



Rosanna Dyer Osterman

Pioneer, Nurse, Philanthropist

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Rosanna Dyer Osterman (1809–1866) was one of the most generous members of her generation in Texas. She served Texas and the Confederacy as a volunteer nurse, and she left a legacy of charitable and religious institutions.

Born in Germany in 1809 to Jewish parents, Rosanna Dyer moved to Baltimore while she was still very young. Her father became the president of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, of which Mr. Joseph Osterman, a native of Amsterdam, Netherlands, was a charter member. Joseph and Rosanna married in 1825, three days before her sixteenth birthday.

Joseph was a silversmith, jeweler, and merchant who was having difficulty with his business in Baltimore. Rosanna's brother, Leon Dyer (who was famous for escorting the captive Santa Anna to Washington, D.C., in early 1837), had visited Galveston, and he convinced Joseph to move there and start over.

Building a Fortune In 1839 Joseph Osterman met his brother-in-law in New Orleans, loaded a large ship with general-store goods, and sailed for Galveston. Rosanna remained with her family in Baltimore. Once the men arrived in Galveston, they set up a large tent on a vacant lot and began selling their goods to the people in the town. After a year of successful business, Rosanna left the family home in Baltimore and joined her enterprising husband.

Over the next few years, Joseph and Rosanna made a sizable fortune for themselves, selling everything from coffins to revolvers and palm trees. They traded with people in all parts of the Republic of Texas as well as with other countries.

Pioneers Rosanna Osterman was a pioneer in her own right. She was a skilled and respected nurse. In 1853 she turned her house, in which she had entertained presidents of the Republic, into a temporary hospital to nurse victims of the yellow fever epidemic. She continued to volunteer as a nurse throughout the epidemics, which lasted until around 1866.

In 1861, Joseph was accidentally shot and killed, leaving Rosanna widowed and childless. She continued to devote her time to nursing the sick and serving the community.

Civil War Heroine During the Civil War years, Rosanna Osterman's nursing skill and generosity were especially appreciated. In 1862, when most residents had fled the blockaded port city, she once again turned her two-story home into a hospital. Although Texas was a member of the Confederacy, Osterman nursed Union soldiers as well as Confederates.

Her services to the war effort didn't stop at nursing. After Galveston Island fell to Union forces, she carried military intelligence documents to Confederate officers in Houston. With this help, they were able to retake the island in 1863.

Legacy of Giving In 1866, at the age of 57, Rosanna Osterman drowned during a steamboat explosion on the Mississippi River. However, her goodwill and generosity did not die with her.

In her will, Osterman left her fortune to a long list of charities. She left thousands of dollars to Jewish hospitals around the country, the Galveston Hebrew Benevolent Society, a Jewish foster home, a widows and orphans home, synagogues in Galveston and Houston, the Galveston Sailors Home, and other charities.

Review Questions

1. Name three of the charities to which Rosanna Osterman left her fortune.
2. How did Rosanna Osterman assist the Confederacy during the Civil War?

Critical Thinking

3. **Analyzing** Do you think that being a Jewish pioneer woman in Texas was difficult? Why or why not?