

Myrtle Bixler Starr

Born: March 31, 1914

Death: October 19, 1994

Myrtle Bixler Starr was born in Ashtabula, OH. Her mother was a school teacher, and her father was a civil engineer who specialized in bridge designs. He passed away when Myrtle was a senior in high school.

Myrtle attended Ashtabula elementary and secondary schools and then went on to Mt. Union College, in Alliance, OH, where in 1934 she earned a high school teaching certificate. Because of the Great Depression and her family's tight finances at the time, Myrtle completed college in 2 ½ years, instead of the usual 4 years. She was the first person in the history of Mt. Union College to accomplish such a feat. During spring break of her senior year, Myrtle went to the Ashtabula High School superintendent and asked for a job. His response was, "Well, of course, that's understood."

Other than motivating her to accelerate her college education, according to Myrtle, the Great Depression did not affect her as she was "just plain lucky." During her childhood and on throughout her life, she was active in church and the YWCA. From 12 years old, the "main focus of [her] life" was the YWCA. Her interest in volunteerism grew out of her memberships in club groups and other organizations. "It was fun and . . . a way to contribute and enjoy even more what the groups had to offer," said Myrtle.

About the time Myrtle started teaching at the Ashtabula High School, she was married to "another gentleman." They were married for 7 years and lived in Cleveland, OH. While they were living there, Myrtle volunteered at the local YWCA. Then, she became the Y Teen program director in the eastside branch. After a "couple of years," she was named the acting executive director of the city's largest branch for a year. Then, after accepting a position as the director of a YWCA teen program, Myrtle moved to Utica, NY. She held that position for about 4 years and then moved to Atlanta, GA, again as director of a YWCA teen program.

While living in Atlanta, Myrtle met her future second husband, John Starr, through a cousin who Myrtle went to visit in New Orleans, LA. The cousin had been writing Starr, who was in the Army at the time, and thought Myrtle might like him better than she did. So Myrtle started writing Starr. Then, they met in person in Chicago, IL. After the Chicago meeting, their correspondence continued. Then, Starr drove down to Atlanta for another face-to-face meeting.

Initially, at this meeting Myrtle was supposed to meet her future mother-in-law, Mrs. Raymond Starr. At the time, Mrs. Starr was running for the Michigan State Board of Agriculture. She had wanted "to take a break" in Florida before the start of a hectic election schedule. But because of a last-minute speaking engagement, Mrs. Starr could not go. Her son went anyway, which made Myrtle very happy.

Their final visit took place in Grand Rapids, MI, where the Starr family lived. Myrtle recalled that she came to the city on an “inspection tour” to be “checked out” by Starr’s family members and friends. She passed the inspection, and in 1951 the couple was married in Fountain Street Church. They were the first couple to be married in its new chapel. In 1952, their son, Ray, was born, and in 1955, their daughter, Barbara, arrived.

After moving to Grand Rapids, Myrtle again became involved in the YWCA. At the time of this interview, she observed a few organizational changes over the years. One, it had consolidated, and its focus was then on domestic abuse, counseling, and giving shelter and safety to victims. Another observation was the health education department had “flourished.”

Myrtle was the second person to be honored by the YWCA with its Helen J. Claytor Merit of Distinction Award. In 1983 Helen Claytor had been the first recipient. “Oh, that was really something else. I was utterly flabbergasted! What a thrill and my kids and their families were there to share it. It couldn’t have been more wonderful, and I have the certificate that I got and the beautiful silver platter that recognized that as a very special, special day,” said Myrtle.

Myrtle also volunteered at Fountain Street Church, where she and her family were long-time members. In particular, she taught in its “Character School” and was “superintendent” of the Tower Club, part of the Character School for seventh and eighth graders. “The years of Character School . . . have been probably the most wonderful and most rewarding of lots of the things that I have done,” said Myrtle. In addition, called the “fearless leader,” she was the “trip-of-the-month” planner. The first trip that she coordinated was a “color tour up and around Lake Michigan.” She was also a proofreader for the weekly sermons.

Other civic and cultural organizations in which Myrtle was a volunteer included the St. Cecilia Music Society, the East Grand Rapids Library Commission, the Women’s City Club, and the League of Women Voters. At the time of this interview, she was living at Porter Hills Presbyterian Retirement Village and volunteering to read to people in the health center. “I love doing the reading out loud to groups,” she commented. In November 1989, a few months after this interview, Myrtle was planning to retire as superintendent of the Tower Club.

Other Resources: