

Opening Slide:

Hello! I am Liz Schmidt, and I am the curator at the Goodhue County Historical Society here in Red Wing. I want to thank you for inviting me back again this year to honor another one of the fantastic women of our community.

Our 2026 Red Wing Women's Network Hall of Fame posthumous inductee is Goodhue County Public Health Nurse Leola Ellis.

Slide 2: Early Life

Leola was born in 1883 in Iowa. Her childhood is very interesting since her parents divorced in the 1890s. During this time period, divorce was very frowned upon. In fact, Iowa did not introduce no-fault divorces until the 1970s. This means that Leola's parents would have had to prove abuse or infidelity in court to be granted a divorce. While we don't know the exact circumstances of her parents' divorce, it was surely a difficult time. Her mother did not remarry until her children were grown, and living in a single-parent household in the late nineteenth century held not only financial difficulties but social burdens as well.

Census records for 1900 show Leola's mother reported herself as a widow. This shows she was battling the stigma of divorce by not admitting her past. As the social stigma around divorce changed, later census records show her mother's marital status as divorced. Leola contributed to the household as a teenager, working as a stenographer and as a postmistress.

Slide 3: Education and Early Career

Leola graduated from nursing school in 1909. She attended St. Barnabas Hospital School of Nursing in Minneapolis. Nursing schools that were attached to hospitals rather than colleges or universities were very common; in fact, we had one in Red Wing at St. John's Hospital. Between 1910 and 1920, she was employed in Minneapolis as a first a private nurse, then a public health nurse. During this time, she would see the outbreak of WWI and the Spanish Flu. Both of those events would have made her time as a nurse very stressful. Particularly as a public health nurse, the Spanish flu would have been a crisis. During the pandemic, historians often compared COVID-19 to the Spanish flu. It was an infectious and deadly disease that was difficult to control. Leola likely worked on public campaigns to wash hands and wear masks, as well as tending to the sick and dying. Since the COVID-19 pandemic is still so fresh in our public memory, we can surely empathize with her experience.

Slide 4: Goodhue County Public Health

In 1920, Leola began work as a Public Health nurse for both Goodhue County and the Red Cross. She held Red Cross classes that taught basic health skills such as first aid, nutrition, and child welfare. She also did home visits to WWI veterans to ensure their health following the war. *Fun fact: the demonstration doll in the photograph is now in our museum!

Slide 5: Rural Medicine

In 1922, she was promoted to a full-time Public Health Nurse for Goodhue County. Her primary role was to visit schools and communities around the county, to treat the sick, and keep the healthy from getting sick. One of my favorite things about Leola is that she drove to these visits herself. This was the 1920s, cars were complicated, and they required physical strength to operate. A newspaper article from the 1950s remembers her early years like this:

It was a common occurrence for Miss Ellis to get out and shovel snow and dig her way out of a snowdrift in those days. If unable to do that, Miss Ellis would make her way on foot to the school or family in need of her assistance. She prides herself on the fact that in spite of all types of weather, she has seldom been forced to postpone any clinic or school visit during her long career.

Slide 6: Children

A large part of her work as a public health nurse was visiting schools. She would visit each of the 156 rural schools at least two times per year, often more as needed. She would teach the children skills to keep them healthy. Such as proper hygiene and diet. (I have this lovely photo of children learning to brush their teeth at school at the top of the slide) During these visits, she noticed that many children were underweight, so she started a milk drinking program. These visits also served as a way to keep track of pre-existing diseases. She

screened for illnesses related to hearing, vision, and other afflictions such as lice and Tuberculosis or TB.

Slide 7: Prairie Island

Leola paid special attention to the Dakota People at Prairie Island. She visited Prairie Island regularly to provide pre- and postnatal care, treat the sick, and set up health clinics that met the needs of the Dakota. Edna Steiner, a secretary in the Goodhue County Public Health office, reflected on her work by writing:

“No one can overestimate her personal concern. She visited each family. She had new clothing to distribute where there was a need. Her warm, friendly personality gained her entrance to many homes in the area.”

Slide 8: Tuberculosis

During Leola’s tenure, tuberculosis, or TB, was a serious epidemic. There was no real cure until the late 1940s, and treatments varied from nonexistent to barbaric. Leola spent much of her time screening patients for signs of TB. When needed, Leola would bring patients to a regional Sanatorium. People would travel from many surrounding counties to be treated. Fortunately for Goodhue County residents, Mineral Springs Sanatorium was in Cannon Falls. In 1950, Leola started a mobile X-Ray clinic that would travel to rural areas to give chest scans. In one year, she oversaw over 25,000 chest X-Rays. Under her stewardship,

Goodhue County became a tuberculosis-accredited county in 1954. To receive accreditation, the mortality rate had to be below 10/100,000, and 15% of high school seniors had to be tuberculosis-free. This would have been a tremendous accomplishment for Leola. She also received an outstanding service award from the Minnesota Tuberculosis and Health Association in 1953. A true culmination of her life's work.

Slide 9: Healthcare by Numbers

I want to close with some statistics about Leola. She retired in 1958 after 38 years in Goodhue County and almost 50 years of nursing service. During her career, she made an estimated 55,000+ home visits, which is about 1,400 visits per year. Not counting school visits or public clinics. Leola averaged 9,000 miles of travel per year.

Leola Ellis was truly a remarkable figure in the history of our community. Not only did she dedicate her life to making people healthier, but she did it with warmth and compassion.

Slide 10: Thank You

Thank You All for your time. If you have any questions, my contact information is there on the screen.