

WAUKESHA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

Classroom Activity—Springs Era Exhibit

The Littlest War

Objective: Students will read a dramatic retelling of the “Water War” episode in Waukesha’s history and discuss it together, then complete writing exercise linking the story with the Water War history from the Waukesha Springs Era Video.

Materials:

“The Littlest War,” by Mary Schiek Sargent

Backstory:

The “Water War” is the name applied to a May 1892 standoff between citizens of Waukesha and workers hired by James McElroy, one of the owners of Hygeia Spring. McElroy wished to pipe the water from Hygeia Spring to the Columbian Exposition (World’s Fair) in Chicago, but many of the Waukesha townspeople opposed his scheme. They feared that the thousands of visitors to the fair would not visit Waukesha if they could get the famed spring water in Chicago. When McElroy brought in workers to lay the pipe under cover of night, the townspeople formed a mob and threatened the workers. In the end, McElroy chose to pipe water from Big Bend instead. Francie Wardrobe was six years old in 1892, and her niece Mary Schiek Sargent tells her story in “The Littlest War.”

Activity:

- Read “The Littlest War” together
- Discuss and answer the Questions to Think About as a class
- Have the students take out a sheet of paper and pencil for the writing exercise
- At the end of the story, the author writes that “Francie wasn’t sure just what happened” that night. Ask the students to imagine that Francie is their friend and write a paragraph describing to her what happened in the Water War. (You may wish to refresh their memories of the Water War story from The Waukesha Springs Era Video before they write.)

Questions to Think About

- Who was Francie Wardrobe? What do you know about her from reading the story?
- Who were the Pipeliners? What were they doing in Waukesha?
- How did Francie’s Papa feel about the Pipeliners? How do you know how he felt?
- How does Francie feel in the story? Use descriptive words (adjectives).
- How does the story make you feel? Use descriptive words (adjectives).

The Littlest War

by Mary Schiek Sargent*

Francie Wardrobe lay in bed thinking. Though the spring night was dark at bedtime, she wasn't sleepy.

She looked around the room. She could see little Jay's bed across from her and the clothes she had taken off, laid neatly on her chair, because at six years old she could undress herself. There was her red wool dress with its fat skirt, and the petticoats with lace edging, her long black stockings and her shoes that buttoned high on the sides with shiny black buttons that someone had to help you button.

She thought about the things that Papa and the other men had been talking about at supper. One was the World's Fair to be held in Chicago, one hundred miles from Waukesha where Francie lived. Everyone hoped he could go to the biggest fair ever.

Some people called it the Columbian Exposition. Papa said that was because it was held 400 year after Columbus discovered America.

The men were also talking about the water. Francie knew about the water. Everyone in Waukesha was proud of their water. It came from deep in the ground, bubbling up in clear sparkling springs and tasted so cold and good. Everyone said it was good for you, too, and in the summer, people came from far away, even Alabama, and stayed at the hotels and drank the famous healthy water.

Francie liked to sit on the front porch steps and watch the ladies in their pretty clothes as they went by in carriages. People told about the wonderful dancing parties they held at the Fountain House, but Francie was only six and had never seen one.

The Waukesha water was so famous that some men were trying to work a plan to sell it at the big fair in Chicago.

Papa and the men all talked about that, too, and sounded angry. One of them said it was crazy to think you could build a long pipe to carry the water 100 miles to Chicago, and all of them said that the people of Waukesha wanted to keep their own water and drink it themselves the way they always had. Papa said he was glad that the men who came from Chicago to get the permission to pipe the water had been told no.

Just then, Francie heard Papa coming upstairs. He was running.

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He came into their room and went toward the big chest of drawers. She knew what was in the chest, though she had never seen it. The top drawer was always kept locked.

Francie's eyes grew large as she watched Papa fit his key into the keyhole on the top drawer. When he drew out the gun, she could pretend sleep no longer.

"Oh," she said.

When Papa saw that she was awake, he explained that he needed the gun because the men from Chicago had come in the dark to steal the water from the Hygeia Spring. Papa and the other men were going to make sure that they did not.

After Papa left, Francie jumped out of bed and ran to the window in her nightie. She could hear people shouting, "The Pipeliners are coming! The Pipeliners are coming!"

Then there was another noise down the street. Such a banging and clanging that it echoed up and down in the chill spring night. When it came closer Francie could see that the men were pulling something. It was the cannon. She knew the cannon because it had always stood in front of the town hall, way down the block. It was left over from the Civil War. Now its big iron wheels were clattering down the road to help protect the Waukesha water from the bad Pipeliners who would steal it.

After the men disappeared down the street the shouts about the Pipeliners faded away. Francie wanted to stay up until they all came back, but her little feet were cold and as the wind blew the tree branches against the window, suddenly she was all cold and shivery.

She scurried into bed and snuggled down among the covers. She could stay awake and wait for them just as well in her cozy bed, she thought. She knew how it would turn out. The men from Waukesha would save the water for Waukesha. They would beat the Pipeliners. She was sure of it. After all, the cannon was there, and Papa, and even the gun from the secret locked place.

There was really nothing to worry about, nothing at all, and Francie fell asleep.

She was right. In the morning, everyone was talking about the fight. Francie wasn't sure just what happened, except that the Waukesha men, with the help of the cannon, and Papa and the gun, were the winners.