

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

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THETA MEAD

1878–1922

City: Merrill, Tomahawk

County: Lincoln

Theta Mead was the first public health nurse of Lincoln County and an early advocate for public health.

Theta Mead was born on July 11, 1878, near Grand Rapids, Michigan. She graduated from Northern Indiana Normal School at Valparaiso (now Valparaiso University) in 1900. The following year, she enrolled in St. Luke's Hospital Nursing School in Marquette, Michigan. Mead was the second-ever graduate from the new nursing education program. She worked at St. Luke's for three years as the superintendent of nurses. She then received another year of training at the Boston Floating Hospital, a ship that had a pediatric clinic, training school, and research center. Her many years of education were unusual for nurses of her day.

Mead moved to Merrill, Wisconsin, to be close to her family. She worked as a private nurse, practicing out of her parents' house for the next 12 years. Mead also cared for her sick mother, who passed away in 1916. After her mother's death, Mead was able to work outside the home. In 1917, she completed an eight-week rural public health course in Milwaukee and was appointed Lincoln County's first Public Health Nurse in August of that year.

There were no public hospitals or clinics in Lincoln County, so Mead was the only resource for healthcare for many residents. She visited schools in the county to give kids health check-ups and teach about hygiene. She visited patients in their homes and workplaces, such as farms and logging camps, and educated people about preventing communicable diseases like tuberculosis. She also had duties similar to those of social workers today, such as investigating child delinquency and enforcing child labor laws. Mead wrote reports about her work for county officials, and in them always encouraged the county to invest tax dollars in public health measures. Additionally, she was a fierce advocate for increasing care for pregnant people and newborn babies, and she made lowering the infant mortality rate in Lincoln County a high priority.

When the U.S. entered World War I, many public health nurses joined the military. By 1918, Mead was one of only two county public health nurses left in the state, so she worked all around Wisconsin, not just in Lincoln County. She traveled to county fairs to talk with families about health. She also had her hands full treating flu patients during the influenza epidemic.

In 1920, the Minnesota Hennepin County Visiting Nurses Association offered her a job as the Supervisor of Rural Public Health Nursing Services. She accepted because she felt she could do more in that job. She resigned as county nurse in April and moved to Minnesota. Soon after, her father became sick, and Mead had to move back to Wisconsin. She worked briefly as a community nurse in Tomahawk, then became the State Supervisor of Public Health Nurses. Mead worked with over 36 counties in northern Wisconsin to help them hire and train county nurses. She held the job for less than a year before resigning due to poor health. Mead died a few weeks later, on November 14, 1922, at the age of 44.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/theta-mead