

CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES  
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY  
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES  
By Jeannie Watson

## JANE E. BEDFORD

Jane Elizabeth Bedford was born and raised in Silver Creek Township; the daughter of pioneers George Bedford and Ann Barton Smith. She married John N. Hawks, and moved to Newberg Township, west of the settlement of Wakelee in Cass County. Her last years were spent living in Marcellus, Michigan. Victorian Era culture clashed with the Women's Liberation Movement, as her short life, followed a path through turbulent waters. She experienced some of her era's worst gender bias, and her story gives one a glimpse into the role women were forced to endure if they stood up for their rights in this era. To add to the injustice, her young life was cut short by one of many epidemics that swept through Cass County, the dreaded Typhoid.

The Bedfords were of English descent, who migrated to North America from Lincolnshire, England. Jane's family arrived in the area in 1841. They were successful farmers, socially prominent, and politically connected. The family homestead was, and still is, located on Garrett Road, in Section 28 of Silver Creek Township. At one time, the large, well designed house, was one of only a few well-appointed pioneer homes, in a township populated by meager log cabins. It rests on high ground that drops down, from the southeast corner of the house, toward a beautiful small picturesque lake. However, even Jane's family's success, and prestige, did not protect her from society's Victorian Era biased standards, and unfair female discriminatory practices.

Jane Bedford was born on February 5, 1851 to George Bedford and Ann Barton Smith in Silver Creek Township. She was raised in an idyllic setting, surrounded with 7 siblings, doting parents, and a warm extended family. Jane attended school and church on School Street, not far from the family homestead. Her brothers, sisters, and she were close and supportive of one another. The children would spend delightful summers swimming in the lake reservoir, and riding horses along Garrett Road. Bright winter days were spent building snowmen, frolicking in the fresh snow, and sledding down the back hill. The home was the center of many social activities, and the epicenter of the local community's culture.

Around the age of 16 (circa 1867), Jane was sent to Albion College, a bold move at the time, but an opportunity her father was determined to provide all his daughters and sons. Albion was where she was given a higher education deemed appropriate for gently bred young woman, and an introduction to the concept of basic human rights. High literacy, the availability of challenging reading material, and exposure to new ideas provided Jane with ample opportunity to form her expectations for later life. It was in this setting that she learned of the country's growing Women's Liberation Movement.

The Victorian Era (1837-1901) was a difficult age for intelligent, educated young women. By the 1860s and 1870s, Michigan, and the rest of the country, was locked into a cultural system of socially reinforced restraints regarding women's rights, laws, and roles. They could not vote, hold office, enter the professions, or work in occupations considered "for men only." Respectable women had to wear uncomfortable, confining clothing, adhere to a strict moral code, and bore the brunt of blame if their husbands chose to seek their own entertainments or defy religious standards.

Gender concepts that suggested women were supposed to be their husbands' helpmates, bear their children, and serve in domestic roles were taken to an extreme at this time. They became excuses to keep females "bare foot and pregnant." Wives were expected to be passive, submissive, obedient, cooperative, and sub-servant to their "master-husbands." Women were supposed to be morally above reproach, loyal, and chaste beyond marriage, while their husbands had the right to keep mistresses, and indulge in whim based indulgences. Birth control was considered sinful, and kept women locked into child bearing, raising and nurturing roles, with few opportunities to expand their horizons. These were major reasons for the era's large families.

Women who dared to defy convention faced isolation, shunning, and some even had to endure the loss of their children. Divorce was viewed by society as "a great evil, and source of great suffering." It was available only at the initiation of men, and once accomplished, cast the ex-wives in disgrace and shame. Drunken husbands, the poverty these males caused to their family, and abuse were considered better than abandonment by a man. Regardless of a husband's transgression, "the marriage was supposed to be held together for the sake of the children." Death certificates of divorced women in this era, list the wives as "widows" rather than "divorced," because it was deemed more socially acceptable than living in a state of humiliation. Divorce laws favored men, and women had few legal rights. Male spousal desertion, adultery, and bigamy were blamed on females regardless of circumstances, until they started standing up as group, and ceased acting as victims. Finally, the feminist movement rebelled against gender biased Victorian Standards, outdated laws, and social mores. Attempts were made to change the law. Elizabeth Cady Stanton stated, "women needed to divorce, to free themselves of fools and tyrants."

Females were viewed as less intelligent, squeamish, with inferior strength, and deemed of less value than males. Respectable women could not "speak before mixed audiences of men and women." Neck lines had to be worn high, skirts long so ankles did not show, and sleeves had to go past the wrists, because the showing of skin was not something a respectable woman was allowed. Even worse, many religious institutions, carried over century old tenets that blamed women for male temptations. They regarded women as "the gate of the devil, the path of wickedness, and the sting of the serpent." It was in this social climate, Jane Bedford and her sisters grew to adulthood.

Jane appears on the U.S. Federal Census of 1860 with her family. She was 9 years old at the time. Father George Bedford was age 46, and mother Ann was age 45. Harriet (age 18), Martha (age 12), Alice (age 5) and Edith (age 1) were her sisters. George Jr. (age 23) and John (age 14) were her brothers.

In 1865, after the Civil War ended, Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) became outraged that "equal voting rights were given to African American men, while black and white women were denied those same rights." It was suggested that rigid role definitions were akin to slavery, and forced servitude. Feminists, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton called for "equality, elimination of gender bias, and . . . female suffrage (the right to vote)."

October 5, 1869, in Niles, Berrien County, Michigan, "Jenny" Jane Elizabeth Bedford married John N. Hawks, son of John Weston Hawks and Lucy Ann Sponberg. They made their home on the Streator Mill Pond, Section 3, east of Wakelee, in Newberg Township, Cass County, Michigan.

In 1870, Jane E. Bedford, at age 19, accompanied her new husband, and the Hawks family on a company logging expedition to Florence, Lauderdale Co., Alabama. There she spent the summer with her mother-in-law Lucy Ann Sponberg, sister-in-law Ann Hawks, and the family, while the Hawks men managed a timber harvesting mission. The U.S. Federal Census of 1870 shows, Jane

Bedford and the Hawks family in Township 1, Range 12, Lauderdale County, Alabama.

Upon return to Newberg Township, Jane and husband John N. resumed their family life. In 1873, son Guy Wesley Hawks (12/13/1873-1/24/1949) was born in Newberg. He later married Bertha Elma Pope. In 1875, son Earl Bedford Hawks (4/26/1875-7/20/1942) came into the world in Newberg. He later wed Bertha Delle and Mabel Flewelling.

Jane was a loving mother, and devoted wife, but the double standards of this era began to cause a rift in the marriage, along with male choices. It finally ended in divorce, and after a time, Jane's ex-husband left the state. Apparently, unable to support her children, the Bedford extended family took over the raising and education of sons Guy and Earl. Earl Hawks was adopted by Jane's brother, John Bedford, and his wife Rozilla Walker. Guy was raised by the Conklins, Garrett, and Hawk affiliate families. They were even given college educations by their Uncle John Bedford.

That era's culture, and church going society, was not kind to a divorced woman, regardless of her circumstances, especially those who would not "endure a marriage no matter what." Emotional pain, the loss of her children, and lack of control over her life, left these women in sorry states, with few ways to make a living, if not supported by a man. To be divorced was to be in disgrace and humiliation. Left alone and with few alternatives, Jane, the lovely educated young woman, with so much promise, did not return home after the divorce, but rather moved to Marcellus, Michigan.

The June 10, 1880 U.S. Federal Census finds Jane E. Bedford, age 29, living in Marcellus, Cass County, Michigan working as a milliner (hat maker). Feather hats were very fashionable and in demand during this time. She was living in solitude.

Typhoid was a common epidemic that swept Southwest Michigan. Plumbing of that era was crude, water supplies were often contaminated by floods, and simple sanitation methods were not always effective. Typhoid is caused by the Salmonella typhi bacteria. Jane Bedford was diagnosed with "Typhoid Pneumonia." For three weeks she lingered with acute fever, severe headaches, abdominal pain, bleeding, lethargy and difficulty breathing. No antibiotics were available to save her. Her frantic family, upon discovery of her illness, sought every cure available to no avail.

Jane E. Bedford died at age 30, on October 23, 1881. Her parents brought her home to Silver Creek Township, and buried her in the family burial lot at Indian Lake Cemetery. Her death certificate listed her as a "widow," but family records told the truth, she was divorced. It, also, states that she died on October 27, 1881 (probably the burial date.). Father George Bedford, and mother Ann Barton Smith, provided their daughter with a large tombstone. They, no doubt, grieved not only for Jane's loss, but for the pain and suffering their beautiful young daughter endured.

It was not until 1918, thirty-seven years later, that "Michigan male voters approved a state constitutional amendment granting suffrage to Michigan women." In 1920, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, granted the vote to women, and became law on August 26. It was only after women gained this political clout, that women's rights and freedoms slowly began to improve.

Jane was a kind, gentle soul, generous to others, "sweet of nature," and hard working. She was considered to be of great natural beauty in her era. Her religious convictions were strong, her charity work well known at the time, and her concern for others genuine. Her children, family, neighbors, and even her husband cared for her. She was well educated, very well read, and intelligent.

What Jane could not endure was that culture's male entitlement standards, and the exaggerated masculine freedoms granted to half the population regardless of the consequences, while the female half bore the load of social inequality. Jane could be outspoken if injustice surfaced, and had the strength to stand up for her convictions. What few today realize, is that the 1870s and 1880s in Southwest Michigan were a time of struggle between identity roles, value systems, and social inequality. The society was male dominated, with all the freedoms that brought them. Females lived restricted lives and were expected to endure, suffering in silence. While their husbands clung to their pleasures "as their due," wives lived with the sorrow of those choices. She was a product of her era's struggle for social, legal and personal equality. She dared to stand against Victorian Era double standards, and lived with the consequences.

In conclusion, "Jennie," Jane Elizabeth Bedford was the daughter of original pioneers in Cass County, Michigan. She attended Albion College, was well-read, and intelligent. Jane lived in the Victorian Era, when the Women's Liberation Movement became popular among Cass County females. She stood up for her rights, and refused to accept the double standards granted husbands in that time. Enduring the shunning of society because she was divorced, with few options for making a living, she moved to Marcellus and became a milliner. Her children were taken in by her extended family, raised and educated. She died in a Typhoid epidemic (and probably a broken heart), one of many that swept Cass and Berrien County, Michigan. Her promising, but difficult, short life became part of the local heritage. She has earned her place in Cass County history.

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