



Lillian Wald.

Wald, Lillian (1867-1940)

by Caryn E. Neumann

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2006 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Lillian Wald, an American public health nurse and social reformer, is the model of a Victorian-era lesbian active in the settlement house movement.

Born in Cincinnati on March 10, 1867 to a prosperous German-Jewish merchant family, Wald grew up in Rochester, New York. The city, home to Susan B. Anthony, was a center of feminist activity in the mid-nineteenth century and undoubtedly influenced Wald's progressive politics.

Wald was educated in private schools. At the age of 22, she enrolled in the New York Hospital School of Nursing and graduated in 1891. For a year, she worked as a nurse at the New York Juvenile Asylum before leaving to study to become a physician.

Shortly after she began taking courses at the Women's Medical College, Wald accepted an invitation to teach home nursing to immigrant families on New York City's Lower East Side. A child led her to a sick woman in a decrepit tenement and Wald instantly became a reformer.

Discovering that the largely Jewish population of the area desperately needed health care, with her friend Mary Brewster she founded the Nurses' Settlement in 1893 and coined the term "public health nursing." The center would grow into the famed Henry Street Settlement. The nurses at the settlement operated on a sliding fee scale, so that all city residents might have access to medical attention. In 1905, it had eighteen district centers and cared for 4,500 patients.

Like other settlement houses, Henry Street also offered girls' and boys' clubs as well as classes in citizenship, art, theater, English, and home economics. In 1915, Wald founded the Neighborhood Playhouse on Grand Street as another means to help meet the cultural needs of the Lower East Side.

To protect immigrants, Wald entered politics. Even-tempered and with a strong sense of humor, she became a skillful politician. Wald lobbied for tenement reform, labor legislation, child welfare laws, better health care, and every other measure that offered a chance to solve the problems caused by immigration, urbanization, and industrialization.

She co-founded the National Child Labor Committee in 1904 to protect child workers and successfully pushed for the formation in 1912 of a Children's Bureau within the Department of Labor. She also convinced insurance companies to provide visiting public health nurses to their policy holders.

Wald's belief in the need for equal rights for women was a vital ingredient of her thinking. For nearly forty years, she participated in almost every aspect of the feminist movement. Though not a militant suffragist, Wald believed that women were better suited than men to protect the home and family. She served as vice-chair of the New York State Woman Suffrage Party.

Although she never had a permanent woman companion, Wald received all of her emotional support from

other women and preferred to work only among women. Like Jane Addams in Chicago, she was the center of a women's settlement house network. The close relationship of the women in the settlement house movement involved at least an unconscious sexuality.

Wald frequently used the language of romantic friendship, addressing women friends as "beloved" and "dearest angel child." She wrote to reformer Florence Kelley that her return from a trip "made my heart go quite pit-a-pat." Although Wald never labeled herself as a lesbian, historians have done so.

Heart trouble and chronic anemia began to take their toll on Wald's health. In 1933, she retired from Henry Street to live in Westport, Connecticut. She died on September 1, 1940.

Bibliography

Brody, Seymour "Sy." "Lillian Wald." *Jewish Virtual Library*: www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/wald.html

Daniels, Doris G. *Always a Sister: The Feminism of Lillian D. Wald*. New York: Feminist Press, 1995.

Wald, Lillian D. *The House on Henry Street*. New York: Henry Holt, 1915.

About the Author

Caryn E. Neumann is a doctoral candidate in Women's History at Ohio State University. A past managing editor of the *Journal of Women's History*, her essays have appeared in the *Dictionary of American History* and *Notable American Women*, among other places.