

The Gebbie Foundation: Beginnings

The Founding Family

The Gebbie Foundation was established in 1964 from the charitable bequest of two sisters, Geraldine Gebbie Bellinger and Marion Bertram Gebbie. The sisters named the foundation in honor of their parents, Frank and Harriet Louisa Gebbie. The elder Gebbies passed on to their daughters, as well as subsequent generations of the family, a deep-seated ethic of commitment to high ideals, personal integrity, and compassion for others. The Gebbie legacy is consequently as much about the progressive and community-minded spirit, for which Mr. Gebbie as founder of the Mohawk Condensed Milk Company is remembered, as it is about the substantial resources provided by the foundation for an improved quality of life in Chautauqua County.

Frank & Louisa Gebbie: An American Success Story



Born in Scotland in 1844, Frank Gebbie traveled to America with his family when he was a young boy, settling in Oneida, NY. His father was a “sawyer” (someone who sawed wood), and Frank and his brother, John, worked beside him in mills powered by streams that fed the Mohawk River.

Frank graduated from Cazenovia Seminary and in 1870 married Harriet Louisa Hubbell, daughter of a Sing Sing Prison warden. They moved to Brewster, NY where Frank worked as a supervisor at the New York Milk Condensery, established by Gail Borden, Jr.

While supervising over 100 people and purchasing milk from over 200 farms, Frank made it a practice to personally greet each farmer as they delivered their milk to the factory every morning. The couple moved to Lockport, NY and in 1874, the same year Borden died, Frank opened a fruit canning operation with John called the Niagara Canning Company. After his brother passed away in 1893, Frank sold the canning business and formed the Mohawk Condensed Milk Company with Michael Doyle, a young Irish immigrant entrepreneur.

Gebbie and Doyle developed and patented a can-capping machine in 1902. This innovation, along with the adoption of Borden’s food safety procedures, such as “Dairyman’s Ten Commandments”, helped make the Mohawk label synonymous with the best in quality and taste; a leader in a burgeoning industry that had been growing rapidly due to the importance of unspoilable milk for supplying troops in the Civil War, the migration to the American West, and expansion of the railroad industry. The first factory was built in St. Johnsville, NY, and before Frank Gebbie sold his interest in Mohawk to Carnation in 1921, additional plants were opened in Colorado, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Iowa, and Sherman NY.

The Gebbie Daughters: Growing a Legacy

Of Louisa and Frank's six children, two daughters survived into adulthood, Geraldine born in 1878 and Marion born in 1880. Moving from their birthplace in Lockport, NY, the girls grew up in St. Johnsville where they were educated by both private tutors and in the public schools, developing a fondness for arts and culture.

Geraldine studied music in Rochester NY and became a talented violinist. She married dairy farmer Earl J. Bellinger in 1908, a former schoolmate whose father was one of the milk providers to the Mohawk plant. Frank offered Earl a job at Mohawk and the newlyweds moved to Sherman NY where a plant had just been built. When the plant was sold in 1923, the local paper wrote, "Sherman people in general greatly deplore the going away of Mr. and Mrs. Bellinger, for they have especially endeared themselves in the community by their open-hearted generosity in every good cause." The Bellingers purchased an estate on Chautauqua Lake in Magnolia, and Earl continued to operate his business interests in Corry and Meadville, Pennsylvania.



Geraldine Gebbie Bellinger



Marion Bertram Gebbie



Geraldine Gebbie, 1900



Marion Gebbie, 1897

Marion attended college at Wheaton Female Seminary in Massachusetts, graduating in 1901 with an education in Liberal Arts and also excelled at the sciences. When the company offices were set up in Rochester, NY, Marion moved there with her parents becoming their companion, caretaker, and chauffeur (one of the first women to learn to drive in NYS). Upon her father's death in 1928, she received an inheritance that she increased by a factor of five through astute business judgment; a remarkable achievement at any time, but during the Great Depression, extraordinary. Alone in Rochester, Marion decided to move to the Magnolia estate where she lived with Geraldine and her niece, Janet, until her death in 1949.



Magnolia Springs Estate Chautauqua, NY



Marion and Geraldine, Magnolia 1947

The Gebbie Foundation Inc. – Established 1964

Shortly before her death in 1949, Marion wrote in her will: “It is my long cherished intention and purpose, and it is my will to establish an appropriate and permanent memorial to my father and mother. I have discussed this plan with my sister, and she and I are in accord in our desires to create and establish a foundation after the death of both of us.”

In December 1960, Geraldine’s will provided specifics: “In the event that said corporation is not formed or, for any reason, is not in existence at the time of my death, then I direct my said trustees and executors, to incorporate a charitable corporation under the laws of the State of New York, to be named Gebbie Foundation, Inc., in memory of my parents and for who the same shall be a perpetual memorial.” Sadly neither sister was able to see their vision realized as Geraldine passed away in 1963, but from the beginning Gebbie family members actively served the Foundation as trustees. Geraldine’s son-in-law, William I. Parker (husband of Janet Bellinger), and her grandchildren, Geraldine Marion Parker and Bertram Bellinger Parker, were dedicated board members for over 4 decades. Nancy Waddell Gleason, great-great granddaughter of Frank and Louisa Gebbie, became a board member in 2005.

To establish the foundation, the sisters’ estates provided 10.6 million dollars. The first meeting of the directors of the Gebbie Foundation was held in the offices of attorney, J. Russell Rogerson, at the Hotel Jamestown in August 1964. Original directors, Rogerson, Katharine J. Carnahan, William I. Parker, John D. Hamilton, and J. Cornell Schenck resolved to carry out the provisions of the wills of Marion and Geraldine and base charitable giving on the example of their personal philanthropy. As a result many educational, humanitarian and cultural organizations in the region were developed and supported through funds from the Foundation.

New Focus: Same Intent, Different Approach

After the community came together to build the 21-million-dollar Ice Arena in 2001, with a significant investment from the Gebbie Foundation, there was a noticeable shift in how people viewed the City of Jamestown. Positive change happened. Residents began to regain hope that restoring a struggling city might be possible after all.

This successful project led the Gebbie board to review the impact of past grantmaking and explore the possibility of a new model. Strategic planning sessions, facilitated by an expert in urban revitalization, led to a turning point in the focus of the foundation. For the foreseeable future, the Gebbie Foundation would be proactive in grantmaking, investing in economic development initiatives to improve the fiscal health of the city. Collaboration with many partners, public and private, resulted in the construction of a new hotel; erection of the BWB professional office building; restoration of the Erie-Lackawanna Train Station; renovation of buildings, alleys, and building facades; and the development of downtown market-rate housing. At Gebbie’s 50-year anniversary mark, the vision was on the near horizon for the community coming together, yet again, to realize the development of the National Comedy Center.