## SARAH GILL KIRBY 1861–1951

## "...a home for people who wish just a home."

Sarah (Gill) Kirby was a woman ahead of her time. Her name is known today through the Kirby House, built by her in 1886. Her magnificent Center Street home, nicknamed "The Old Grand Dame," boasted modern conveniences of indoor plumbing, replacing the outhouse for an indoor bathroom. She was also one of first women in this area to drive an automobile. By the 1930s she was behind the wheel of a modern sedan when most folks were still using rustic Model T-style vehicles.

Born Sarah Gill in Orange, Massachusetts, on November 30, 1861, she was the daughter of Willard S. and Maria Gill. The Gill family arrived in Michigan in 1870 and settled on a farm south of Douglas.

Sarah married Frank Kirby on April 2, 1883. Frank Kirby was a boot, shoe and crockery merchant. He was also an accountant and salesman at the Douglas Basket Factory. Frank died in 1896, when Sarah was 35 years old. She never remarried and continued to live in the family home as she raised their children, Faith and Willard.

She was considered to be one of the area's reigning social matriarchs. She was listed in the telephone book in the 1920s as a fruit grower and held considerable properties in Allegan County.

Sarah purchased the Kirby House site on Center Street from her parents in 1886. She paid \$100 for the land and the home mortgage shows she borrowed \$400 at 10% interest from Mr. Kibby who owned a hotel in Douglas. The interest was most likely because the mortgage was in her own name, and women were not supposed to hold property, or allowed to vote at this time.

Some time prior to 1920, Sarah began using her home as a tourist home she called Hawthorne Lodge. Always the entrepreneur, she rented rooms to tourists and grew ginseng for commercial sale. By the late 1920s she and her daughter, Faith, a practical nurse, offered convalescent care or "a home for people who wish just a home". In keeping with the Kirby tradition of caring for those in need, Faith converted the home into a community hospital in 1931. The Kirby House was the area's first Community Hospital from 1931–1960. Many local residents take pride in pointing out they were born at the Kirby House.

Sarah made several trips to California with her mother in the 1890's. She moved to California as a permanent resident in 1932 where she lived until her death in 1951 at the age of 90. Sarah would be pleased to know that more than 100 years later the Kirby House still stands and serves the community.

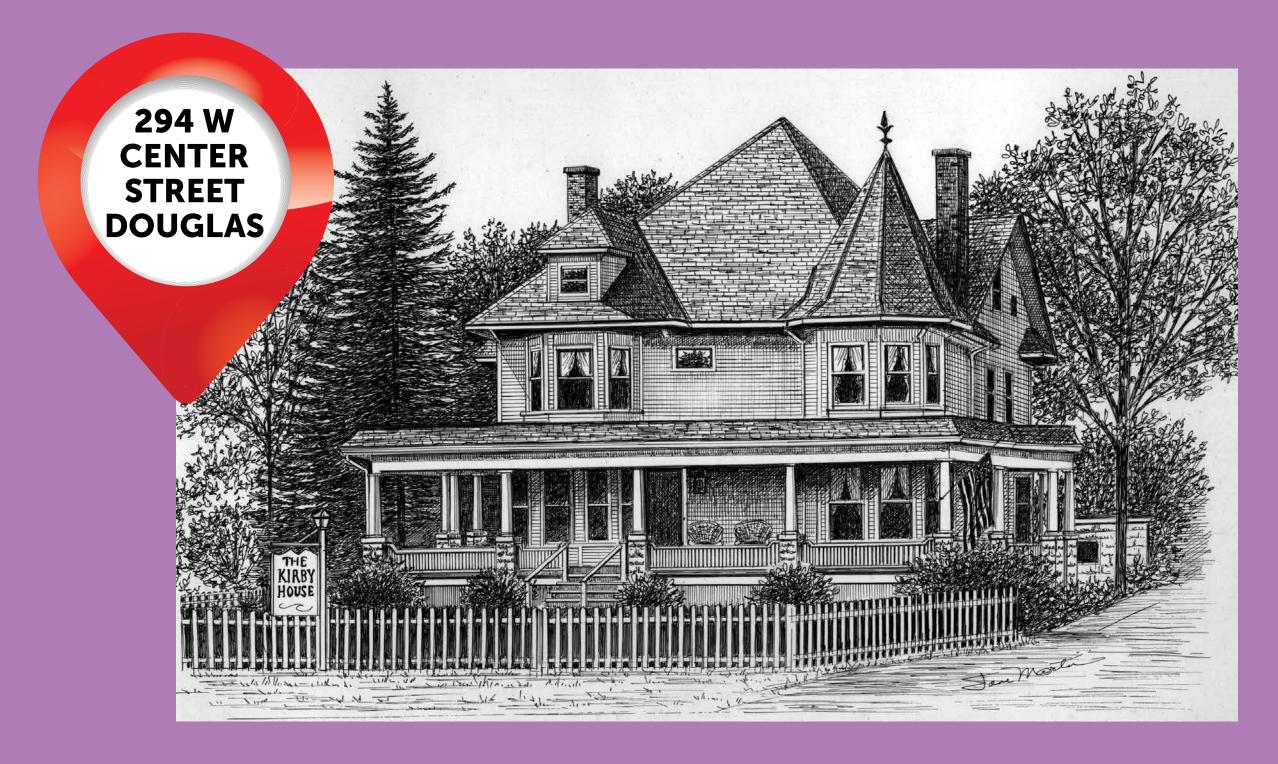
Sarah Gill Kirby researched by fellow Team HerStorian, Gemina Petruzzelli based on work by Marsha Kontio.







Sarah Kirby, far left next to her good friend Minnie Belle Gerber, appears in this 1896 photo showing a group of Douglas residents. She wears black in mourning for the recent death of her husband, Frank, while others wear then-fashionable summer clothes. (photo credit: Holland Sentinel)



The Sarah M. Kirby House, built in the 1890s, has historical significance peppered with a long and romantic history, and has earned recognition as a registered Michigan Historic Site.



The Kirby's circa 1918: Sarah, dressed in widow's black, is fourth from left.
The woman in profile is likely Sarah's daughter Faith and the girl may be Sarah's grandaughter Dorothy.



The Douglas Community Hospital was located in the "Kirby House" from 1932 until 1960, when a new facility was built. The new hospital was later closed and Saugatuck-Douglas no longer has its own hospital.