

THOSE WONDERFUL WOMEN OF THE WILD WEST

Read by Adele Failmezger

Written by Rev. Christine Brownlie

May 18, 2001

I'm very glad to be with you this morning, back from my excursion to the "Holy Land" at 25 Beacon Street, the headquarters of the UUA. One of the things I truly love about number 25 is the display of portraits, busts, and relics of our saints that grace the corners and hallways of that wonderful old building. One of the staff led a tour for us new ministers, explaining the details of the building and pointing out the various items that had been rescued from the homes and churches of some of our more illustrious ministers. We were even allowed to touch William Ellery Channing's pulpit. One of my fellow ministers referred to this tour as "ancestor worship".

Because March is women's history month, there was a special addition to the "ancestor worship" experience, an exhibit of portraits and a few relics from the women, clergywomen and laity, who have made significant contributions to our double heritage of Unitarianism and Universalism. As I looked at the faces, some gently smiling, some looking grim and determined, and as I read the few lines that summarized each woman's accomplishments, I felt very keenly the debt that I and all UU's owe to these saints who often took on the work that the men of the day saw as either insignificant or beneath them.

Today I would like to honor a small, but very important group of women who devoted their lives to two causes: liberal religion and the rightful place of women in American society. These women were not the vanguard of a legion of female clergy-wannabe's who would knock down the walls of the patriarchal hierarchy of the liberal church. I can't even call them a bridge between the all-male model to the inclusive model of church and state leadership we enjoy today. They were more like a wandering band of prophets and missionaries who spoke of things to come, but who, for the most part, did not live to cross over into the Promised Land. Many of these brave leaders died before they even got to the overlook where they could see Canaan and know that the goal was within reach, at least for the next generation. To use the words of historian and author Cynthia Grant Tucker, they "were at once influential and impotent, conspicuous and invisible, highly vocal, and effectively silenced...."

Their story was played out in three-quarters of a century from about 1878 to the early 1920's. The stage was called the Western Conference of the American Unitarian Association: Ohio, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and the Great Plains states. Their leader was an energetic and savvy woman named Mary Augusta Safford. Other names have a place in this proud history though they are nearly forgotten today: Mary's childhood friend and associate minister Eleanore Gordon, Olympia Brown, who was the first woman in America to be ordained by a denomination. Let us also name Florence Buck, Caroline Bartlett Crane, Marie Jenny Howe, Ida B. Hultin, Rowena Morse Mann, Marion Murdock, Anna Howard Shaw, Eliza Tupper Wilkes, Celia Parker Wooley.

These are just a few of the women who dreamed of serving the cause of religion and humanity through the work of ministry.

Most of these women had the misfortune of being born to parents who valued education for their daughters as well as for their sons. Sadly, most grew to be women of independent minds and spirits who looked beyond the safety of the domestic realm of housekeeping and child rearing for their life's satisfaction. Many of them faced the added hardship of having been exposed early in life to the heretical theology of liberal religion. I use these words, "misfortune", "sadly", and "hardship", without sarcasm. The usual circumstances of these women's lives caused them enormous difficulties, which they would fight all their lives to overcome.

Some of these women were denied a formal seminary education, even at liberal schools. Once they became ministers, they could find pulpits only in the smallest and poorest paying congregations. That is how they all found themselves in the Western Conference territories. Women filled the pulpits that the male ministers thought beneath their male dignity and education. Once settled, they were treated with condescension by the patriarchy of the AUA.

How did they survive? Fortunately, they had three great sources of strength to draw upon. The first and most obvious was their own character and courage. The second was a wonderfully supportive and nurturing web of sisterhood and friendship that existed between these clergywomen. Some of the women had been friends since childhood, but in most cases, relationships developed as they worked together to address their common problems whether the need was personal or professional. The third great source of strength was the support of their remarkable male colleague, Jenkins Lloyd Jones, the leader of the Western Conference. Jones was the father figure of the sisterhood, encouraging and guiding the women as they learned to become effective leaders of women and men.

Mary Safford was the mother figure of the group. She gave encouragement and financial help to young women who came to her for advice and her blessing as they began to prepare for ministry. All of the women raised funds for each other's congregations, preached at one another's ordinations and installations, and sent letters of comfort and care when times were tough. They nursed one another through illnesses and surgeries. And, of course, they quarreled and gossiped and gave one another unwanted advice.

The intensity of their relationships was matched by the intensity of their devotion and dedication to their congregations. The needs of their people and the stark living conditions of the little towns they found themselves in led these women to create a seven-day program church. They found themselves doing everything from supervising building and renovating projects to keeping the books to organizing Sunday Schools to teaching basic home economics.

The ideal home was the guiding principle for these clergywomen as they grew their congregations. Like any family gathering place, the rooms of the church were used for

many purposes. Kindergartens, workrooms for women and men learning new skills, dining halls that served nourishing cheap lunches to factory workers, and even gymnasiums for women were found during the week in the very spaces that were used for worship and study on Sunday. To provide a proper home for their spiritual families, these clergywomen often reached into their own small salaries in order to have the funds to pay for their new churches. Between 1880 and 1913, the congregations led by these female pastors built twenty church homes.

By the late 1890's and early 1900's, concern for the well being of the home and the family naturally carried the sisterhood into the various reform efforts of the day. While they agreed that the conditions in the great cities that had grown up in a few short years were deplorable, they disagreed strongly on the philosophy and method of reform.

Walter Rauschenbusch's writings on the "Social Gospel" attracted many of the younger more radical women who were also reading Marx and various Socialist writers from England. These radical women began to preach on social and economic reform, much to the dismay of Safford and Gordon who advocated a more gradual and individual approach to social reform. A running debate began and Western Conference magazine called "Unity" was filled with the disunity of the discord that developed.

It seemed that the only social issue on which the ministers could agree was that of suffrage. All of them were strong advocates for giving women the vote and seldom missed an opportunity to speak out on this issue at any public gathering.

Like many of their radical Christian brethren, the women of the Western conference began to feel that their ministry would be too limited if it were to continue in the context of the single congregation. There were many reasons for this shift away from the church home and family. Even more conservative female ministers found that their congregations were not at all responsive to the message of reform. Also, as mainline churches moved into the West, their theology softened and people began to move their membership to more socially acceptable denominations.

Perhaps the most powerful force driving the dissention among the women was the theological dispute that nearly killed the American Unitarian Association. In the late 1800's, the Western Conference of the Association had moved away from the traditional liberal Christian orientation of the Unitarian movement to a much broader conception of Unitarianism. This point of view portrayed Jesus as a teacher and brother, but not as the Christ. Jenkins Lloyd Jones, the guiding mentor for the western clergywomen, took a more radical stance. He wanted to eliminate any reference to Jesus at all because it was too limiting and precluded the ideal religious fellowship that he hoped would evolve. His vision was that of a fellowship of seekers bound together by a common quest rather than a core of shared beliefs.

Although the clergywomen were not in line with the orthodoxy of the Eastern establishment, neither were they as liberal as Rev. Jones. The result was that they were castigated by both sides of the argument and felt themselves to be unappreciated and

unsupported by either party. For a period of several years the conflicts became more intense and more sectarian. It wasn't until 1908 that the women and Jones were able to patch up their relationship, but by then the wheels of history had taken another turn which would ensure the decline of the sisterhood.

The AUA had worried over the decline in membership throughout the country and began to focus more attention on the cities and university communities. Meanwhile, the small towns had become fertile mission fields. Towns of two thousand had as many as seven or eight different churches for the residents to choose from. The number of pulpits held by liberal female clergy dropped from twelve to six. The administration of the AUA reserved the newer urban pulpits for younger men. The goal was to revitalize the churches by supplying them with a "manlier" ministry.

The new President of the AUA, Samuel May Eliot, came from an old Boston family. Eliot was no social radical and he voted against suffrage for women when it came to a vote in Massachusetts. One of his most telling acts was to suggest that the AUA begin a program for "parish assistants" which would offer training similar to what the Methodists offered to their deaconesses. Women would be trained to run Sunday Schools, visit the sick and elderly and co-ordinate programs for their congregations. Safford and her sisters were furious at this suggestion and lost little time in making their objections known. Eliot was at a loss at how to deal with such uppity women and he rubbed salt into their wounds by his patronizing attitude.

Whatever we might think of him in retrospect, Eliot was in tune with his times. Teddy Roosevelt was President and all of society was moving toward a more masculine image of power and success. Women were encouraged to develop their special quality of "unobtrusiveness" which went nicely with their "intuition" and "purity". Women were told that while they might never be heroes and preachers, they could evangelize within the confines of their own short reach and fill and lifetime with small and kindly acts.

The sisterhood put up a valiant effort. Time and time again they confronted Eliot's policies, and fought to maintain what little power they had left. But this was a fight they could not win. By 1909, Unitarian and Universalist clergywomen began to turn their intellect and energies to secular agencies that offered opportunities for service and social reform. Several individuals had positions of importance in the War effort as WWI swept the world and many of the Western sisterhood turned their efforts to the issue of suffrage. As some of the women moved into old age and infirmity, they were heartsick and bitter that the religious association and the country for which they had given so much of their lives now looked upon them as enemies.

There is one happy, hopeful note in this story. On November 2, 1920, many of these brave women had the indescribable pleasure of voting for the first time. I wonder how they felt as they stood in line, reflecting on their years of work and sacrifice for this right and for a place of equality and dignity in a society which still saw them as second class people. They are, for the most part, already forgotten except in the minds of a few

scholars. Most of them are not even given a line in histories written by their fellow Unitarian clergy.

It seems to me that the hard won achievements of these courageous women are taken for granted now. In most Protestant denominations, women are no longer challenged when we apply to divinity school or stand up in the pulpits of the largest UU congregations. Women hold positions of respect and power within our districts and the UUA. We are no longer surprised and thrilled when women take on these once elusive roles. It seems perfectly natural and right to us. To paraphrase the Hebrew Scriptures, we drink from wells we did not dig and we do not remember the names or the faces of those who toiled on our behalf. We take it all for granted. And perhaps that is exactly the way our foremothers would have wanted it.