



# Calumet County Historical Society Museum

**Open Sundays June-September 1:00 to 4:00  
or by appointment**

## MARTH WINIFRED SWEET BONFILS

**By Debbie Barany**

If we look into the history of Chilton, and the surrounding communities we learn about the many fascinating stories of people who were born and raised in our part of Wisconsin. They left our communities with a solid foundation to go out into the world and create their own mark on history.

One such person was Martha Winifred Bonfils – A pioneer woman in the newspaper industry. With her good looks and lively spirit, she often would risk her life, or engage in elaborate stunts to get a scoop. She was as colorful as her exposes' and had a career spanning over 50 years. Proving to be one of the most versatile journalists of her time.



Martha was born October 14, 1863 to Union Brevet Brigadier General Benjamin Sweet, who served as Colonel of the 21<sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Infantry during the Civil War and who later was appointed Commander at the famed Union prison, Camp Douglas in Chicago. Her mother was Lovisa Loveland Denslow Sweet.

She spent her early years in cities like Chicago, New York and Washington as her family moved with the various jobs of her father. Her connection to the newspaper industry came thru her first cousin Alexander Sweet. Harold Frederick a famous London correspondent and Fannie Forrester, one of the earliest newspaper women in America were her second cousins.

She began writing as a journalist for the Chicago Tribune, but landed a job at the San Francisco Examiner in 1890. At the Examiner she wrote under the name of Annie Laurie, as one of the most prominent "sob sisters", a label given female reporters who wrote human interest stories. Martha next went to work on her first exposé, addressing the questionable treatment of women in the city hospital's emergency room. In an elaborate stunt, she dressed herself in threadbare clothes and fainted in front of a carriage. After being prodded with a club by the police, she was placed on the hard, wooden floor of a horse-drawn carriage for the trip to the hospital. There, she was subjected to lewd remarks by the attend-

ants and released after treatment with an emetic of mustard and hot water. When her sensational narrative hit the street 36 hours later, it not only established Black as a journalist but resulted in the dismissal of some hospital personnel and the establishment of a regular ambulance service.

She also wrote for William Randolph Hearst's news syndicate writing as Winifred Black. While in San Francisco, she married Orlow Black in 1891, a fellow newspaper worker. She filed for divorce in 1897, charging Black with cruelty. After the divorce she moved to Colorado where she joined the staff of Harry H. Tamm and Frederick G. Bonfils's *Denver Post* where she met Charles A. Bonfils, the brother of Frederick. In the late 1920's she moved back to California where she married Charles A. Bonfils.

Martha over the course of her life worked a reporter, telegraph editor, Sunday editor, assistant city editor, special writer. She investigated the leper settlement in Molokai, Hawaii, in 1892. She raised funds for founding several charities. She investigated the public hospitals in San Francisco and those inaugurating many reforms. She helped found Junior Republic for Boys in New York. She conducted California Children's Excursion to World's Fair in Chicago. She managed hospitals and relief work for Galveston flood victims. She organized and managed national and international fight on narcotic evil. She was the first woman to report a prize fight and the second to interview a President.



In 1900, she dressed as a boy and was the first reporter on the line at the Galveston Hurricane of 1900. She delivered an exclusive and Hearst sent relief supplies by train. She covered the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and had a front row seat at the murder trial of Harry Thaw in 1907. Her coverage of the trial and descriptions of Thaw's wife Evelyn Nesbit earned her the label of "sob sister". She reported from Europe during the First World War, later the Versailles Peace conference

Martha died May 25, 1936 in San Francisco at the age of 73.

Tuesday, May 26, 1936 Paper: Times-Picayune (New Orleans, LA) Mrs Winifred Black Bonfils, known to hundreds of thousands of newspapers readers as "Winifred Black" and "Annie Laurie," beloved columnist, died today at her home in San Francisco. Mrs. Bonfils had been ill for several months, although she kept on writing her daily newspaper articles-articles to which her tremendous public turned every morning for a thought with which to start the day. Seventy-three years old when she died. Mrs Bonfils had lived and worked in many cities in all parts of the country during her years of newspaper work. Mrs Bonfils is survived by a daughter, Mrs Winifred Barker of San Francisco, and by her husband, Charles A Bonfils, Bonfils was a brother-in-law, Fred Bonfils famous Denver newspaper publisher.

#### QUOTES:

- "a woman has a distinct advantage over a man in reporting if she has sense... Men are always are good to a woman"
- "I'd rather smell the printer's ink and her the presses to around than go to any grand opera"