

## FROM PRAIRIE TO PARSONAGE: THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN A FRONTIER CONFERENCE

ANDREW KLUMPP

A faded picture of three elderly women graces the first page of the 1928 journal of the Northwest Iowa Annual Conference (NWIAC) of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC). It commemorates the 50 years that these three women attended annual conferences alongside their husbands. Over the course of five decades, the women and men of the NWIAC had transformed a fledgling prairie conference from a frontier outpost into an established bastion of Methodism.<sup>1</sup> The Iowa Annual Conference eventually incorporated the conference as it grew to become the state with third highest proportion of United Methodists per capita in the United States at turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in its earliest days, these pioneers often remained unnoticed as they toiled on the remote prairies where they lived and ministered.

This project explores the stories of the women who helped to establish the Methodist church on this particular swath of American prairie. Specifically, it looks at how NWIAC journals memorialized these pioneering women and contends that these remembrances reveal how the role of pastors' wives changed as the conference developed. What's more, I suggest that this transformation demonstrates a shift from a more egalitarian frontier approach to ministry to an emphasis on the home as the epicenter of women's ministry.

In order to explore these contentions, I consider both the character of the frontier and developments within the broader national and ecclesial culture yet remain focused on how these journals memorialized the women who joined their husbands in ministry in the NWIAC. These conference records tell, at least in part, the stories of the women who labored on the prairie under the banner of Methodism. Moreover, they also reveal how the men who comprised the conference and wrote these memoirs understood the role

---

<sup>1</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1928), 1. When possible, this project uses the given names of women; however, because practices within the conference are not consistent, occasionally a memoir only identifies a woman in relationship to her husband.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Noll, "Protestantism: An Enduring Methodist Tinge," in *Religion and Public Life in the Midwest: America's Common Denominator*, ed. Philip Barlow and Mark Silk (New York: AltaMira, 2004), 49-82, 54. The two states with the highest proportion of United Methodists were Mississippi and Oklahoma.

of a pastor's wife.<sup>3</sup> These records, therefore, illuminate not only a bit of how these women lived but also the characteristics and actions that the men who remembered them celebrated. This project recognizes that language for memorializing the deceased can change and insists that such changes in language are not meaningless.

### A Frontier Context

Although Iowa welcomed its first Methodist settlers and preachers in the early 1830s, the farthest reaches of its territory, which became the NWIAC, remained sparsely populated throughout much of the mid-1800s. Nevertheless, as pioneers settled the fertile prairie, Methodist circuit riders followed. In the early 1860s, Landon Taylor—the first superintendent of the Sioux City District, which was in the heart of Northwest Iowa—described his experiences in the region:

though I have encountered many hardships, braved dangers, and suffered the loss of many social pleasures, I have been honored with the privilege of preaching the gospel where its joyful sound had never been heard, organizing new societies, establishing new Sunday schools, witnessing the conversion of many souls, and laying the foundation for further growth and prosperity of the church of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Taylor and the men who worked alongside him described Northwest Iowa in the 1860s as “beset with dangers,” “isolated,” and “largely treeless, strewed by innumerable ponds . . . intersected by sluggish streams,” and characterized by the “terrors of far ranging prairie fires . . . and the terrible blizzards of winter.”<sup>5</sup> For both itinerant preachers and the wives who traveled with them, the Iowa frontier presented a formidable challenge to ministry and survival.

At this time, the prairie frontier connoted a virtuous character and particular vibrancy.<sup>6</sup> Midwestern historian Benjamin Shambaugh lauded egalitarian character of Iowa's prairie frontier: “Above all the frontier was a great leveler. The conditions of life there were such as to make men plain, common, unpretentious—genuine . . . It made men really democratic.”<sup>7</sup> The process of establishing a Methodist presence in Northwest Iowa originated during this democratic frontier era. The Methodist pastors and their wives charged forward onto the “great leveler,” they undertook a ministry within the distinct geographic and cultural context of the American frontier.

The zeal of these early itinerants drove them and their wives onto the prairie in such numbers that in 1872 a cohort of preachers and congregations

---

<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of discourse is based largely on Gail Bederman's understand of discourse as an historical artifact in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1995), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Lyle Johnston, *The Sioux City District: A History* (Sioux City, IA: Morningside College Printing Department, 1978), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Johnston, *The Sioux City District*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Jon K. Lauck, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (Iowa City: U Iowa P, 2013), 31.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Franklin Shambaugh, *Constitutions of Iowa* (Des Moines: The Historical Department of Iowa, 1902), 28.

formed their own conference—the NWIAC. When Bennett Mitchell, an early member of the conference, reflected on the conference’s initial potential, he reveled in “the glorious fruitage that was to follow” its establishment.<sup>8</sup> From the founding of the conference with its 52 charges, 23 charter members, and 3,292 laity, the NWIAC sought to minister effectively throughout the prairie.<sup>9</sup> The work of sowing and reaping the glorious fruitage would fall to men and women alike.

### **The Frontier Conference: 1872-1892**

The NWIAC’s first reference to the role of women after its founding appeared in a strong affirmation of women’s civic rights. In 1874, Iowa proposed a constitutional amendment that provided women the right to vote in state elections. When the conference considered the question of whether or not to support such Iowa’s proposed amendment, it affirmed women’s right to vote. They responded, “We give our unequivocal endorsement to the proposed amendment.”<sup>10</sup> In no uncertain terms, the conference supported the suggestion that women be allowed to vote. The subsequent reasoning offered for this endorsement revealed strong egalitarian sensibilities, at least regarding civic responsibility.<sup>11</sup> The conference’s supportive arguments for woman’s suffrage included increasing number of voters available to support temperance reform and an effort to embody the Golden Rule.<sup>12</sup> Although the amendment failed to pass the state legislature, the NWIAC demonstrated a clear desire to expand the role of women, at least in some realms of society.

After the affirmation of woman’s suffrage, the conference’s first decade left few clues to illuminate the role of women. A basic observation simply notes that women attended these early annual conferences along with their husbands. The portrait in the 1928 conference journal, marking three conference matriarchs spending half of a century attending annual conferences, acknowledged that women journeyed with their husbands to these events. Yet, later records confirm that they attended these early conferences. Although they were not mentioned, women were present. At the same meeting, the conference also heard reports about the work of women’s organizations within its bounds. In particular, the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society

---

<sup>8</sup> Bennett Mitchell, *History of the Northwest Iowa Conference, 1872-1903* (Sioux City: Perkins Brothers Company, 1904), 3, 7.

<sup>9</sup> John Nye, *Between the Rivers: A History of Iowa United Methodism* (Lake Mills: The Archives and History Commission of the Iowa Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, 1986), 70.

<sup>10</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1874), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Although the conference supported the right of women to vote in the civic sphere, women were not allowed to attend General Conference as lay delegates until 1904, which was the result of a ruling in 1900 that made women eligible to serve as lay delegates. Despite its hearty support of women’s right to vote, the NWIAC did not send a woman as a part of its 1904 delegation (Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism, 1760-1939* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999], 223-224).

<sup>12</sup> Throughout this era, the movement to earn women the right to vote employed a number of terms including “woman’s suffrage,” “women’s suffrage,” and “woman suffrage.” In order to remain consistent with the sources, this paper elects to use the term “woman’s suffrage.”

brought a formal report of their work within the conference.<sup>13</sup> The contents of the report do not appear in the records; however, in response to it, the conference affirmed the value of the organization's work. For them, the group's work served a critical role in the conferences overall ministry. Throughout subsequent conferences, men continued to report on behalf of women's organizations despite the female leadership within the organization, yet it consistently celebrated the work of these women as integral of the fulfilling of the conference's own calling even if it did not acknowledge that they were there.

As the conference entered its second decade in 1882, the first mentions of individual women began to appear in the conference journals. That year three pastors wrote the single-page memoir for the six deaths that occurred between the meetings of the NWIAC. Four children, one minister's wife, and one minister died within the conference. Mrs. O. H. P. Faus—the one minister's wife who had died—received no individual treatment on this memoir page. The conference simply extended general condolences to the men who lost family members. The following fourteen paragraphs of the sixteen-paragraph memoir page recount the death of one of the ministers in the conference, the Reverend T. M. Williams. In Williams' memoir, the conference also acknowledged his devoted wife because she “proved a help-mate indeed to him in his work.”<sup>14</sup> His unnamed wife clearly participated in the ministry of the church, but she merited little discussion. Although in death, Mrs. O. H. P. Faus received no particular eulogy and was not identified beyond her relationship to her husband, Williams' memoir reveals that the conference viewed women as important participants in their husbands' ministries.

After the publication of the first conference memoir in 1882, the conference's practice of mentioning women remained restricted to those who died in the previous year, yet even in these brief obituaries, the mission and work of the female leaders on the frontier becomes clear. Only one adult—Hattie N. Wilcox, the wife of A. A. Wilcox—appeared in the 1883 conference memoirs. The committee on memoirs, which included one of the same members as the previous year, remembered, “Our beloved sister was a faithful wife, a loyal Methodist and an earnest Christian worker. Her memory is precious.”<sup>15</sup> Although brief, this statement offered substantially more than the previous year's memory of Mrs. O. H. P. Faus. Not only does this entry identify Wilcox by name and celebrate her identity beyond her role as a wife, it also reveals the conference's view of the virtues of a pastor's wife inasmuch as it celebrates Wilcox's character with words like “faithful,” “loyal,” and “earnest.”

This expansion of women's memoirs continued in the following year when the conference devoted five sentences to Martha A. Snyder and praised her for similar qualities. It remembered her as “a devoted, faithful wife, a

<sup>13</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1878), 9, 18-19.

<sup>14</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1882), 22.

<sup>15</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1883), 35.

kind, sacrificing mother, and a true follower of the Savior. After a long a painful illness she passed triumphantly to the heavenly land.”<sup>16</sup> While women still received significantly shorter memoirs than their husbands, the conference publicly acknowledged and celebrated lives and ministries of women like Snyder. In doing so, these brief memoirs illumine the qualities of a frontier wife that the conference deemed praiseworthy. Pastor’s wives found their identity as faithful spouses, loving mothers, and earnest Methodists. What is more, these ideal women possessed qualities of faithfulness, love, and earnestness in a way that equipped them to excel as helpmates in frontier ministry.

In 1886, only four years after the initial conference memoir, women began to receive multiple-paragraph entries that illuminated more about their role within the conference. The 1886 memoirs of Mrs. George W. Pratt and Mrs. S. C. Bascom reflected the persistence of the challenging frontier terrain by emphasizing the struggles of itinerancy on the expansive prairies. These descriptions of itinerancy are littered with words such as “toil,” “turmoil,” and “trials.” The words suggest that Pratt and Bascom experienced the toll of ministry on the frontier.

While celebrating Pratt’s ability to traverse the rugged prairies, her memoir also acknowledged that itinerancy allowed her to lead women’s organizations in many parishes. The journal claimed “her memory lingers sweetly” and that Methodists throughout the entire region mourned Pratt’s death.<sup>17</sup> Along with her husband, she led the church, established women’s organizations, and touched the lives of frontier pioneers. Her work functioned alongside those of men on the prairie. The conference celebrated this call by saying that “with her husband, she was called to labor.” Although her efforts remained wedded to the ministry of her husband, the conference recognized the important role of a pastor’s wife and believed that God had placed a particular call on her life.<sup>18</sup>

When discussing the work of Bascom, the conference also praised her: “The loss of Sister Bascom is irreparable [*sic*]. The extent of her influence in the Sunday School and her work in the church can only be known in that great day when the Book of Life shall be opened.”<sup>19</sup> The memoir specifically located Bascom’s work in the church. As a part of women’s organizations and in partnership with her husband, it stated that the church actually formed the primary stage upon which Bascom conducted her work. What is more, the conference celebrated this egalitarian model as crucial to the work of the entire conference. They lamented the loss of Bascom not simply because of her character, but also because of the work she did in and for the church.

The paragon of this model of a Christian frontier wife appeared in Kittie Smith. After her death in 1890, the conference devoted an eight-paragraph memoir to her work and ministry in the conference. It acknowledged, “Her

---

<sup>16</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1884), 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1886), 29-30.

<sup>18</sup> *Annual Conference Journal* (1886), 29.

<sup>19</sup> *Annual Conference Journal* (1886), 30.

devotion to the Master's cause was complete. Toiling with her husband, oft-times on hard circuits with meager support, she was never heard to complain." As a pastor's wife, she bore the weight of ministry. The language of toiling on hard circuits echoed the first circuit riders' initial assessment of the area as "beset with dangers." Similarly, the toll of the harsh climate was evident not only in the writing about itinerancy but also in Smith's early death at the age of twenty-nine. On behalf of the conference, her memoir remembered her as "clear and hopeful" in testimony, "in prayer . . . full of unction," and "in public addresses . . . thoughtful, spiritual, and effective."<sup>20</sup> Through prayers, testimonies, and public addresses, she ministered alongside her itinerant husband. Regardless of her lack of ordination, her actions reflected a ministerial vocation that took place in the public sphere.

Smith's time in the NWIAC made a significant impression on both parishioners and clergy. Regarding her life and death, her presiding elder stated, "She had a long, hard road of suffering . . . . She trod with wonderful Christian patience . . . . In her home life so chaste and cheerful, in her church work so courageous and faithful, and in her spirit so gentle and holy, she has left us an example worthy of imitation."<sup>21</sup> Even this denominational leader recognized the toll of an itinerant life, and more significantly, he heralded this woman as an exemplar of Christian living and piety. The church held up Smith due to her home life, church work, and spiritual life. Importantly, in this articulation of her life and work, the presiding elder distinguished between Smith's home life and church work. As the conference prepared to close its second decade, it remembered Smith's legacy as an egalitarian frontier woman who participated in the leadership of churches alongside her husband, endured the transience of itinerancy, and ministered through prayer, testimony, and public address. To be the wife of a Methodist minister on the frontier meant grit, gumption, and gusto. Kittie Smith had all three.

### A Transitioning Conference

As the nineteenth century neared its end, the prairie frontier was not the only thing changing. While pastors and their wives worked together on the frontier, the United States experienced an explosion of movements to bring about moral, social, and civic reform throughout the nation. During Progressive Era (1890-1920), a frenzy of reform movements, often led by women, resulted in momentous social changes.<sup>22</sup> This fervor encompassed a diverse agenda that ranged from the regulation of big business and the amelioration of poverty to the exaltation of the Victorian home and disciplining of debauchery among the poor and the overindulgence of the wealthy.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1890), 35.

<sup>21</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1890), 35.

<sup>22</sup> Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Building that Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era* (New York: New York UP, 2014), 19.

<sup>23</sup> Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), xiv.

This zealous movement catapulted many women to national prominence as the leaders of organizations and movements. Frances Willard became the driving force behind the Woman's Christian Temperance Movement.<sup>24</sup> Jane Addams emerged as a prominent leader in the settlement house movement and brought attention to the plight of immigrants and the urban poor.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, innumerable women worked for change locally, led revivals, and sought to transform their society. As the NWIAC became more established and entered its third decade, it did so in an era that witnessed nationally (and internationally) known female leaders like Addams and Willard move beyond the traditional female roles while continuing to extol the virtues of the home as a model for societal transformation.<sup>26</sup>

The impulses of the Progressive Movement and the expanded leadership of women within many of these organizations extended and in some ways was anticipated by many of the movements, leaders, and organizations that arose within the MEC in the decades leading up to and through the Progressive Era. In 1872—the year of the NWIAC's founding—the General Conference of the MEC established a special Committee on Woman's Work in the Church in order to address concerns and petitions specifically aimed at the role of women within the denomination.<sup>27</sup> Debates raged about the role of women in the church throughout much of subsequent decades. Organizations such as the Ladies' and Pastors' Christian Union (1868), the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (1869), the Woman's Home Missionary Society (1880), and the Deaconess Movement (1888) had arisen to empower women to meet the needs of their communities and the world.<sup>28</sup> In this way, the women of the NWIAC not only inhabited a geographic or cultural context, but they also worked in a denomination that was fiercely debating the role of women and expanding opportunities for women to pursue ministry.

Within this geographic, cultural, and religious landscape, the NWIAC memoirs of pastor's wives also began to change. They started to shed the language of itinerancy and public female ministry in favor of the language of the home.<sup>29</sup> During this transitional period, the legacy and memory of the toils of frontier itinerancy continued, yet the celebration of the domestic sphere suggested the migration of pastor's wives off of the prairie and into the parsonage. Opportunities for women appeared to be expanding; however, they were beginning to focus more exclusively on the home. The gradual move from the frontier into the domesticated life balanced this simultaneous exaltation of both the hardworking itinerant wife and the gracious lady of the parsonage.

These two emphases continued to appear in the conference's memorials of deceased women throughout this transitional period. Flora Ann Jamieson's

---

<sup>24</sup> McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 52-53.

<sup>25</sup> McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 53, 133-136.

<sup>26</sup> McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 114-115.

<sup>27</sup> Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient*, 154.

<sup>28</sup> Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient*, 152, 158-159, 168, 200.

<sup>29</sup> McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 114-115.

memoir in 1893 celebrated her identity as both an active minister and domestic saint: “Her testimonies in the social means of grace for months have indicated a deep cement in spirituality and a calm, quiet consciousness of Divine cleansing.”<sup>30</sup> She exhibited virtues that were reminiscent of her predecessors, yet her memoir augmented the familiar frontier trope of a frontier wife with a story about the unnamed author visiting Jamieson in her home. The author reminisced nostalgically about her hospitality and the excellence of her home. This instance marked the first occurrence of hostess language within the NWIAC journals, and Jamieson was the first woman whose home was specifically identified as the site of her ministry. Although she toiled with her husband in taming the prairie, importantly, she also maintained an exemplary Christian home.

This emphasis on the home did not pervade all memoirs from this transitional period. The 1895 memoir of Stella Belle Woodrow recounted her journey through many Midwestern states along with her husband. It celebrated that she “bore faithfully all the crosses and trials of an itinerant’s wife.”<sup>31</sup> The ministries she led in women’s organizations emanated from her work in the church rather than through the establishment of a hospitable home. Words such as “trod” and “way” peppered her memoir and suggested a life spent traveling over vast prairies in service to the church. Woodrow’s memoir testifies that not all women during this period had yet breached the expanse between the prairie and the parsonage.

Even when maintaining the language of the trials of itinerancy, subtle shifts in the perception of the prairie life signaled the closing of the frontier era of the conference. In the 1896 memoir of Azuba Amanda Kilborne, the writer claimed that she “shared the cares and delights of an itinerant life, encouraging and efficiently aiding her husband in his work. She joined him in pastoral visiting, and thus endeared herself to the people, exerting a most helpful influence in attracting them to the services of the church.”<sup>32</sup> Kilborne’s work resembled the egalitarian efforts of earlier itinerant wives, yet the language used to describe itinerancy differed from earlier accounts. Rather than “toils,” “burdens,” or “trials,” Kilborne shared the “cares and delights of itinerancy” with her husband. Itinerancy no longer connoted only toil and struggle but now suggested delights. As another sign of the gradual transition, at the conclusion of her memoir, the author specifically reminded readers, “she never neglected her home.”<sup>33</sup> As the conference approached the turn of the twentieth century, the grit needed to endure the prairie began to fade and the glory of the home appeared to be taking its place. Even for the most hardened frontier veteran, the home became more difficult to ignore.

In 1902—the same year that Shambaugh referred to the Iowa’s frontier in

<sup>30</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1893), 39.

<sup>31</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1885), 43.

<sup>32</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1896), 37.

<sup>33</sup> *Annual Conference Journal* (1896), 37.

the past tense—the conference memoir of Caroline Ellen Kiernan exhibited this burgeoning importance of the home in conference life. Her memoir remembered her as “the mistress of a parsonage home” and recounted that upon news of her death, “in many a parsonage . . . and in many a Methodist home, where she had been known as a pastor’s wife, memory told . . . of her good deeds and loving heart.”<sup>34</sup> She stood in a lineage of women whom the conference celebrated for their goodness, patience, and love; however, Kiernan’s sphere of ministerial influence became limited to her home. Unlike Mrs. George W. Pratt whose memory lingered sweetly throughout the region, Kiernan’s memory is located specifically in parsonages and homes. This subtle shift in language suggests the establishment of the home as the primary location of women’s ministries. The conference recognized that she shared the ministry of her husband, which appeared in references to her frequent moves over the plains, yet the home became the primary site of both her work and her legacy.

The elevation of the home in the lives of pastors’ wives did not mark the end of their activity within the local church. The calling to domesticity, in the opinion of the men who penned these memoirs, did not diminish the work and witness of women. Stories such as that of Hallie Laurie Lambly, which appeared in the 1903 NWIAC journal, occasionally emerged from the pages of the conference journals. The conference remembered, “In the special evangelistic work of the Church, she was her husband’s invaluable helper. When he did the preaching from the pulpit, she would go and personally win and lead the young people to the altars of the Church.”<sup>35</sup> Her efforts and fervor recalled the work carried out by her predecessors on the prairie. Nevertheless, Lambly’s active work in the evangelistic endeavors of her husband marked one of the last memorials to the more egalitarian frontier wife in the memoirs within the NWIAC journals. While women continued to work actively alongside their husbands in the life of the congregation, references to the toils of prairie life disappeared by the middle of the first decade of the 1900s. The ideal pastor’s wife now exhibited efficient stewardship of the parsonage and home as her means of partnering with her husband’s ministry.

The completion of this transitional period within the conference arrived in the unusual memoir of a woman who died shortly after Lambly. The memoir of a woman known as Mother Trimble was the only full memoir of a pastor’s mother that appeared throughout the 77 year history of the NWIAC. The Reverend J. B. Trimble remembered his mother as one of the preeminent missionary women in Canada before her arrival in the United States. Her life involved moving throughout Canada and the United States with her husband in her missionary efforts on behalf of the Methodist church, yet her memoir lacked any indication of the toil and tumult of this itinerant life. Her age—84 years-old at the time of her death—made her a contemporary of the women

---

<sup>34</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1902), 188-189.

<sup>35</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1903), 259.

who died during conference's frontier era, and, in fact, she was in ministry before the frontier conference's paragon, Kittie Smith.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the words used to describe Mother Trimble resonated more with home-centric descriptions of women who died at the end of this transitional period within the conference.

Trimble's memoir located the primary context of her ministry in her home, which involved both raising her children and caring for the church. The memoir stated, "Her home life had a wonderful charm, so quiet and calm, yet persuasive and intense, holding every member by the chords of love."<sup>37</sup> Despite living on the prairies of the United States and Canada during a period of significant migration and settlement, she was remembered as a lady of the parsonage. Trimble's exemplary home life offered an ideal example of a faithful pastor's wife at the beginning of the twentieth century. Unlike her peers from the frontier period, the toil of frontier itinerancy was not mentioned nor did the writer note any work she may have accomplished beyond her home. This memory of a leader and matriarch reveals that as the conference concluded its first quarter century, the role of women seemed to have transitioned fully from the prairie and into the parsonage.

### **At Home in the Conference**

By the close the first decade of the twentieth century, the transition of the NWIAC from a frontier conference seemed complete. The metamorphosis of the conference included the reimagined roles and ministries of women. In its second quarter century, conference memoirs teemed with the same laudatory claims about the work and ministry of women who labored alongside their husbands and led women's organizations within the church; however, the work of these women had moved from the frontier spaces and into the domestic realm.

Just as Kittie Smith stood as a paragon of a leader of Methodist women in 1890, the memoir of Alice Robbins offers insight into the model of the ideal woman at the onset of the conference's new domesticated age. The memoir remembered her as "a most excellent Christian lady" because "she was quiet and reserved in manner, but a congenial neighbor and a devoted wife and mother" who made her home in parsonages for over 25 years.<sup>38</sup> With the pronounced references to Robbins' submissiveness, quietness, and her ministerial location in the home, she assumed the role of a domestic saint and female example. Unlike her predecessor's unction and zeal in her proclamation on the prairies, Robbins exhibited a new model of a mother and a wife. The elevation of Robbins in 1908 confirmed the close of the age of the frontier woman and began the conference's foray in to the celebration of pastors' wives and the women's organizations as a network of domestic helpmates and wives.

---

<sup>36</sup> *Annual Conference Journal* (1903), 176.

<sup>37</sup> *Annual Conference Journal* (1903), 176.

<sup>38</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1908), 69.

In addition to the personal example of Alice Robbins in contrast to Kittie Smith, the national woman's suffrage amendment provided another parallel example to consider the change in the conference's perspective on women since its earliest days. In 1914, the NWIAC claimed to be "in hearty sympathy" with the woman's suffrage amendment being considered at the nationally. In its reasons for the adoption of this amendment, they claimed that the founding fathers used "the term 'men,' not in the narrow masculine sense . . . but in its broad and generic sense." The conference balanced this gender-neutral interpretation of the word "men" by adding that the government needed the voice of women because they were naturally more tender, sympathetic, and loving than men.<sup>39</sup> The same ideal about the nature and role of women that persisted within conference memoirs reappeared in the reasoning that undergirded allowing women to vote.

This argument, which was rooted in ideas about the nature of women and their character, did not appear in the 1874 resolution in support of woman's suffrage in Iowa. The 1914 resolution found its mooring in the perceived domesticity of women in the conference. Because of their proclivity for nurture, mercy, and the domestic arts, the conference believed women needed full access to suffrage on the national level. Four decades earlier, language of female agency in order to support the causes of the church at the polls dominated the justification for supporting woman's suffrage, yet those claims did not appear in the 1914 explanation. Instead, the qualities that enabled women to cultivate robust and nurturing homes provided the reason to support the extension of suffrage to women.

Ultimately, Nancy Bryan's 1922 memoir succinctly captured the fullness of the transition frontier to the home as the center of women's ministry. The memoir stated that for 42 years she and her husband "lived and labored together in the itineracy [*sic*]." This reference to 42 years of itinerant ministry did not use the language of trial that was present in the frontier and early transitional stages of the conference. It simply recognized the 17 churches she and her husband served throughout that time. The memoir focused its effusive praise of Bryan on her role as "a model home-maker" who presided over a parsonage that became both "a haven and a heaven."<sup>40</sup> Bryan had managed to bring the experience of refuge and rest to Iowa, and she did it in her home. Even a 42-year veteran of itinerancy found her identity primarily in the home rather than on the frontier. By 1922—50 years after the founding of the conference—parsonages and not the prairie provided the best place in Northwest Iowa to encounter heaven.

The three matriarchs of the NWIAC who celebrated 50 years in the conference in 1928 had watched the development of this onetime prairie conference. They witnessed the work and ministry of frontier women such as Kittie Smith, Hallie Lambly, Alice Robbins, and Nancy Bryan. Since their initial trip to the 1878 conference, the memoirs of their colleagues had shed

---

<sup>39</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1914), 64-65.

<sup>40</sup> *Annual Conference Journal*, Methodist Episcopal Church, Northwest Iowa (1922), 344-345.

language referring to the turmoil and tumult of itinerancy and the characterization of women as active in the church's non-domestic ministries. In the place of women who forged into the prairie, memoirs grew to recount the tale of women who superintended the home and collaborated with her husband's ministry through the cultivation of the next generation and abundant hospitality. Each year, men stood before the conference to read a report of the activities of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society and the Woman's Home Missionary Society, yet the details of their work, ministry, and strength appeared in the way the leaders of these societies were remembered. The discourse about these women changed and revealed significant changes in the roles that women played in the conference. The memoirs of the prima donnas of the plains reveal that the wives of Methodist itinerants had indeed moved from the prairie to the parsonage.