

Martha [Mattie] Gardner Relf, Early Monroe Business Woman

While I was looking through digital photographs recently, I came across the photo of the Relf & Hyde millinery shop that was printed on page 23 of the Monroe Area Pictorial History. That was when I decided that I wanted to share information about a woman, Martha [Mattie] Gardner Relf, who became an early entrepreneur and leader in the community. Martha was born in White Oak Springs, Lafayette County, on February 28, 1850 to Silas E. and Maria Gardner. The family moved to Monroe when she was still an infant where she attended school, probably only for a few years since there was no high school at that time.

The 1860 census shows that she was living with her parents, three older brothers, and a younger sister here in Monroe where her father was a master carpenter. According to newspaper excerpts in *Becoming a Village: Monroe in the 1850s*, her father had also been involved in the community, having been on a committee to find new land for a cemetery in 1859, was a member of the Green County Educational Association in 1856, and was a vice president helping to plan the celebration for National Independence in 1859.

Martha was working as a milliner and the only child still living with her parents in 1870. The parents had already buried three of their children by then, one of them being a 5-year-old daughter whose clothes caught on fire in 1859. They moved to Decorah, Iowa for a few years where Martha married William E. Relf, a photographer, on October 25, 1871. The marriage ended and Martha moved back to Monroe, as did her parents, sometime after 1880. The first reference I found of Martha being back in Monroe was an ad that invited the ladies of the county to visit Relf & Stearns on the south side of the square for the “regular opening of spring and summer styles of millinery” on April 21 and 22 of 1882.

The *Sentinel* reported the following week that the store “presented a gay appearance to the hundreds of visitors who found their way thither last Friday and Saturday to celebrate the opening. . . . The display was elegant and tastefully arranged. It is seldom that such an array of beautiful goods is seen outside larger cities, and the new and enterprising firm did themselves great credit. This is the verdict of all who visited.” It concluded, “Monroe and vicinity are fortunate in having such enterprising and accomplished milliners.”

It is unknown if Mrs. Relf learned her trade in Monroe, but she and her partner, Miss Mary Stearns, travelled to Chicago that fall to purchase goods. Miss Stearns spent four weeks in one of the leading millinery establishments there and “posted herself thoroughly in the styles of trimming and making of millinery.” The ladies of the vicinity were invited the following spring to see “their pattern hats, bonnets, new style in neckwear, handkerchiefs, and general millinery.”

This business lasted until the middle of July 1884 when the ladies dissolved their partnership. At this time they were selling all of the goods they had in stock at cost. It was announced the following month that Mrs. Flora Wolcott Hyde had purchased Miss Stearns’ interest and the firm would become known as Relf & Hyde after September 1. Mrs. Hyde was experienced in the business, having been with Chenoweth & Co. for several years.

The ladies announced in 1888 that they would move their stock to the east half of the building that had previously been occupied by Randall & Co. They were nicely settled in their new quarters by April. Mrs. Relf was spending two weeks in the city at that time purchasing their entire spring and summer stock. The ladies again moved to a new location, starting 1892 in a new store east of their most recent location. This was the last item I saw in the newspaper about their business. It is not known how long they remained at that new location, but neither of them was listed as a milliner in 1895.

The millinery business must have been quite lucrative as an article on May 17, 1893 stated that Mrs. Mattie Relf’s new dwelling house was nearing completion at what is now 2022 11th Street. Her mother’s obituary stated in 1902, “Mrs. Relf has been the constant, faithful and patient companion of her mother all through her declining years, which were, toward the last filled with pain and longing to go to



Mattie Relf with her niece
Laurene Gardner (1873 - 1946)

the better land.” This might mean that Martha’s main job was to care for her mother during those years. They were living together in 1900, but Martha was living alone in that home in 1905 and 1920.

By 1930, Martha was 80 years old and had her 36-year-old grand niece, Harriett Anundsen, living with her. Martha passed away in her home of pneumonia one day before her 85th birthday. She had only been seriously ill a few days even though her health had been failing for several years. Her obituary said that she “had long been respected for her interest and her energies directed toward the betterment of life around. She was intensely concerned with community affairs and kept pace with all current affairs by varied readings.” She was an organizer of the Monday Reading Club, whose meetings were held in the Relf home. She was also instrumental in the organization of the Benjamin Harrison chapter of the DAR, named after one of her mother’s cousins. She had served as the president of the Monroe Woman’s Club in 1901 and was chairman of various committees after that. She was a member of the Eastern Star, having been worthy matron in 1908. She also took great interest in the Universalist Church. Her father had set a good example of being involved in the community and she carried on that tradition. Through her mother, she was also related to William Henry Harrison, making two relatives who had been Presidents of our country.



Martha Gardner Relf (1850 - 1935) had this home built four blocks east of the square at 2022 11th Street in 1893. She and her mother each lived in the home until their deaths, 33 years apart. The home still looks similar even though some remodeling has taken place in the 130 years since it was built.