

Dakota Images

Winona Axtell Lyon began life as a pioneer child whose early memories included traveling up the Mississippi River by steamboat. She eventually became one of Sioux Falls's most generous philanthropists, demonstrating that she had truly mastered the art of "paying it forward."

Winona Axtell was born 12 February 1863 near Walnut Grove, Illinois, where she helped to raise her younger siblings and operate the small family hotel. After a short stint as a schoolteacher, she began a job in the local post office, transferring to Sioux Falls in 1883. There, in 1891, she married William H. Lyon, a young lawyer who would go on to specialize in tax-forfeit property and serve four terms in the South Dakota Legislature.

Winona Axtell Lyon became a popular socialite who enjoyed playing tournament whist, riding bicycles, and traveling the world. She also became active in civic affairs, including the Women's History Club, which led to her role as the first president of the South Dakota General Federation of Women's Clubs. Widely known for her sharp-tongued wit, Lyon also authored a book on parliamentary procedure.

Lyon served on the Sioux Falls College Board of Trustees, the Sioux Falls Park Board, the Women's Division of the South Dakota Board of Charities and Corrections, and the Sioux Falls Historical Society. She and her husband had no children, but they provided a home for her widowed father and her widowed older sister and three children. She later gave the family a life estate in the Lyon house at 746 South Phillips Avenue, farm property, and a generous educational trust.

Widowed in 1930 at the age of sixty-seven, Winona Lyon inherited an estate valued at more than ten million dollars today. She carried on the philanthropic efforts begun with her husband, gifting numerous properties to Sioux Falls and Minnehaha County, including land that became the W. F. Lyon Fairgrounds, Axtell Park Middle School, Lyon Park on Phillips Avenue, Palisades State Park, and the Girl Scout Camp at Wall Lake. She also donated land and funds to Sioux Falls College, Augustana College, the Sioux Falls Women's History Club, the South Dakota Children's Home Society, and many other organizations.

Winona Axtell Lyon died 4 February 1949, just short of her eighty-seventh birthday.

—Cheryl Eagan Taylor



Winona Axtell Lyon

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