928 when an operation to remove a spinal abscess left her paralyzed from the waist down. She settled in at Holy Cross convent in Suffern, New York, where she remained until her death in 1940. She was buried at the convent.
Historians differ as to whether Starr converted to Catholicism, but the author of the Starr biography states she did not. There is no question, however, as to her dedication toward serving the underprivileged.

Yes, Starr, like her friend Addams, was giving all she had for the causes in which she believed, and history should certainly recognize that.

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