

## Amelia Jenks Bloomer

She stood at the back parlor entrance, a gracious old lady of seventy-two. Placid in black satin with its grey damascene front and frill of lace at the throat, Amelia Bloomer greeted Council Bluffs neighbors come to her Golden Wedding reception. Close by, her husband accepted congratulations. For thirty-five years the couple had occupied the same residence. Friends, calling on this afternoon of April 15, 1890, had almost forgotten their hostess as a militant female reformer who gave her name to a costume she did not originate. Rather, they thought of her as they had known her — “a dignified, serene-faced little woman,” walking on the grassy terrace near her home, plying her needle in the sunny nook of her bay window, and taking prizes for the best currant jam at the county fair.

The Bloomers had come to Iowa in 1855 in order that Dexter Chamberlain Bloomer might further himself as a frontier lawyer and editor. They were a part of that great sweep of people who, caught by the promise of Iowa's fertile prairie land, brought security and settlement to the Hawkeye State. As a river packet carried them from St. Louis to St. Joseph they must have been

astonished at the magnitude of the western country. Perhaps, as the yellow Missouri unfolded new vistas, their thoughts turned back to their marriage in Seneca Falls on April 15, 1840, when Bloomer was the struggling editor of a Whig newspaper and Amelia Jenks was publishing the *Lily*, a ladies' journal devoted to temperance and literature. No doubt they reviewed wistfully their home in Mount Vernon, Ohio, where they moved in 1853 to edit the *Western Home Visitor*.

It may be that Mrs. Bloomer recalled the satirical reception given by coarse male commentators to the novel costume she sponsored in 1851, and was still wearing. A contributor to *Yankee No-*

*tions*, however, recommended the new fashion of knee-length skirt over Turkish pantaloons.



For who would hear the scoffs  
and jeers of boys,  
The old maid's scandal, and the  
young men's snigger.

Or she might have found encouragement and considerable comfort in a poetic endorsement which appeared in another publication — *The Carpetbag*:

The maids were very beautiful,  
With ebon locks and tresses,  
But what so much enhanced their charms,  
Were those short Bloomer dresses.

Even the dour *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* said kindly, "If the question is between the present skirts and Bloomerism, then we are Bloomerites," and *Bentley's Miscellany* was not too severe.

Down the swaying gangplank at St. Joseph, the travelers moved with their carpet-bags and valises. To their dismay they found that the regular stage for Council Bluffs had left only a short time previously. For two days they lodged at a "very ordinary" hotel. "The waiting was long and tedious," wrote Bloomer years later. "We could not even walk about and view the city because of a high wind which prevailed and blew the dust in clouds into our faces." Finally, they pushed themselves into a lurching stage. Among their fellow passengers was Kit Carson, resplendent in fringed buckskins. Toward dusk of the second day, April 15, 1855, the coach pulled to a halt in front of the Pacific Hotel in Council Bluffs. There was the legendary back-of-beyond come to reality.

What a contrast between that frontier community of two or three thousand inhabitants and the orderly villages of Ohio. In Iowa, observed Bloomer, the buildings were mostly of logs. Sidewalks were lacking and some streets were but beaten paths through fields of sunflowers. The

city lay about three miles from the river, added Mrs. Bloomer. She noticed that from the Missouri the land sloped upward until it reached a chain of high hills. "Among these bluffs," she continued, "are numerous beautiful valleys, some of them sufficiently extensive for large farms, and through which clear and pellucid streams of water flow gurgling down to join the mighty Missouri."

Within a few days Amelia Bloomer found a new house located on Bancroft Street, not far from Willow Avenue. From Bancroft to the river not a single structure obscured her view. As she unpacked her cherished dishes, hung curtains, and set out shrubs and fruit grafts brought from the East, she heard the noises of progress. Several brick and frame houses were going up. A three-story hotel was being rushed to completion in order to catch immigrant trade. Private residences and the United States land office were under construction. She saw gardens being fenced, "trees planted, streets opened and graded, and every preparation made for accommodating the population." Indians camped near her home; daily stages brought news and frontiersmen from south and east; settlers and speculators crowded the land office. Already land within a few miles of Council Bluffs was selling for as much as ten dollars an acre. Shouts from saloons rang in her ears, and she saw games of chance openly played along the streets.

The Bloomers entered into this bustling life with zest. For a few years the activities of Mr. Bloomer eclipsed those of his wife, though she almost persuaded the Nebraska legislature to adopt woman suffrage in January, 1856. Within a short time citizens knew him as a competent attorney in partnership with W. H. Kinsman.

A dramatic interlude in the placid life of Council Bluffs was occasioned by the firing upon Fort Sumter. When chattering telegraph keys brought the news of secession, citizens responded with zeal. No sooner had Company B of the Fourth Iowa Volunteer Infantry been recruited than Amelia Bloomer organized the Soldiers' Aid Society. Her committee, meeting in the Bloomer residence, as it so frequently did, stitched a large silk flag. And on the pleasant afternoon of August 9, 1861, the troop was drawn up in parade formation to receive the colors from Mrs. Bloomer.

"You are now going forth to sustain and defend the Constitution," she told Captain Craig's command, "against an unjust and monstrous rebellion, fermented and carried on by wicked and ambitious men who have for their object the overthrow of the best government the world has ever seen. To this noble cause we dedicate this flag."

The volunteers, commented the local press, listened with deep emotion, and "many a brawny breast heaved, and tears trickled down many a manly face." Then Lieutenant W. H. Kinsman,

responding in behalf of his captain, accepted the flag in words which seemed moderate as compared with those of Mrs. Bloomer. The company, he began quietly, was not imbued with the spirit of revenge, nor was it motivated by vindictive malice against the South. Rather, it was taking the field to "preserve inviolate the institution for which our fathers fought." He had no doubt that "the members of our company are as brave a band as the sun ever shone upon, and under their rough shirts beat hearts as true and loyal as ever throbbed beneath the tattered garments of our fathers at Valley Forge." A crash of drums and the saucy "Yankee Doodle" echoed over the parade grounds as the command passed in review. Within a few minutes Mrs. Bloomer and her ladies heard cheers in their behalf. Truly, it was an exciting occasion!

By September, 1861, the Soldiers' Aid Society, working diligently, had put up 122 havelocks, 174 towels, and twelve needle books fitted with thread, needles, buttons, pins, and tape. A month later, twenty bed sacks, fifty pillow sacks, fourteen cotton and feather pillows, and many pillow cases were packed carefully in the Bloomer parlor and shipped to Company B at Rollo, Missouri.

D. C. Bloomer, not to be outdone by the war activities of his energetic wife, opened his office as a recruiting station, and served as chairman of the Committee in Charge of Donations to Soldiers' Families. Over a thousand dollars in cash was

collected, as well as stove wood and groceries. Almost a hundred families were cared for during the fall and winter. Bloomer's committee, as well as the Soldiers' Aid Society, supported the activities of both the Christian Commission and the United States Sanitary Commission. So interested, indeed, was Mrs. Bloomer that she attended the great Northwest Sanitary Fair held in Chicago in June, 1865. She exclaimed over the booths and exhibits, and declared boastfully that Iowa made "a very creditable appearance in fancy articles and curiosities."

While her husband was thus engaged in patriotic affairs, Amelia, not forgetting her early reform interests, took the lecture platform. Although she had ceased wearing the Bloomer costume before 1860, she still retained her liberal viewpoint. More and more, as the decade came to a close, she spoke upon women's rights. A Good Templar meeting in the spring of 1866 heard her give an interesting and excellent interpretation of suffrage for women. The following February she lectured in Burhop's Hall. "We expected to hear her rave and rant," commented the critical *Weekly Bugle*, "but heard none of this. She was argumentative and even eloquent in some of her remarks, and had just enough sarcasm to them to spice them well." High praise, indeed, from an editor not too friendly to the Bloomers! In March, Mrs. Bloomer, wishing to raise funds

for the Library Association, spoke in Glenwood. Her lecture was described as well-written and as delivered in a manner which few men could surpass. Chicago audiences heard her in 1869.

An anonymous author, writing in the *Weekly Bugle* for February 18, 1869, took her to task for these activities. He characterized her as a failure because she "had failed to convince the women of America that voluminous pantaloons and tight-waisted coats were becoming and convenient." Her friend, Anna Dickinson, was described as a "squatty, pug-nosed, cross-grained maiden lady." Then this colorful buckaroo congratulated Mrs. Bloomer upon taking up cudgels again in support of female suffrage, warning her, however, not to "Get into bad company."

Amelia Bloomer, wise woman that she was, ignored the criticism and began urging the appointment of a woman as postmaster of Council Bluffs, if the proper man could not be found. In May, 1869, she attended the stormy convention of the Equal Rights Association in New York as a vice-president for Iowa. There she visited old friends, among them Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who were busy forming the National Woman Suffrage Association. She helped organize the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association in 1870, and served as the second president. In 1890 she was made an honorary vice-president of the American Woman Suffrage Association.



Although her husband was equally preoccupied with business and public affairs, this did not prevent the Bloomers from enjoying a tranquil domestic life. Their home was the cynosure of social eyes, just as the new Bloomer Block, on the corner of Bancroft and Broadway, was the center of business and professional activity. Their comfortable home was shaded by trees planted when first they reached Council Bluffs. Fruit blossoms made the yard white and pink in spring. Bloomer tended his apple orchard so assiduously that his fruit took prizes at the county fair, not only for size but also for flavor. Great beds of asters made the lawn a mass of color. Toward the rear of the house currant bushes hung heavy with fruit.

In the airy kitchen, Amelia Bloomer, like any housewife, pulled loaves of the "best" graham bread and jelly cake from her spacious oven. On the broad back of the wood stove she put up sweet pickles, currants, and apple jelly. Here she cooked her clear crab-apple jelly and stirred her plum preserves. On closet shelves she racked cake after cake of homemade hard soap and her special fancy soaps. From cellar rafters hung hams and bacon. Busy with household chores and public duties throughout the week, she found time on Sunday to attend St. Paul's Episcopal Church.

For years, the Bloomer residence attracted distinguished guests. Susan B. Anthony came to chat reminiscently of a speaking tour through New

York in 1853. Both women recalled the cordial reception given them by Horace Greeley. Frederick Douglass, famed almost as much for his leonine head and frizzly hair as for his abolitionist oratory, spent a few days. The indomitable Elizabeth Cady Stanton, reformer and leader in the women's rights movement, was pleased with Council Bluffs. A noted group of singers, the Hutchinson family, called on Amelia early in 1867 to meet the "promoter" of the Bloomer costume.

Many visitors were received in the alcove where, surrounded by books and magazines, Amelia spent much of her time. There she frequently turned the yellowing pages of the *Lily*. If her thoughts roamed the past, they perhaps lingered lovingly upon Cortland County, New York, where on May 27, 1818, she was born. Certainly, this aging woman recalled her experiences as governess in Waterloo, New York, and, without doubt, she remembered her courtship with the Quaker lad, Dexter. She dreamed again of the frontier Council Bluffs and she reread her early letters and notes. In 1890, the very year which marked the closing of the frontier, her health began to fail. On December 30, 1894, she died. The *Iowa State Register* spoke of her not only as a woman of national reputation, but also as a gentle woman. Her devoted husband, who published her biography in 1895, died in 1900.

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