

America's first dietitian — Sara Tyson Rorer **by Chris Sholly**

Many famous people, including U.S. Presidents and movie stars, have visited Mount Gretna over the past 150 years, but one of the least well-known persons — and yet one of the most interesting — was Sara Tyson Rorer, America's first dietitian.

One of her earliest visits to the community was at the Mount Gretna Agricultural, Mechanical and Industrial Exposition in 1889. She was active in the Pennsylvania Chautauqua gatherings, teaching classes on the art of cooking and various other food topics, including proper diets. Among the many lectures she gave in the 1890s at Mount Gretna were such things as French batters and "The Picnic Basket." According to newspaper accounts, her classes were always crowded with women, but some men also attended. During the fifth annual meeting of the Chautauqua, Rorer used two cottages on the meeting grounds for her demonstrations. (She bought her own lot in 1900. After her death, her home was used as the Colebrook Post Office.)

Rorer was born on Oct. 18, 1849, in Richboro, Bucks County, to Charles and Elizabeth Heston Tyson, and raised in New York. She was still a baby when her father, who was a pharmacist, moved the family to Buffalo, N.Y. As she grew, she developed an interest in science, much like her father. She had hoped to follow in his footsteps but realized it was difficult for a woman to follow that role in those days. The Tyson family later returned to Pennsylvania, settling in Philadelphia, Pa., and in 1871, she married William A. Rorer. They had three children, two boys and a girl, who died at an early age. She and her husband later separated.

After returning to Pennsylvania, she decided to take cooking classes at Philadelphia's New Century Club, eventually becoming one of its teachers. She then ventured out on her own, starting the Philadelphia Cooking School that lasted until 1902. She also began writing a book, "Mrs. Rorer's Philadelphia Cook Book," the first of many. In addition, she began writing cooking columns for various publications and became the domestic science editor for a new magazine — Ladies Home Journal.

As her fame rose, she spread her theories on cooking and diets at the World's Fairs in Chicago in 1893 (also attended by Milton S. Hershey) and in 1904 in St. Louis, Mo.

In addition, she was an editor for and part owner of Household News and a Philadelphia magazine — Table Talk. She also had an interest in a New York restaurant.

In addition to her activities in Mount Gretna, she also gave lectures in the Lebanon County community, participated in local causes and visited friends in the city of Lebanon.

In 1906, she became embroiled in a local civil lawsuit.¹

In a news article, Dr. A.B. Gloninger, who operated the Lebanon Sanatorium hospital, charged that she owed him \$50 as the result of a case he handled in 1905. Gloninger contended that he admitted and treated a young girl who was in need of medical care to his hospital in July 1905. Presumably, Rorer had sent the girl to the hospital. The girl remained in the hospital for three weeks, the news article reported. The doctor argued that Rorer “promised to meet any cost that accrued” for her treatment. However, Rorer argued that she simply advised the girl to go to the hospital and had not agreed to pay for any treatment.

In 1910, she opened a Curio shop on the Chautauqua grounds, the proceeds of which went to help defray the cost of the new Hall of Philosophy.²

In addition to her lectures in Mount Gretna, Rorer was often asked to give presentations to local groups, such as the Woman’s clubs. For instance, in 1918, she gave a lecture on how to feed a family of three on \$5 a week. She discussed meat and meat substitutes, such as certain vegetables. In her talk, she also referenced her own research on the diets of peoples around the world. In her lecture, she also pitched the idea of using less meat and wheat in daily cooking so that there would be more of these types of rations for the American soldiers serving overseas during World War I.

Like many people during the Depression, Tyson suffered financially during the Great Depression, losing much of her investments.

In the 1930s, she continued to lecture and participate in local and national events and gave lectures on local and national issues, not just cooking. In 1931, Rorer was elected as the first president of the Lebanon County League of Democratic Women, a position she held for seven years until her death. In the fall of 1934, the League held a surprise party for her 84th birthday. At the party, she proudly read a letter she received from President Franklin D. Roosevelt. A news article described her as a close personal friend of the president and his wife Eleanor.³

In late December 1937 she became seriously ill following a fall at home in which she injured her hip. She developed pneumonia and died at her home in Colebrook on Dec. 27, 1937. She was 88 years old. Her grave is located in the Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church cemetery in Colebrook.

¹ “Mrs. Rorer is Defendant,” *Lebanon Daily News*, July 9, 1906, page 1.

² “In the Mount Gretna Colony,” *Evening Report*, July 2, 1910, page 2.

³ “Democratic League Women Stage Surprise for Pres. Mrs. Rorer,” *Evening Report*, Oct. 13, 1933, page 7.

Additional sources used for this article:

“America’s first dietitian lived here,” Lebanon Daily News, March 30, 2013.

“Sara Tyson Rorer: The Nation’s Instructress in Dietetics and Cookery,” Emma Seifrit Weigley, Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society, 1977.

*Pennsylvania Center For The Book,
https://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/literary-cultural-heritage-map-pa/bios/Rorer_Sarah_Tyson, Pennsylvania State University, Lauren Baker, Fall 2005*

They had two sons, William Albert Rorer and James Birch Rorer, and a daughter who died very early in life.