VOICE FROM THE FRONTIER

Nell Brown Propst

“If we are good enough to teach, then surely we are good enough to enter that world so accessible to our male students.” Back in 1891 a frontier Methodist woman wrote these words to The Christian Advocate, protesting in a witty but forceful manner the half-world to which women were relegated.¹

Missouri Powell Propst had come in 1874 as a bride to the plains of Northeastern Colorado where she was a full participant in the hard business of taming the frontier. At her childhood home in Northport, Alabama, near Tuscaloosa, she had played the piano and guitar, painted, and otherwise enjoyed life as a member of a proud family which was related to the Lees of Virginia.

Her father was Ezekiel Abner Powell, Sr., a lawyer, state senator, and sometime Methodist minister, who, like many men of the time, felt a responsibility to bear testimony. Before the Civil War, he had traveled all over the state of Alabama, begging people to stay calm and predicting the harrowing results of secession. He was right, of course, and the war and its aftermath devastated the South. His family, like most others, suffered.

Personal tragedy came to Missouri. The young man whom she married went away to sea soon after the wedding and never returned. The word came that his ship had been lost at sea.

A few years later, happiness came again when Sid Propst, a veteran of the war, saw her in Tuscaloosa one day and was so struck with her beauty that he persuaded a friend to take him out to the big Powell home for an introduction. When Missouri married Sid on February 10, 1874, she was twenty-five years old and ready for adventure in the West. His glowing accounts of the “land of milk and honey” in Colorado Territory, which he had visited the previous fall, contrasted greatly with the dreary prospects in the South.²

¹Essay by Missouri Powell Propst from historical collections of her descendants.
²Personal details are from unpublished biographical material of Sid Propst; autobiographical material dictated to daughter, Alice Propst Buchanan; “S. R. Propst” by W. L. Hays (unpublished); unpublished letters of Sid and Missouri Propst, 1874-1876 (Courtesy of the late Frank Propst, Bay Minette, Alabama); “On the Last Frontier,” account of the Powell family in Colorado, by Susan Fletcher Powell deVeau; unpublished biographical material of Will Powell, courtesy of Colonel William P. Blair; extensive interviews with Lena Propst Woolman Emery, 1866-1963, who came to Buffalo, Colorado, in 1876.
The young couple traveled west by train and covered wagon to the "new land" along the South Platte River in northeastern Colorado. The hundreds of thousands who had stampeded up the river in search of gold in 1859 and the years following had seen little value in the land. But in 1874 the Denver Times described northeastern Colorado as "a landscape of unsurpassing beauty" with thousands of buffalo and cattle and a few little clusters of houses. The entire population along the 180 miles could not have been more than 250 people.

Missouri's first night in Colorado Territory was spent on the dirty floor of a cattle camp, rolled up in a buffalo robe she described as "lively" (with "beasties," the cowboy term for lice). There was one tree at this camp, and it was the first she had seen all day. The almost suffocating smoke from an old camp stove was not the only cause of her tears, and she was glad her new young husband could not see her reaction to the place which he had so enthusiastically described to her. Missouri thought to herself, "The fun of immigration is about up!!"

Their first home in Buffalo, Colorado was a tent attached to a lean-to shack, which was actually a hole in the prairie topped by a cover of wood brought from the mountains. Missouri described this addition as eight by eight feet and about two feet high, except where it slanted up like a chicken coop — "...that delightful pen for me to cook in." Her fine quilts, linens, silks, and laces were stored away in a nearby "leaky sod hut."

For a more permanent home, they found no wood, no stones with which to build, but they dug the sod and put up a hut which Missouri's artistry made into a charming sight: "a quaint little sod house with sunflowers growing on the roof."

They celebrated their first Christmas in Colorado by going to the Buttes, sixty miles away, to get firewood, a luxurious replacement for the buffalo chips they had been using. The weather was good when they started. It was a lark, a different adventure than any they had known in the South, but on Christmas Day came heavy snow, and they hastily broke camp. After a time it became impossible to travel, and Sid nearly froze his hands putting up the tent. Next morning they awoke to a real blizzard. The wind repeatedly blew out their fire. Half frozen, they made a great effort and reached a sheep camp, finding three old bucks had had the same idea and were comfortably settled in the little shack. They were lucky. Many people have lost their lives in Colorado blizzards which cut visibility to zero and suck the very breath from the body.

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3 The Denver Times, 25 March 1874.
5 Missouri Propst, letter to cousin Tom Lee, from Julesburg, Colorado, 8 February 1877.
6 Sarah Elizabeth Powell Davis, sister of Missouri, autobiographical material.
They learned to respect the weather, to cooperate with nature, to adapt themselves to constantly changing conditions. Though they missed a civilized community with an organized church, they soon found God in the never-ending vista of plains and sky, unmarred, it seemed, by man's creations or sins.

Missouri's fingers, accustomed to playing the piano, helped to break the sod and planted gardens, milked cows, made butter. She lost her first baby to the harsh frontier life. But, like Sid, she grew to love the "great green prairie," and perhaps most of all she liked the feeling of usefulness in her life.

But she was a woman of great intellect, and there must have been times when she longed to use it more fully. She helped to organize the first Southern Methodist church in the area. In 1876 she and her mother-in-law, Jane Propst, attended the annual Denver Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, a conference which stretched from Helena, Montana to Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The Southern Methodists had constructed the first church building in the Denver area in 1860 but had disbanded during the Civil War. In 1876, despite the vast expanse of their conference, they had only a few hundred members.\(^7\)

Denver, at that time, boasted twenty-odd thousand residents, and Missouri and Jane marveled at the brick stores and wooden and brick houses, at the shade trees and plank sidewalks, as if they had never seen anything like them. The railroad streetcars and gas streetlights were downright marvelous to the women who had become accustomed to the simple life on the prairie.

Though Missouri wrote of the pleasure of making friends with people who had come West from Alabama and Tennessee, she had little active participation in the conference. Women were limited to singing solos and attending discussions.

The situation was little better in the larger Northern Methodist conference. The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society had begun in Colorado in 1873, but an all-male committee reported the activities of the organization to the annual conference. At the 1877 conference, however, the men were forced to concede that "Woman is man's equal," but maintained that the advantage of the Society was that it provided a means for women to evangelize their own sex. Even the women's Methodist magazine, *The Ladies' Repository*, was edited by a man.

However, doing the Lord's work on the frontier was not easy, even for the men. B. F. Crary, a presiding elder in the Northern Church, told

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\(^7\)Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for the year 1876, p. 14, lists 528 local preachers and members in the Denver Conference — 140 in Montana District and 388 in Colorado District.
that, as a traveling minister, he slept under wagons, in a granary, in a stable, on the floors of cabins, and many times on the ground. Sometimes there was no water to be found, and he cleaned his cooking utensils with sand. In 1873 he warned preachers who wanted a life of ease that "...the more space they can put between them and Colorado the better for both parties." The pay for the ministers was uncertain, and as Mr. Crary reported, "...some have had to work at daily labor for daily bread."

There was a constant turnover of ministers. Probably for that reason, many of the small communities had "half preachers," local men who did their regular work during the week and conducted church in someone's sod hut on Sunday. Jerome Bonaparte Landrum, homesteader, builder, blacksmith, and amateur dentist, preached the first sermon at Buffalo. Sid, who had put himself through a couple of years of college in Alabama, sometimes filled the pulpit when he wasn't on the road with his stagecoach or freighting business.

After several years of volunteer service, W. E. Tetsell, an Englishman, rode a circuit of several tiny communities, including Buffalo, and preached in the soddies.

The first real church building was constructed in Sterling, which had become the main town of the area. In 1888 the Northern Methodist Church, by then the largest Protestant group in Colorado, organized in Sterling and soon bought the Southern Methodist building. The first six trustees of the new church included at least three "half preachers," one of whom was Sid Propst. Perhaps Missouri felt encouraged by the new church. B. F. Crary had proposed to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, held in Cincinnati in 1880, that pronouns and nouns in the church Discipline be changed to recognize that "women were also serving as stewards, trustees, and class teachers — that "he" should not refer to man alone.

Actually the chief function of women in the church, even on the frontier, seemed to be the raising of money by cooking meals and staging socials and choir benefits. They cleaned the parsonage before a minister arrived and helped to settle his family.

But women like Missouri Propst longed to serve in a more meaningful way. She and Sid had prospered, and there were four bright healthy children in the big house which they built in Sterling. The soddy became a memory. Missouri began to use her talents again, playing her

10Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1880, p. 182.
instruments, painting portraits of her family and friends, teaching in the Sunday school, and writing bright, sparkling letters to her Southern family.

It was a time when almost any man feeling the call could preach the word of God. But women were denied that privilege. Finally in 1891 Missouri drafted an article of protest against the limited use of women in the church and sent it to the Christian Advocate. She ridiculed man’s habit of placing woman in an exalted position but at the time making that position a prison. She noted that the elm does not “...give the pine its elm ideas of what it needs to become a pine.” Yet man, she said, does this to woman:

Man being at one and the same time the institutor of the office, the selector of the candidate, the candidate, the elector, and the incumbent, he proceeds according to his Mohammedan, or his Buddhistic, or his Christian, or his Hebrew, or his savage, or his civilized ideas, to mark out “woman’s sphere,” to tell her what are her duties, her needs, her capabilities, how to be womanly, how she can make him happy, what in her will meet his approval. . . . how much knowledge he will let her acquire.

But man made one big mistake: “...his permission to learn to read opened the big outer door and let her into the vast fields of knowledge where she was, by no means, content with browsing around the edges.”

Missouri ended the article with the plea that women be allowed to make their contribution to the world:

‘It is not well for a man to be alone’ did not mean that man, poor fellow, was lonesome and needed woman to make things pleasant for him, but that he needed her help in planning and working of school systems, conducting of newspapers (those going into families), the making of laws, choice of officials, caring for the poor, and by all means, man should not be left alone in the ministry.

In a world so in need of improvement, call in the reserves, Missouri cried.

Her article was not accepted by the Advocate. She was undoubtedly considered a radical. Within a year, Missouri Propst was dead, a victim of typhoid, contracted when she returned to Alabama to care for her dying father. Her life was ended at age 42, and she did not have the satisfaction two years later of seeing Colorado women among the first in the nation gaining the right to vote. Women of her community would very soon be elected to the office of county clerk. Others would serve on school boards. If Missouri could have looked down through the generations to the 1970s, what satisfaction it would have given her to see her great-great grandchildren, boys and girls alike, campaigning for their mother, Mary Estill Buchanan, first woman Secretary of State in Colorado.

But even more satisfying would have been the progress of her beloved Methodist Church. The changes did not come very soon, although four women were accepted as lay delegates to the General Conference in 1896, and a new constitution in 1900 established women’s rights as lay participants. But it would be another twenty-four years
before Methodist women would be given limited clergy rights and 1956 before they would be fully ordained. Finally in the 1970s, a General Commission on the Status and Role of Women successfully advocated those changes of “sexist” references in the Discipline and elsewhere, changes which were first proposed almost a hundred years ago.

Missouri Propst was ahead of her time, but perhaps her voice from the frontier was prophetic, and her courageous determination to come into her own, we are discovering, was shared by substantial numbers of other Methodist women across the decades. Those changes have become a reality in both church and society.

[It seems appropriate for Methodist History to carry the full text of Missouri Propst’s article, which was denied publication ninety years ago.]

ESSAY ON WOMEN

by Missouri Powell Propst

Nov. 10, 1981

It tickles the sense of the ridiculous to hear a person assert conflicting and irreconcilable news, and especially is this funny, when done with the obstinacy of one who is sure he knows; and the fact that he is unconscious of his own absurdity adds to the amusement, while at the same time it excites impatience that he cannot perceive what is so clear.

Nothing can be more funnily exasperating than mankind’s authoritative and discordant utterances concerning woman. Such a profound jumble they are — “Woman is angelic — Woman shows wisdom in matters requiring judgment — Woman is unfit for council — Woman’s moral perceptions are keener than man’s — While man is putting on the boots of reason, woman flies to the goal with her wings of intuition — Woman is to be blamed for the larger part of man’s misdoings


12James M. Buckley, editor of The Christian Advocate from 1880 to 1912, is probably the person who rejected Missouri Propst’s article. It is interesting to note in an article published a month later the following statement by Buckely: “We all agree that it is right for women to speak and pray in public, to become deaconesses, to lead class, to teach in Sabbath-schools, to explain the Scriptures with or without a text. Where do we divide? It is upon the question whether or not women should be admitted to the law-making bodies of the Church, and be ordained ministers and appointed to pastorates. Why do some of us oppose these things? Because we believe them to be contrary to the Bible...” (“The Woman Question in the Ecumenical Conference,” The Christian Advocate 66/50 [December 10, 1891]: 844.)
— Woman's nature is not susceptible of high cultivation — All that he was he owed to his mother — Woman excels in organizing and conducting philanthropic work — Woman has no soul — Very little information will suffice from woman’s vocation — Woman has solemn responsibilities, even the training up of children for life in this world and the next — It is sufficient for Woman that she can be skillful with her needles, a good housekeeper and a stay at home; but man needs every facility for developing his powers of mind. The little that woman has accomplished in the world compared with what man has accomplished shows how inferior woman is to man — Woman forms the citizen, guides the republic,” and so ad nauseum.

The “Ten qualifications for a Wife” are thus stated — “good temper, good sense, wit, beauty, remainder to be divided among fortune, connections, education, family and so on.” The amount of good temper is unpleasantly suggestive, and the belief in woman’s need of education is the same which has always stood in the way of her advancement. Most of the opportunities now permitted her have been gained by a march of conquest with a skirmish at every post. But through it all the enemy has ever sounded the cry, — “Oh, woman’s vast influence! Woman’s solemn responsibilities!” — never perceiving that forming the citizen and guiding the republic demand the development of her highest faculties. If we suppose that her declared natural superiority (notwithstanding her declared natural inferiority) has been thought sufficient unto these high duties.

“For he was from the unorganized dirt unfolded,
But she came forth from clay which life before had molded.”

We are driven from such supposition by the following dictum of one of the early Fathers. “What is woman but an enemy of friendship, a desirable affliction, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a wicked work of nature coloured over with a shining coat of varnish.” Another one says, “Do you know that each of you is Eve? You are the Devil’s gateway. You are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack.” These ideas of the early Fathers are somewhat inconsistent with the exaltation of woman claimed by Christianity. They seemed to have regarded her chiefly as a means of degradation to man, something that should be kept from his path — as temperance reformers would remove the saloon. It was on this ground that women were ordered to be stayers at home, not to appear unveiled, to leave ornaments alone ("Natural grace must be obliterated by concealment, as being dangerous to the beholder’s eye").

And it is this poor innocent weakling man, on whose account one half of humanity has been remanded into obscurity, and for whom a whole continent, so to speak, labors to remove liquor temptations. It is he, even he, who assumes to be the guide and ruler of woman, forgetting that the
order as seen in creation is for *individual development*. The elm does not give the pine its elm ideas of what it needs to become a pine. The apple tree does not guide the cherry, nor the rose the honeysuckle. Man being at one and the same time the institutor of the office, the selector of the candidate, the *candidate*, the *elector*, and the *incumbent*, he proceeds according to his Mohammedan, or his Buddhistic, or his Christian, or his Hebrew, or his savage, or his civilized ideas, to mark out “woman’s sphere,” tell her what are her duties, her needs, her capabilities, how to be womanly, how she can make him happy, what in her will meet his approval, in what ways she can serve him, what he will and will not allow her to do, how much knowledge he will let her acquire. He has constructed her creeds for her, mapped out her heaven and hell, made her her *toy* and his *slave*. He has made himself her law-maker, judge, jury and executioner. He has burnt her, put her to torture, given her to the wild beasts, thrown her into the water by the hundred sackfuls. He has been her sole attendant in imprisonment, has had sole charge of every public institution in which woman has been placed.

But his permission to learn to read opened the big outer door and let her into the vast fields of knowledge where she was, by no means, content with browsing around the edges. Perceiving his mistake, he hastened to rope off the higher paths and to shut and lock the gates leading to the professions, and to put up warning placards, “Danger!” “This ground entirely preempted by men!” — “No women need apply!” — “Politics! A corrupt and vile institution we use for governing the country, managed wholly by and suited only to man.” — “Pulpit! Let your women keep silence in the churches — Women strictly forbidden to enter this path.”

Man’s conscience is exceeding tender on this point, but it is a funny conscience to be so tender in one spot and so tough elsewhere. The text, “I suffer not a woman to teach,” glances off harmless while he proceeds to call the womanly host from their appropriate sphere to go forth, unveiled, as teachers in Sunday schools, public day and evening schools and mission schools far across the sea. Other texts fall equally harmless — “Give to every man that asketh” — “Of him that taketh away thy goods, ask them not again.”

It is fortunate that scripture interpretation is only for man, as woman guided by her own light might suppose it just as wicked for a person to try and reclaim his property, or to incur debt, to refuse to give or lend as for him not to stop a woman from speaking. She might even ask why an injunction laid [on an] area of Judea nearly ten thousand years ago should govern the women of America today. There is one text, however, which seems to confound even the wisdom of man. “Wives be subject unto your husband as unto the Lord.” Plain and comprehensive, it required no explanations from commentators and councils whose prolonged labors
settle what is bible. Shall a woman obey her husband to do wrong? By her conscience — But her right to obey her conscience gives her the right of decision — the right of decision makes the text of no avail, and if one text can be set aside, so can another.

Sometime the world will be awakened by the dawning light, — of the light of ages shining in its face, and will see the why and wherefore of its chaotic condition, and the reason will be this, that the world has been trying to get on with only one half itself, the two parts unlike and it takes both to make the complete whole. Cooperation is Divine ordering. “It is not well for man to be alone” did not mean that man, poor fellow, was lonesome and needed woman to make things pleasant for him, but that he needed her help in planning and working of school systems, conducting newspapers (those going into families) — the making of laws, choice of officials, caring for the poor, and by all means, man should not be left alone in the ministry. For every human being stands in equal relation to God.

Woman is likely to be made a medium and divine inspiration and “Quench not the spirit” is as binding a text as the other. The pulpit everywhere is lamenting its own inefficiency. Let it call in the reserves, let it avail itself of that superiority in moral perception, of spiritual vision, the genius for planning, the skill in adaptation, the intuition, the patience, sympathy, warm heartedness, love, devotion, tenderness, energy, enthusiasm, earnestness, persistency, declared by man to belong to woman by nature. With these, plus the special preparations and helpful conditions accorded to man, the pulpit would gain in her a powerful ally, and some unused and misused womanly activities would be turned to good accord. According as women are wisely educated, heart and mind, so shall women become better mothers and wives, men better fathers and husbands, and so shall harmony be secured in the household.