

By the Grace of God:
Women Missionaries in Indian Territory
1830-1861

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"Christianize and civilize" were the battle cries of missionaries. Missionary societies devoted to christianizing the "heathen" at home and abroad were organized in the United States in the nineteenth century. Men and women, awakened to the need to spread the gospel, ventured to the frontier to preach, teach and save the "heathen" from extinction and their ways. These missionaries spearheaded the government's efforts to acculturate the Native Americans into the mainstream of Euro-American civilization. Women who served as missionaries in Indian Territory between 1830 and 1860 contained a "certain type of cultural and moral absolutism in their makeup".¹ These women endured many hardships but never lost their faith and zeal for christianizing the Indian; they were missionaries first and women second.

Acculturation was the nineteenth-century United States government's policy for the Indians. It was a continuation of Thomas Jefferson's belief that the Indians had the capacity for civilization.² The early association between Protestant missions and the government began in the colonial period. United States Indian policy was based on the belief that the Indians could change their barbaric ways if separated from the vices of white culture from which they had no defense. Policy makers hoped that assimilation after christianizing was possible: destruction of the tribes was out of the question.³ "Within the framework of a separatist policy, the higher values of a Christian society were to be fostered by transforming the wandering hunter into a sedentary farmer there by teaching the primacy of private property."⁴ The missionary, whose belief system contained the concept of a strong Christian civilization, was the ideal person to carry out

this policy.

Missionaries had always worked to christianize the "heathen" in the new country. After the War of 1812, when the government took up the problems of the Indian in response to frontier pressures, public policy and the goals of the missionary societies aligned. Missionaries became the eyes and ears of the government, working to educate and pacify the Indians.⁵ The spirit of nationalism transformed missionary operations from local foci to organized, regional societies that drew funds from all churches to support missions to the Indians and abroad. Major religious denominations appointed boards to oversee their missionaries in the field, for example, the Baptist Home Mission Board, the Methodist Mission Conference, the Presbyterian Mission Board, and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), a consortium of churches. These boards were responsible for raising funds, assigning missionaries, paying them, erecting buildings, and working with the tribes. Cooperation between the churches and the state was mutually advantageous. The government supported mission schools, and the churches fulfilled the goal of a civilized, christian Indian. "The Boards of Foreign Missions accepted the relationship with the government with few qualms as an extension of American culture".⁶ The nations's work was God's work.

Because the nations's work was God's work, the missionary societies established a working relationship with the government and helped to further the policy of acculturation. They adopted a paternalistic attitude toward the Indian and worked to locate him in his proper place in American society.⁷ Using the Gospel, they sought to change the Indian from a "heathen" with no chance of

salvation to a productive, Christian member of society. "It is the Bible, that book of books which causes the difference between savage and Christian nations" stated Cassandra Lockwood, a teacher at Dwight Mission, in her journal. ⁸

Motivated by patriotism, cultural absolutism and a romantic attitude toward serving the Indian, missionaries established stations and schools in Indian Territory to achieve their goals. Noted Historian Paul Prucha states; "Schools were the agencies to swing Indians from barbarous, immoral and pagan to civilized, moral and Christian."⁹ The new Christian was to receive religious, vocational and academic training. The missionaries knew they would not convert the old, so they educated the young. Miss Mary Price, a teacher at Tullahasse Mission, wrote, "We have much to hope for in the younger portion of our children and some of the older ones have many noble traits of character."¹⁰ Missionary societies used small wilderness day schools and manual labor boarding schools to teach agriculture, industry and academics- in all, a new way of life. To encourage attendance, the missionaries educated the parents to the value of schooling. Changing the behavior of the young by example became very important; schools served as models of piety, learning and family life.¹¹ The main object of the mission was to save souls: education was to be moral and religious training.

The dual priorities of the missionaries were teaching and preaching, but the mission boards were not allowed by the tribes to just preach. For the tribes it was more important that the missionaries teach the academic basics.¹² In the Cherokee tribe after removal, the missionary societies needed permission from the Cherokee National Council to locate schools in their

domain.¹³ In order to expand their schools and missions, every board tried to work with every tribe to gain a toehold in the various nations.¹⁴ The mission schools provided a precedent for formal education within the tribes, who relied on the missionaries to provide teachers, most of whom were women. Cyrus Kingsbury of Pine Ridge Mission in the Choctaw Nation believed that the women instructors provided a "benificent [sic] influence and a cultural atmosphere."¹⁵

The common characteristic among the women who ventured to Indian Territory was their faith. They were convinced of the good they as missionaries could achieve. Describing the missionaries, particularly the women, George Wood, a board member of the ABCFM, had this to say:

Their attachment to their work and to the Board with which they are connected is unwavering. With fidelity they prosecute the great object of their high calling and in view of the spiritual and temporal transformation taking place around them, as a result of the faithful proclamation of the gospel we are compelled to exclaim, 'What hath God wrought.'¹⁶

The wives of missionaries and teachers were an eager group of women who wanted to go to Indian Territory to serve God, not necessarily to escape the confines of a woman's role in the civilized part of the country. The West was the place to realize a religious vocation that was closed to them at home.¹⁷ Their utilization as teachers and assistants expanded traditional women's roles. Historian Sandra Myers states that although women missionaries were "conservative and traditional in most of their views...the missionaries nonetheless helped broaden a women's place within Western society and in the nation as a whole."¹⁸

The nineteenth century clearly distinguished between a man's world and a woman's world. Women were the civilizing influence in a

society and the keepers of the moral order. The ideology of domesticity crossed class and regional lines: missionary women carried it with them to the West.¹⁹ In the frontier world, women did not try to work out a new world for themselves or abandon the conceptions of their place in society. By becoming self-reliant teachers and workers who helped the religious cause of the mission stations, they did broaden the scope of their role in society.

The women who went to Indian Territory as teachers felt a strong pull to educate and evangelize. They were the first generation of literate women, trained in the new female seminaries and schools.²⁰ As the century progressed, teaching as a profession in the East and subsequently in the West became a female vocation. As more women had the training to teach, society accommodated and accepted the female teacher to fill the expanding need for educators. They were allowed their new role, because it was related to the ideology of women as the keeper of morals and inculcator of values.

Missionary societies and the Indian tribes initially frowned upon sending single women to the field, but as the need increased more unmarried women were sent to the new mission schools.²¹ The women who ventured to Indian Territory on behalf of the various boards were well educated and of extremely strong faith. Writer Micheal Coleman says " The mission field was no place for mediocrites who wished to free ordinary society, strong devotion, piety, good disposition, common sense and sound judgment were demanded of him and her."²²

The boards of missionaries who sent women to Indian Territory considered them helpmates to the male missionaries and teachers. In

board publications women were rarely listed by name and were referred to as teachers and female missionary assistants, never missionaries in their own right. Only in obituary notices, written by the head missionaries, were their contributions to the schools acknowledged. The notices commented on their untiring devotion, piety and natural disposition to the tasks of teaching.²³ The women were an important but unacknowledged part of mission life.

Staffing of the missions varied, but the head missionary, always male, oversaw the running of the station and made the major decisions in consultation with the tribe and the appropriate board. A station might consist of a head missionary, his wife (if possible), a physician in larger stations, teachers and helpers, both male and female. The wife or teacher was an important part of the station. N. Sayre Harris commented on the women at the missions, in a journal of his visit to Indian Territory for the Protestant Episcopal Church commented: "We could not but admire the cheerfulness with which the lady shared his [Cyrus Byington] labors and gave the natives the example of a cheerful Christian home in the wilderness."²⁴

Single men who wanted to become missionaries were encouraged to find a wife if they were single, four hands were better than two in the field. Robert Loughridge, starting out on his long career in Indian Territory, writes about his desire for a wife:

As I was yet a single man and God had said of Adam, 'It is not good that a man should be alone,' I felt that this was emphatically the case with a missionary among the Indians: so that the greatest preparation to be made was to find a missionary wife to share my trials and labors in a heathen land. The Lord was however very gracious to me and provided an excellent helpmate in the person of Miss Olivia D. Hills, who was teaching school near Selma Alabama. ²⁵

Miss Hills was the first of three wives of Rev. Loughridge during

his tenure in Indian Territory. Newly recruited missionary Andrew Watson advised fellow would-be missionaries to " get good wives if possible and if they did not get such as were competent to meet the needs of the field not to get any." Of his future wife he stated: " This lady [is] I think very easily suited to the station for which I need her." ²⁶ But not every missionary, male or female was married. Many married while there, for " the well educated and attractive young women who went to Indian Country as teachers and missionaries did not remain long unmarried."²⁷

Christian benevolence - not money- attracted women to the field. Although pay varied by organization, generally the teachers received room, board and a small stipend. According to Reverend Robert Loughridge these women " ... engaged heartily in the work, not for loaves and fishes but with true missionary spirit of self-denial and love for souls as was evident from their devotedness where their salary was \$100/yr."²⁸ Walter Lowrie wrote to William Robertson in 1849, outlining the reimbursement for that year for the missionaries: a single female teacher was to receive \$100.00, a missionary and his wife, \$200.00 and \$25.00 for each child and a single man was to receive \$166.00.²⁹ Although there was very little to spend the money on, finances became a concern when families wanted to send their older children back east for advanced schooling.³⁰ But women still applied for teaching positions in Indian Territory.

Once a woman was chosen by a missionary board to serve in Indian Territory as a teacher or assistant she often had the arduous task of getting to her assignment before a railroad link was completed. Traveling required months on an overland trail or a river steamer to arrive in Arkansas, the starting point for

ventures into the home of the five tribes. Ellen Whitmore's journal describes the poor conditions on her journey. "We arrived at Holidaysburg last night at midnight, then spent a few hours in a miserable tavern where we had no accommodations and very little to eat."³¹

Conditions on the rivers were often no better than traveling overland with long waits in river towns full of vice and corruption from the missionary standpoint.³² N. Sayre Harris came upon the wreckage of the steamer Buckeye on the Red River during his journey to Indian Territory in 1844: 100 passengers went to their watery grave; rescuers of the boat were able to find sixty bodies and buried them in a common grave.³³ Eventually the missionaries arrived.

The living arrangements in Indian Territory varied. The assigned station could range from well provided and well furnished to an outpost where the new missionaries had to erect their homes and school buildings themselves. If a teacher was lucky enough to be assigned to Park Hill, adjacent to the Cherokee national capital, the quarters would have seemed luxurious when compared to an outpost where one had to sleep in a tent or lean-to and cook outside until a permanent structure could be built. New teacher Ellen Whitmore described her accommodations at Park Hill on arrival:

The little room where I am writing is unfinished neither paint nor plaster but it has a nice comfortable bed a nice rocking chair and a bright blazing fire in the corner. I hope I shall not be homesick.³⁴

Andrew Watson and his wife had a different situation upon their arrival in Chickasaw Territory. "We are getting fixed up in housekeeping as well as we could expect, for articles of

furniture are hard to get and very scarce", he wrote, "The cost of provisions is very high." The boat carrying the Watsons' belongings hit a sandbar in the Red River and arrived in useless condition.³⁵ Often the missionary homes were similiar to the cabins their students lived in. "The initial homes were log cabins without windows and chimneys," wrote teacher Sarah Tuttle, " and it was sometime before families lived in comfortable homes with glass windows and bricks chimneys."³⁶ Sue McBeth, a missionary in the Choctaw Nation, contended with lizards and scorpions that visited her during the night through the crevices of the walls of her log cabin.³⁷ But the main objective of educating the children was not limited by the poor quality of the living arrangements.

There were two kinds of schools developed by the missionaries: the small station school, which was a day school and functioned as a Sunday school, and the manual labor school which was primarily a boarding school. In a smaller school the teacher would often reside with a tribal sponsor or by herself. A description of a small school and the women in charge appeared in the Missionary Herald:

Miss Burnham labor's are on the Red River about 8 miles from Wheelock. She resided there from October to May and taught school during the week and superintended a sabbath school and bible class on the Sabbath. As that location is unhealthy in the summer, she did not remain there after the middle of May. She has a little cabin where she lived a part of the time alone and a part of the time had one or two children with her. Her cabin is close by the house of a half-breed family from whom she recieved assistance when needed. She is spending the summers at Wheelock but continues her labors on the Sabbath at Red River. At the age of 64 the oldest in the service of the Board, she goes every Sabbath with untiring diligence to her work.³⁸

The preferable method of schooling was the boarding school. It worked to keep the children away from less christian influences.

Boarding schools were far superior to the day school plan and the only system in which the entire reform program could be accomplished. The missionaries wanted to establish both female and male boarding schools so the anticipated native ministers and pious citizens could marry appropriate partners.³⁹

The manual labor school taught not only the academic and religious basics but also agricultural techniques, sewing, cooking, animal husbandry and any other skills the missionaries deemed necessary to educate the children to become proper residents of American society. Communication was a constant problem, because the missionaries assumed that English would be the primary language. They had to learn the local Indian language to function and teach.⁴⁰ Besides teaching, the women had to look after the sewing, gardening and be den mother to a group of girls. The need to teach skills other than reading, writing and religion led to problems for many of the teachers and the missionaries in charge.⁴¹

In the classrooms and at the stations there was a chronic shortage of qualified teachers and assistants. Many times the wives of the missionaries, although not specifically teachers, would have to help teach in addition to the duties of caring for the the girls and boys before and after school and running the station. Ann Eliza Robertson, wife of missionary William Robertson of Tullahassee, often taught six hours a day and functioned as "mother to 40 girls." She was also responsible for the care of her husband and children. In her spare time she worked on her translations of the gospel into Creek.⁴²

Often new arrivals had to work at other projects for which they were unprepared or in which they did not care to participate.

In an 1853 letter to Walter Lowrie at the Mission House, Reverend William Ballentine of Wapunucka Mission wrote of the problems his teachers encountered with the division of labor:

I come to a matter of some importance. There are now four ladies here and they are all teachers and never sewers and spinners and I have really been at a loss to know how to manage in order to satisfy all. Miss Greene told me in positive terms what she expected to teach. Miss Schellenbarg told me on the day she came that if she had know that anything but teaching had been required she would not have come.... The ladies who take charge of the sewing can do nothing else: fixing, cutting etc will be all that one lady can possibly do for fifty girls- this leaves all the mother's care in the hands of the teacher and consequently the teachers [sic] office becomes more than ordinarily important.⁴³

They worked to instill discipline and the love of God needed for their salvation in the students. The women had a concerned interest in the spiritual welfare of their students. William McIntosh, a student at Kowetah Mission, wrote in a composition that: " If you become a Christian under their instruction it will give them such pay that they will hardly know how to express their joy."⁴⁴ As Miss Mary Price, a teacher in the Creek Nation, said: " Oh how responsible is my position; it devolves on one in a great measure to detect and correct the girls and nurture the good dispositions of those committed to my care."⁴⁵ Correct behavior and the teaching of western values would help develop a new citizen for the growing nation.

The missionaries regarded Indian family life as a failure because it did not correspond to western standards. The boarding schools, therefore, were responsible for teaching their charges by classroom methods and example. The women "endeavored to exhibit to the poor Indians all that is lovely and excellent in the different departments of family managment."⁴⁶ All the students ate

with the missionaries. The girls were supervised in the kitchen and the laundry and were taught the correct method of running a household by the missionary wives and teachers. The men taught the boys husbandry and farming. Unfortunately for the missionaries, the need for survival by farming, the repeated crop failures and the building of the stations were hinderance to the true work of the missionary.⁴⁷ Often the needs of day to day living took precedence over religious instruction.

Daily life in Indian Territory was vastly different from the previous living arrangements of the missionaries. "Isolation," wrote O. B. Campbell "was a handicap and discouragement to the missionaries from both the standpoint of receiving supplies and mail."⁴⁸ At Dwight Mission the nearest post office was seventy-five miles away and mail often took months to arrive. Many times supplies were lost on the journey to Indian Territory, especially the ones meticulously packed by new brides accompanying their husbands to their new assignments.⁴⁹ Orders for clothing for the missionaries and their families were placed with the various boards and filled by donation and purchase. They took their chances with what would arrive. Ann Worcester, the wife of Samuel Worcester of Park Hill Mission, "received a cask of clothing which was more than dared hope for. It will be shared with other stations".⁵⁰ Supplies and food were constant problems.

The missionaries had to learn from the natives how to use local foods to set a table. Miss H.F. Thompson, a teacher in the Creek Nation, wrote to Leighton Wilson at Mission House in New York, "The difficulty of furnishing a table in a country like this with no market could not be easily understood."⁵¹ Crops had to be planted at the new mission sites, many times resulting in failure.

In 1834-35 at Dwight Mission, the drought was so severe that only three bushels of potatoes were raised from the thirty planted.⁵² Hogs, milkcows, gardens, hunting and trade with the tribes were to supply the staples. The food was bland and repetitive. Cassandra Lockwood described a typical day of meals: "breakfast-- coffee, honey and cornbread, stewed meat: lunch-- beef, pork or venison, cornbread: dinner-- tea, hominy with milk and cornbread."⁵³ Because some of the stations were on the main roadways, the missionaries were counted on to lodge travelers and visitors and as missionary wife Addie Torry says, "they were expected to keep an open house to entice people back to the church."⁵⁴

Visitors helped break the isolation and boredom of the missionaries in the out-of-the way stations and at larger stations where schedules did not contain much visiting time for the missionaries. The isolation could be harder on the wives of missionaries if the husbands were required to travel the circuit preaching. Reverend William Templeton wrote to the Presbyterian Board that:

It is too much to ask of almost any female to stay alone at night when I am absent preaching. It is too arduous for them to teach as much as ought to be even without a regular school and attend to their domestic matters especially with such help as generally available. And when they are away from all society but Indian and colored and almost constantly at home the effect is to sink the spirit and in the end shorten the life.⁵⁵

Illness was an unremitting problem. Many letters home discussed the problem of chronic fevers and poor medical care especially in the early years or at a new station. New sites were often located in the swampy lowland that led to malaria. Entire classes and their teachers came down with fevers. It would take months for the station to regain its health.⁵⁶ Wives who had

children in the field risked death in childbirth.⁵⁷ After the funeral service of baby Bella Ainslie of Goodwater Mission and her burial next to two other missionaries in the church graveyard, Sue McBeth asked; "shall I sleep with them too."⁵⁸ Health matters were one of the major reasons cited when missionaries asked permission to leave the service of the various boards.

Health, marriage or the need to return to the states to see family and friends were the main reasons for leaving the field. Few women left because they had lost faith. Miss Francis Thompson of a Chickasaw mission asked for a leave of absence to see her family after four years, since "to me it does not seem unreasonable and certainly not to my father who gave me cheerfully to the work of missions with the hope of seeing me as often at least as once in four years."⁵⁹ Miss Mary Jane Wilson, who left because of ill health, wrote to Walter Lowrie that she hoped to "assist in some measure the cause of Christ back east since it would be a severe trial to give it up."⁶⁰ There were other reasons. Marissa Shellenbarger of Wapunucka Mission asked to leave the service of the Presbyterian Board because she "found soon after coming here that I did not feel well after eating cornbread. But being very reluctant to ask for any diet than that provided for the children I ate it until compelled from a sense of duty to ask for wheat bread." ⁶¹

Not every missionary who asked for a leave from a certain board left the vocation. Transferring between missionary societies was not unheard of, especially when one organization fell out with a certain tribe. This happened before the Civil War when the ABCFM had grave problems with some of the tribes over their

anti-slavery stance. Many women transferred to the tribe itself or to the Presbyterian Board from the ABCFM. Miss Elizabeth Dewey wrote to Miss Thayer in 1854 asking her how she transferred to the Presbyterian Board from the ABCFM since she had been "lent to the Cherokees as a teacher and I find myself placed in a day school where I have large half-breed boys to govern and control whom no female ought to attempt to contend with."⁶² When a tribe closed a school because of the impending Civil War, many of the teachers wanted to stay on. Reverend C.H. Wilson of Wapaunucka Mission wrote to his uncle at Mission House in Philadelphia to tell him that the ladies wanted to stay in the country if there was a need for them. "[They] place [themselves] at the disposal of the board and would gladly labor among the Indians if there were a place for us."⁶³ Elizabeth Diamond left mission work because of poor health but with a sadness of not being able to fulfill God's work:

I think there is nothing for which I feel more truly grateful that that I have been permitted to engage in the missionary work. I feel that I am all together insufficient for and unworthy to be engaged in it . If I ever do any good it will be by the grace of God.⁶⁴

The need for the grace of God bought these women to Indian Territory. They fulfilled their religious longings and their desire to serve by becoming teachers to the "heathens." These women looked upon themselves as teachers and spiritual guides for the children they taught. They did not see themselves as women liberators on a march for an expanded view of female roles. The tasks they assigned themselves were tasks that were rightfully theirs in the civilized part of the United States. Conservative and well educated, these women were part of the government's policy

of acculturation. They taught the Native Americans the ways of the conquering nation so that they could join the Christian civilization that was to become their way of life.

Endnotes

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