

# **ISCHUA VALLEY**

## **HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

### **A NINETEENTH CENTURY MODERN WOMAN - RHODA MEAD**

Women born in the 1800s in America had few options as to choice of lifestyle or career. Society expected them to marry, be wives and mothers and to be taken care of by their husbands. Those who did not marry lived at home with their parents or in the households of family members usually acting as nursemaids to children in the household or as housekeepers.

Women did not have the right to vote. If they worked their salaries were given to their husbands. Money received through inheritance also became his property. The husband had the right to make all decisions regarding his children.

Education was not deemed necessary for a woman and few continued on past learning how to read and do simple math. Few careers were available with the exception of teaching young children, being a seamstress, running a small shop, domestic work and trying to survive brutal work in factories. Their wages never equaled that of men.



This was the world that Rhoda Mead came into in 1833. She was one of eight children of Merlin and Polly Mead. The family moved to Franklinville and then to the hamlet of Cadiz. Both parents had been school teachers in New York City. Although their children started school in Cadiz, they were given the opportunity to travel and attend higher educational institutions. Their son Aaron attended school in Waterbury, Connecticut where he lived with relatives. Rhoda went to New Haven, Connecticut where she was described as a model student.

After her school years, she taught for several years. But she was determined to go to Europe and be on her own. She fell in love with Paris and Switzerland and finally became a teacher of English in a boarding school in Wurtenberg, Germany to 50 girls.

She was an avid letter writer and as a result gives us a picture of her life. The school was run by a severe professor who considered all Americans to be barbarians and robbers, according to Rhoda. She was paid \$1 a week and expected to chaperone, teach and do chores. He would receive all their mail and sometimes delay delivering it to them for weeks. Although she loved her students she decided one winter there was enough.

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In one letter home she writes: "Elections are over, and I suppose dear old Father Abraham is still in the White House and our country once more on the road to peace." "I am quite happy, though I do not think there has been a single night that I have not dreamed of home."

Her passport was signed by Secretary Seward on September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1863, and she is described as 5'1" tall, black eyes, small nose, medium mouth, oval face but sharp chin, black hair and dark complexion.

In 1865 she writes home, worried that she has not heard from her mother saying, "it seems to me that you would not let 6 months pass without saying one word to your baby daughter who though she can run alone and delights in her freedom from Mother's apron strings, yet looks back very often for the approving smile and encouraging voice".