

ANN DUMVILLE: A WOMAN OF CONVICTION

LINDA CARLISLE PRUITT

Like a scorching broom, fire swept the sparsely settled Illinois prairie near Sulphur Springs in Macoupin County in August of 1842. Thomas Dumville, newly immigrated from England, went out to fight it. He returned exhausted and within a short time died from the effects of exhaustion and malarial fever. He left a wife and four children; a family so impoverished that his clothing was sold to help pay burial expenses. Within the year, the English cooperative society which had sent the family to America failed, and the widow Dumville lost what little property she had.¹

One might expect the story of the struggle to survive and provide for her family would dominate the record of this widow's life. But Ann Dumville was a woman of remarkable courage and conviction. Though materially poor most of her life, her plainspoken testimony and generous giving were habitually directed to the significant causes of her time. She spoke out in favor of abolition of slavery at a time when moral right and political expedience were at great odds in her church, community and nation. She supported education for Blacks and helped start a Black church school in Missouri after the Civil War. She advocated education for women and, in her best remembered act, provided in 1860 the inspiration for saving the financially troubled Illinois Female Academy (now MacMurray College) in Jacksonville.

For the church historian, her life is remarkable for exemplary Christian stewardship and devotion, and as an example of Methodism as it was expressed on the Illinois frontier. For the historian at large, her life is part of the multi-sectioned puzzle of history—fascinatingly interlocked with some of the major issues and events of the mid-nineteenth century.

Unlike such contemporaries as Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Francis Willard, whose views on abolition, temperance and education she shared, Ann apparently never acted as part of any group other than the church. Even within the church, her name does not appear on the membership rolls of the women's circles, though many of her closest friends are listed there. She did not become a famous organizer or leader. Rather, she exemplified how one "ordinary" woman simply living by the power of her convictions could affect the lives and institutions of her time.

¹James Leaton, *Methodism in Illinois: 1840-1851*, Vol. 3: *The Illinois Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, Unpublished monograph, Commission on Archives and History, Central Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church, Bloomington, Illinois, 19.

Early Religious Experiences – Wesley's Methodism

The source of Ann Dumville's moral courage was rooted in her religious experience. Her life was bounded by two of the dominant forces in Methodist church history – the teachings of Methodism's founder, John Wesley, in England and the preaching of such frontier circuit riders as Peter Cartwright in America. She was born in Flixon, Lancashire, England, July 12, 1795, four years after the death of John Wesley. Her father was a lay preacher and the family members were strict Methodists. Ann, writing in later years to one of her daughters, would recall:

I never heard Mr. Wesley preach, but my mother has a many times. He used to come to your grandfather's house before there was any meeting house in Manchester when he preached in the open air . . . I used to hear Benson, Clarke, Lessey Dawson, Newton Atmore and most of the good preachers; they all preached good old fashioned religion.²

The good old fashioned religion was based on Wesley's theology of Christian perfection and was neither easily obtained nor easily held. This theology pointed to the futility of good works as a means of salvation and called on the repentant sinner to seek the experience of grace as the only method of salvation. Only when this grace was received could growth toward Christian perfection begin, and the new Methodist was called upon to strive for perfection in this life. By increasing selflessness and devotion to Christ one could hope gradually "to be made perfect in love." The road between salvation and perfection was made somewhat easier by a second religious experience, that of sanctification. This second experience yielded a sustaining peace and assurance which enabled a life uniting faith and good works.³

Ann's religious experience, beginning in the fall of 1819, followed this Wesleyan model. In her words:

I had been doing good works, it was true, but had been doing them to bring glory to myself. My going to church and praying, and distributing to the poor had all been done to be seen of men and to have a good name. The Lord showed me what a precious crime it was to live to be seen of men instead of living to glorify him.

After two days of prayer and inner struggle, she would testify ". . . the power of God overshadowed me, and all sighing and sorrow fled away."⁴

But her conflict was not over. Not long after this her mother died and Ann was left to care for the family. James Leaton, church historian and Ann's contemporary, wrote:

²Letter from Ann Dumville to her children, November 31, 1855, Dumville family letters, Archives of MacMurray College, Jacksonville, Illinois.

Letters are quoted as written, except where punctuation has been added for clarity. All letters cited are from the above noted collection at MacMurray College.

³John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," in *The Works of John Wesley*. Vol. XI (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), 366-446.

⁴Leaton, 18-A.

In her attention to domestic matters she found many things to cross her and excite the evil propensities, the remains of the carnal mind within her. She became discouraged. . . .

Nevertheless she continued attending the Methodist class meetings. Through the counsel and encouragement of her class leader over a period of two years, she received the spiritual peace and assurance she had sought.⁵

Early Years in America — Slavery and Schism

Little is known of Ann's succeeding years in England. She married Thomas Dumville of Hollans Green, Lancashire, and they settled at Huddersfield, Yorkshire, where he worked as a foreman in a cloth weaving factory. According to her grandson, Dr. Edwin Holme, Ann worked as a nurse and midwife.⁶ While in Huddersfield, the Dumvilles had five children: Mary, Elizabeth, Jemima, Hepzibah (Eppie) and John.

In the fall of 1840 Thomas Dumville was sent to America to purchase a tract of land for the cooperative society of which he was a member. Except for one daughter, Mary, who had married and remained at Huddersfield, the rest of the family sailed from Liverpool to America. Following a route up the Mississippi River to St. Louis, they spent the winter there. During their stay they evidently sought out a Methodist society, and Leaton records that the preacher there, Rev. Wesley Browning, was impressed with Mrs. Dumville's "Christian worth."⁷

By the spring of 1841 the Dumvilles had moved to Sulphur Springs in Illinois, about twelve miles northeast of Carlinville. Sulphur Springs was a small settlement consisting of eight or nine houses, a church and a cemetery.⁸ Within eighteen months Thomas Dumville would be laid to rest in that cemetery.

The church at Sulphur Springs had been built in 1830 as a union church and was used by two or three denominations scheduling their meetings so as not to conflict. It became a preaching point on the Carlinville Circuit established in 1831 by the first Methodist circuit rider in the area, Rev. Stith Otwell.⁹ In later years, Otwell's widow, Mary Otwell Wright remembered Ann Dumville:

At one of his [Rev. Otwell's] appointments, Sulphur Springs, he met an English lady who has since then been one of the well known and honored characters among us.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Mrs. C. J. Lumpkin, "Ann Johnson Dumville," unpublished paper, ca 1946, 1.

Various draft versions of this paper are in the Archives of MacMurray College and the Carlinville United Methodist Church.

⁷Leaton, 18-A & 19.

⁸Carlinville and Macoupin County Sesquicentennial, Inc., *The Story of Macoupin County, 1829-1979* (Carlinville, Illinois: Carlinville and Macoupin County Sesquicentennial, Inc., 1979), 154.

⁹*Ibid.*

. . . When the time for preaching came around nothing but sickness would keep her from the meetings, and the four miles between her home and the place for gathering was cheerfully walked. . . . And often, while there, the joy of the Lord so filled her heart that shouts of praise and thanksgiving to God would burst forth from her lips, electrifying the whole congregation. I think no one ever doubted Grandma Dumville's religion. . . . Hers was a bright, joyful Christian life, not but that she had sorrow, for of that a full cup, even to the bitter dregs, was wrung out to her. As "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich" has truly been her experience. But 'tis not necessary to tell of her life, for she was well known among us.¹⁰

Shortly after the death of Thomas Dumville the church at Sulphur Springs apparently contributed to Ann's bitter dregs of sorrow.

In central Illinois at that time slavery was a boiling issue. Abolitionist societies and anti-slavery newspapers called for immediate emancipation of all slaves. However, pro-slavery sentiment was also strong. Many settlers had come to Illinois from Kentucky and other southern states and were sympathetic to the position of southern slaveholders. Evidently the congregation at Sulphur Springs leaned toward the southern position. Although they did not doubt Ann Dumville's religion, her outspoken support of abolition was unacceptable to them. Leaton recorded that:

Her deep devotion and zeal were not appreciated by the members of the church. She was an *abolitionist*, and that was enough in their estimation to neutralize all her other excellences. For this she was turned out of the church.¹¹

Methodist records for the Illinois Conference contain no reference to this dismissal apart from Leaton's manuscript history. However, given church procedures, the tensions of that pre-Civil War era, and what is known of Ann Dumville's later actions, it is reasonable to assume Leaton's record is correct.

Removal from a local church on doctrinal or moral charges was not uncommon during the first one hundred years of American Methodism. Churchmembers and preachers were regularly examined for evidence of Christian character. Conference records of church trials contain accounts of dismissals for various reasons, typically neglect of duty, Sabbath breaking, improper business conduct or immoral behavior.¹² Quarterly Conference Minutes for the Carlinville Methodist Episcopal Church include sections entitled "Examination of Character Taken Up" and record instances in which local elders were rebuked or dismissed.¹³

¹⁰Mary Byram Wright, "Personal Recollections of the Early Settlement of Carlinville, Illinois," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, XVIII (October, 1925), 677-678.

First published in the *Carlinville Democrat* in 1870.

¹¹Leaton, 19.

¹²William Warren Sweet, *The Methodists: A Collection of Source Materials*, Vol. IV of *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1964), 640-679.

¹³Record of the Proceedings of the Quarterly Conference of Carlinville Station, Illinois Conference M.E. Church, 1852-1884, unpublished record book, Carlinville United Methodist Church, Carlinville, Illinois, passim.

Ministers were even more thoroughly examined at their annual conferences. Usually any censures were for the same sorts of offenses as befell the laity, but in the 1840's new requirements for ministerial fitness were added. Illinois Annual Conference minutes for 1847 show that men seeking admission to the conference that year were asked: 1. Are any of you members of an abolition society? 2. Are any of you pro-slavery men? Apparently the correct answer in both cases was "No." Each of the men answered both questions in the negative and was accepted into the conference.¹⁴

Nationally, Methodist leaders were trying desperately to tread a middle road between radical abolitionism and pro-slavery elements of the church in a futile effort to avoid schism. Methodists in America had continually retreated from the unequivocal anti-slavery position set forth by their English founder, John Wesley,¹⁵ and initially supported by the General Conference of American Methodists in Baltimore on December 24, 1784.¹⁶ Since that first national conclave, Methodism had spread southward and many of the traveling preachers (circuit riders) had married into slaveholding families, thereby becoming slaveholders themselves. Frequently, these preachers were caught between church law requiring them to release their slaves and state laws prohibiting them from doing so. Sympathy for their situation, and even some support for the southern position, began creeping upward through the church hierarchy.

During this period, Peter Cartwright was presiding elder of various central Illinois circuits. He was a strong anti-slavery leader, both in the Illinois Conferences and the General Conferences. At the General Conferences of 1836 and 1840, the church was locked in bitter debate over slavery. Cartwright raised vehement pleas for compromise and for unity behind the church's primary mission of saving souls. He chided pro-slavers:

. . . they [preachers who became slaveholders] began to apologize for the evil; then to justify it on legal principles; till, lo and behold! it is not an evil, but a good! it is not a curse, but a blessing! till really you would think, to hear them tell the story, if you had the means and did not buy a good lot of them, you would go to the devil for not enjoying the labour, toil, and sweat of this degraded race, and all this without rendering them any equivalent whatever!¹⁷

Yet Cartwright was equally opposed to abolitionism:

What has all this violent hue and cry of proscriptive abolitionism done for the emancipation of the poor degraded slaves; Just for nothing at all; nay infinitely worse than

¹⁴Marie White, "Antislavery Leadership in Illinois Methodism," unpublished Master's thesis, Illinois State University, 1972, 5.

¹⁵John Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Slavery," in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. XI (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), 59-79.

¹⁶Halford E. Luccock and Paul Hutchinson, *The Story of Methodism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1926), 328.

¹⁷Peter Cartwright, *The Backwoods Preacher: An Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, edited by W. P. Strickland (London: Alexander Heylin, 28, Paternoster Row, 1858), 86.

nothing . . . it has engendered . . . prejudice, strife, and wrath, and every evil passion . . . until the integrity of the Union of our happy country is in imminent danger; and what has it all amounted to? Not one poor slave set free; not one dollar expended to colonize them and send them home happy and free.¹⁸

Ann Dumville undoubtedly knew Peter Cartwright and heard him preach at various times as he presided over central Illinois circuits. Eppie wrote her mother in one letter that she had gone to hear "Uncle Peter" preach and "of course his sermon was after the Cartwright style." Eppie then remarked that they heard a young Mr. Harmantrout preach that evening and added, "if I am any judge I will say the evening sermon was the better of the two."¹⁹ Although Ann's own opinion of "Uncle Peter" was never recorded, her views on the question of slavery apparently differed from his. Cartwright wanted to end slaveholding gradually by attrition, and he favored colonization of the former slaves in Africa. Ann felt the slaves should be freed outright and educated where they were for the purpose of their salvation.

In the spring of 1843, Ann traveled to St. Louis where she visited her former pastor, Wesley Browning. Browning was sufficiently appalled at the story of her dismissal from the church to write the preacher in charge of the circuit rebuking him for his treatment of Ann and affirming her Christian character.²⁰ Whether she ever rejoined the Sulphur Springs congregation is not clear. There is no mention of any further conflict between her and the church over abolitionism. With the split of the Methodists nationally in 1844, the northern branch (including Illinois) became stronger in its anti-slavery stance. Perhaps the congregations Ann later joined were more tolerant of abolitionist views.

It is clear that, regardless of any opposition, Ann and her daughters continued to support the cause for Black freedom. Eppie at one point sent \$3.00 of her meager earnings as a housekeeper to the Free State Party in Kansas.²¹ She also wrote in 1862 to her sister Jemima:

I am glad Mr. Lincoln would not change the sentence of Gordon the slave Capt. from hanging to lifelong imprisonment. Though for forty years slave catching has been pronounced piracy, And the punishment death, yet in all that time not one has received the punishment. The honor of the execution belongs to Old Abe. Our other Presidents have not had the courage to do their duty in this matter. But I believe the days of Slavery are nearly numbered, and I expect to see the end of them.²²

Jemima, in correspondence to Eppie in December of 1859 wrote sympathetically, "Sis what do you think of poor Brown who was taken at

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁹Letter from Eppie to Mother and Mima, October 29, 1857.

²⁰Leaton, 19-20.

²¹Mary Watters, *The First Hundred Years of MacMurray College* (Springfield, Illinois: Williamson Printing and Publishing Co., 1947), 90.

²²Letter from Eppie to Jemima, March 17, 1862.

Harper's Ferry? I suppose you have heard of the awful events in Virginia."²³ In another letter, dated January 4, 1861, Eppie responded to a sermon on slavery which Jemima had sent her:

I have read the sermon you sent and like it very well. I could almost tell when I came to the places where with a nod of the head Ma would say "Yes Yes" bless her.²⁴

Ann herself considered the Civil War the "Lord's War," and collected aid for the soldiers' wives and widows. To earn her own contribution, she chopped her own firewood (she was then in her 60's), donating the money thus saved to the Union effort. After the war, she was instrumental in starting a Sunday school and church for Blacks living near her daughter Jemima's home in Rosendale, Andrews County, Missouri. While visiting there, she learned that a Black family lived nearby. Visiting them and learning they could not read, she told them she would provide the books and her daughter would teach them. From that beginning, a Black church and Sunday school grew. In later years a leader from this church would visit and pray with Ann as she neared death.²⁵

A Frontier-Style Saint in Carlinville

Soon after the conflict with the Sulphur Springs church in 1843, the Dumville's financial situation worsened. The Macoupin County Assessor's book for 1842 shows Thomas Dumville, deceased, owing a total tax of 56 cents on personal property including two cows, one horse and one watch, all worth a total of \$70.²⁶ Leaton wrote of their hardship:

After losing their farm she rented a piece of ground and endeavored to keep the family together, but they suffered great privations, it often being the case that for days together their only food was corn cooked and beaten.²⁷

By the fall of 1844, they gave up farming and, apparently, the family went separate ways. No mention can be found of John during this period. Elizabeth married and moved to Iowa. Ann, Jemima and Eppie hired out as housekeepers. It is possible that Ann lived for a time near Nilwood, twelve miles due north of Carlinville, and attended the Nilwood Methodist Church. The entry for that church in the *History of Macoupin County* published in 1879 includes the following comment:

In these days of much zeal in walking, it may not be out of place to say that sister Dumville often walked five miles to church, which is but one manifestation of her zeal for the Lord of Hosts.²⁸

²³Letter from Jemima to Eppie, December 20, 1859.

²⁴Letter from Eppie to Jemima, January 4, 1861.

²⁵Leaton, 25-26.

²⁶Macoupin County Assessor's Book, 1842, not paged, Illinois Regional Archives Depository, Accession 235/10, Sangamon State University, Springfield, Illinois.

²⁷Leaton, 19.

²⁸*History of Macoupin County, Illinois* (Philadelphia: Brink, McDonough & Co., 1879), 76.

By the 1850's Ann was living in Carlinville, frequently working as a housekeeper for the Burke family. Major Beatty T. Burke was prominent in the community, having served first as a major of the local militia and then for many years as sheriff. Later he was elected at various times to both houses of the state legislature.²⁹ He was apparently a very successful businessman as well. The Burke home was described as "palatial" and his fortune as "colossal."³⁰ Following the death of his second wife, he hired Ann to live with the family and care for his children, Don and Ellen. She would live with them for extended periods during many of the remaining years of her life.

Although Major Burke was well respected in the community, his lifestyle apparently did not measure up to "Grandma" Dumville's standards. He was frequently the object of her firmly spoken rebukes, which he accepted graciously and, on occasion, invited. She responded to one letter from him:

I am sorry you were so unfortunate whilst at Baltimore as to get into such a "horrible" place as a theatre, I fear you were not so much horrified at it as you intimate. You must ask forgiveness of a higher power than myself.³¹

In another letter she admonished:

I am glad to hear that you feel well recompensed for your trouble and hope that whilst you are surveying the works of "my Father in heaven" that you will feel humble before him.³²

Yet the relationship with Major Burke was a warm one that clearly benefitted them both. He placed sufficient trust in her to leave care of the household to her for four months in 1855 while he traveled east on business. And Ann, though she labored hard, enjoyed being part of a family again.

While the Major was away in 1855, she evidently took charge of the household, firing one hired man ("I found two pipes, some tobacco, a bunch of matches, and a jug of whiskey in the saddle house and Ellen saw him smoking in the stable."), hiring another, enrolling the children in school, collecting and paying household bills and overseeing repairs to the cellar. She wrote him:

I have been glad you were away visiting whilst the cellar was being fixed and I had briks and lime, mud and mortar to contend with, it tried my patience, *let alone yours*, but I am amply repaid now, it looks so nice.³³

That she was satisfied in the Burke home seems clear. She said in one letter:

²⁹*Ibid.*, 94-95.

³⁰Manuscript notes, no author or date, Archives of the Carlinville United Methodist Church.

³¹Letter from Ann to Major Burke, October 25, 1855.

³²Letter from Ann to Major Burke, November 25, 1855.

³³Letter from Ann to Major Burke, October 25, 1855.

Whilst I was walking backward and forward with the slop to the hogs and water to the horses, with Ellen clinging to my side, prattling with childhood's innocence, it brought to my recollection the time when my own little ones were around me, and caused the silent tear to flow from my eye.³⁴

In later years when Jemima was with Ann at the Burkes, Jemima described a picture of contentment to her sister Eppie:

While I write all is quiet. The children are snoring, jack also (that is Ma's pet dog) and Mas well, fat & rosy, sitting right here smoking her pipe.³⁵

During these years in Carlinville, Ann's reputation as a devout and plainspoken woman increased. From memoirs of her contemporaries and a series of family letters written from 1852 to 1862 comes a fascinating sketch of this woman who was by then "a well known character" among them. A friend's daughter, writing years later, recalled:

As a child I remember her well. She was about five feet tall, I should guess; a stout, little woman who dressed simply in dark clothes . . . in church and class meetings she would shout "Amen" "Praise the Lord!" or "Glory to God" in a way that would always startle me.³⁶

That her contemporaries placed much faith in Ann's prayers and valued her work among them is apparent in various recorded incidents. In one such case she responded to a request from "Old Mrs. Adams" to talk to her daughter, who was a victim of the typhoid outbreak in Carlinville in the fall of 1855. Unable to converse with the dying girl, Ann reflected, "Health is the time to prepare for death."³⁷

Ann was also appreciated by the local church for her generous giving from meager resources. She apparently worked hard, lived frugally and gave whatever cash she earned to the various collections of the church. (This would, of course, have been in keeping with John Wesley's advice to Methodists in regard to money, i.e. to make all you can, save all you can and give all you can.) Leaton lauded, "She always remembered the regular church collections and prepared for them beforehand, so that her pastor was never disappointed by her failure to contribute. For many years her ten dollar annual contribution for missions was earned by taking in washings."³⁸ Jemima noted in one letter that her mother had again been appointed to the committee "to beg for the poor" that winter, and added that she had collected over \$100 to that end already.³⁹

If they appreciated her generosity, the various pastors at Carlinville learned also to respect her counsel. At least one local pastor earned her

³⁴Letter from Ann to Major Burke, October 9, 1855.

³⁵Letter from Jemima to Eppie, December 20, 1859.

³⁶Letter from Anna R. Burton to Janette C. Powell, April 16, 1945.

³⁷Letter from Ann to Major Burke, October 25, 1855.

³⁸Leaton, 24.

³⁹Letter from Jemima to Eppie, December 20, 1859.

reproof "for indulging in frivolous and foolish conversation and trifling conduct."⁴⁰ Her repute among these men was evidently fairly widespread. One area preacher mentioned to friends that he hoped the Conference would "do him a favor" of assigning him to stay at Mrs. Dumville's during the upcoming Carlinville Conference.⁴¹

In 1852 the Carlinville church appointed a committee of five men to estimate the cost of a new church. The prospects for the project were not good and, after several years, the endeavor was postponed indefinitely. In what was characteristic behavior, Ann prayed about the church. Convinced that God's blessing would be with the enterprise, she approached the current pastor, W. S. Prentice, and urged him to resume the building effort. As usual she backed her words with a donation. Rev. Prentice, respecting her reputation of cogency with the will of God, rallied the members and the new church was built.⁴² A few weeks after the dedication service on September 23, 1855, Ann wrote Major Burke:

We had a great day on the dedication of our new church, a great sermon, fine collection. \$1950 were raised that day so the Lord's house is finished and paid for and we are thankful and rejoicing and praying for a revival.⁴³

Apparently her prayers were honored. Within six months, the new pastor, L. C. Pitner, would record in the church minutes that they had been "blessed with one of the most powerful and extensive revivals ever known in this place." The new building had been completed in time to accommodate an increase of some one hundred and ninety-five new members.⁴⁴

During the years in Carlinville Ann remained in touch with each of her children. Mary, also widowed, and with young children, was struggling against hard times in England. Elizabeth and her family were enduring hardship on their farm in Iowa.⁴⁵ Ann wrote to Jemima and Eppie that Elizabeth had been ill, was very much dissatisfied and that they intended to sell out as soon as they could. She added "I intend to let them do as they like. I gave them good advice before they went away and they did not take it."⁴⁶ Yet she was concerned about them; Elizabeth's daughter wrote her in consoling tones: "Granmaw you nedant to be uneasy About us. We have enough flannels and lins to do us next winter."⁴⁷ John also had a family by then and was fighting poverty. Eppie relayed in her cor-

⁴⁰Leaton, 22.

⁴¹Letter from Eppie to Jemima, August 26 (1861?).

⁴²Leaton, 21.

⁴³Letter from Ann to Major Burke, October 9, 1855.

⁴⁴Record of the Proceedings of the Quarterly Conference of Carlinville Station, Archives of the Carlinville United Methodist Church, Carlinville, Illinois, 49.

⁴⁵Letter from J. M. Williams to Sister, January 17, 1855.

⁴⁶Letter from Ann to Daughters, November 31, 1855.

⁴⁷Letter from Margaret Emily Williams to Aunt Gemima, July 20, no year given.

respondence that he was digging for gold "on a certain particular spot" and added "I hope he succeeds to his satisfaction and ours."⁴⁸

Eppie and Jemima remained closer to home. The early 1850's found them working as housekeepers, Eppie at the C. W. Stribbling home near Jacksonville and Jemima elsewhere in Morgan County, perhaps at Lynnville. Both girls were attempting to attend school, as work permitted, at the Methodist's Illinois Conference Female Academy in Jacksonville. College catalogs for the years 1852, 1854, and 1856 list them as "irregulars" in the preparatory and English programs.⁴⁹ Jemima was able to complete sufficient schooling to become a teacher. Census records for 1860 show Ann and Jemima living in their own household in Carlinville with Jemima's occupation listed as schoolteacher. They apparently remained together until Jemima married and moved to Missouri around 1867.

Eppie's life was harder, and her mother's concern for her was expressed in several letters with such phrases as "Give my love to poor Ep. Tell her I want her to seek religion with all her heart and not rest till she has found it."⁵⁰ Eppie remained with the Stribbling family for many years, working very hard on their farm, wishing to return home and always hoping to advance her education. In a poignant letter to Jemima, she wrote:

I should like very much to come home but have little hope of so doing and for that reason have said nothing about it. I know that I lack a great deal of having all I desire, but I sometimes feel as though if I had a good education I could be content.⁵¹

That the family put great value in education is evident in their correspondence. On learning of Jemima's acceptance as a teacher, Ann wrote:

I am glad that you have received by your own exertions an education sufficient to prepare you for usefulness in an enlarged circle. There is scarcely any position in life so desirable to one who wishes to be useful as that of a teacher—to you in this capacity is committed the destiny of young minds. To you is given not only to impart to them a knowledge of the sciences but impart those precepts that will bring them in possession of knowledge far more precious: a knowledge that maketh wise unto salvation.⁵²

Ann's own educational background is not known. She could read and was a student of the Bible.⁵³ Her ability to assist Major Burke in household business suggests some competence with simple arithmetic.⁵⁴ However, she apparently did not write her own letters in 1855. Eppie at one point

⁴⁸Letter from Eppie to Jemima, April 22, 1860.

⁴⁹Fourth, Sixth, Eighth, and Tenth Annual Catalogues of the Illinois Conference Female College, Archives of MacMurray College, Jacksonville, Illinois.

⁵⁰Letter from Ann to Children, February 22, 1855.

⁵¹Letter from Eppie to Jemima, April 15, 1862.

⁵²Letter from Ann to Children, 1855 (no month or day given).

⁵³Leaton, 20-21.

⁵⁴Letters from Ann to Major Burke during 1855.

inquired of Jemima, "Who wrote that last letter for Ma? And why did not you do it?"⁵⁵ Variant penmanship and the differing tone and style of these letters support the premise that differing persons helped with her correspondence. Her letters to Major Burke are colloquial, using such words as "whilst" frequently. The letter to Jemima (quoted above), however, reflects a larger vocabulary and uses more complex sentences. Additionally, Eppie wrote on another occasion:

Grandma Stribbling was very much pleased with her letter and grandpa pronounced it the best one he has seen for some time, which led him to think Ma had gotten one of the preachers to compose and write, she furnishing the principal ideas.

Eppie assured him that "Ma was the compositor and Mr. Robbison the writer."⁵⁶

It is possible that injury or poor penmanship could account for her not writing these letters in her own hand. A contemporary recalled that Ann once requested her friend Mrs. Robertson, "because her penmanship was beautiful," to write a sketch of Ann's life for the church.⁵⁷ Additionally, a photograph taken later in her life, shows that her hands were gnarled and enlarged, perhaps by work or disease. However, her will, still on record at the Macoupin County Courthouse, was signed only with her mark — an "X" over her name.⁵⁸

One local church historian noted that "Grandma" Dumville's warmest friends were "highly cultured ladies, namely Mrs. Anderson, Robertson, Mayo and Halderman," and offered that as evidence that "while grandma may have been poor and plainspoken, she was neither illiterate nor uncouth."⁵⁹ Regardless of her inability, for whatever reasons, to write, Ann Dumville's views on the issues of her time were clearly well informed. This can be explained in part by her circle of acquaintances — the aforementioned women — and by her association with the Burke household, where events and politics of the day were surely topics of daily conversation. A vigorous press was present in the region at this time, and news was further circulated by frequent correspondence between relatives and friends, and by the circuit-riding ministers. While all this provided opportunity for a woman of Ann Dumville's station to become well informed, it was from an old and steady source that Ann formed her convictions. Her beliefs were rooted in biblical study, and they were both clearly expressed and

⁵⁵Letter from Eppie to Jemima, May 6, 1861.

⁵⁶Letter from Eppie to Jemima, March 17, 1862.

⁵⁷Mrs. C. J. Lumpkin, "Ann Johnson Dumville," draft of unpublished paper, Archives of Carlinville United Methodist Church.

⁵⁸Record of Wills, Book B, 110, Macoupin County Courthouse, Carlinville, Illinois. (Last Will and Testament of Ann Dumville, dated March 23, 1873.)

⁵⁹Mrs. C. J. Lumpkin, "Ann Johnson Dumville," draft in Archives of Carlinville United Methodist Church, 2.

supported with action. This gained for her the respect and love of her contemporaries. Dr. Charles Adams wrote of her:

She was a Methodist of the primitive style, characterized by singular faith and distinguished by all corresponding good works. Her views were large, and liberal, and intelligent. She was enthusiastic without a particle of fanaticism, entirely devout without the slightest spirit of censoriousness, and greatly faithful without offensiveness. Though endowed with but little worldly possessions her hands were always open for every benevolent or charitable enterprise.⁶⁰

Dr. Adams spoke from first-hand knowledge, for it was during his presidency at the Illinois Conference Female Academy in Jacksonville that the institution benefitted from Ann Dumville's good works.

The Widow's Mite Saves A School

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Illinois frontier was well on its way to civilization. Although pioneer poverty was still in evidence, many frontier communities had attained sufficient economic security to allow them to turn attention to the need for social and cultural improvements. The churches of all denominations led the way in establishing the first schools on the frontier. One historian has questioned the motivation of these churches, suggesting that many schools were founded "with not much better reasons than local pride or, in some cases, denominational rivalry."⁶¹ Nevertheless, their importance to the young men and women of the time cannot be overestimated.

The Methodists were at the forefront of this push for schools on the Illinois prairie. Tracing their founding to the heart of an English university campus (Wesley's Holy Club at Oxford) they felt a traditional tie with education. The founding conference in America (Baltimore, 1784) had drawn up elaborate plans for a full-fledged university in Maryland. Yet, early attempts to establish such institutions of higher education were not uniformly successful. Bishop Francis Asbury decided that the real need was not so much for these advanced institutions as for preparatory academies. After years of scattered effort, the 1820 General Conference adopted an overall educational policy and urged the annual conferences to establish within their boundaries "literary institutions."⁶² Illinois Methodists responded over the next two decades by establishing numerous small institutions; among them was the Illinois Conference Academy at Jacksonville.

Established in 1846 largely through the efforts of Peter Akers and Peter Cartwright, the school was at first the pride of the Illinois Conference. In 1853 it boasted a "Philosophical Apparatus sufficiently large

⁶⁰Leaton, 25.

⁶¹Luccock and Hutchinson, 365.

⁶²Sweet, 66.

for ordinary experiments and illustrations in Natural Philosophy, and a Library of several hundred volumes of choice reading." The course of study was divided into a Primary, or Preparatory, Department and a Collegiate Department. The Primary Department offered Reading, Writing, Spelling; Geography; Arithmetic; Natural Science; and Needle-Work, while the Collegiate Department provided a four-year classical course including Latin and Greek.⁶³ Attendance at daily chapel, and certain courses in Bible and church history and in Christian morals and ethics were required.⁶⁴

Unfortunately as the 1850s progressed, the bright star of the college began to fade, and when the Illinois Conference ministers met in Jacksonville in 1860 for their annual meeting, a major item of business was the future of this Female Academy. General economic hard times and the impending civil war had reduced enrollments and brought the school into extreme financial distress.⁶⁵ Earlier attempts had been made to meet the school's \$40,000 debt. At the Decatur conference in 1857 pledges in that amount had been subscribed: \$20,000 from the board of trustees, \$10,000 from the citizens of Jacksonville, and \$10,000 from the preachers of the conference.⁶⁶ The Carlinville church recorded in its minutes for the quarter following this conference:

The Presiding Elder having explained that the preachers at the last annual conference had assumed ten thousand dollars of the indebtedness of the Conference Female College at Jacksonville and the amount assumed by our minister Rev. J. H. Moore is \$300. On motion it is resolved that this conference take upon them his liability aforesaid.

The motion passed and certain members present pledged \$190 of the amount; a committee was appointed to raise the balance.⁶⁷

However, efforts by the churches to respond to the request for funds pledged at Decatur succeeded only in part. Now, three years later, the ministers were again being asked by the school's trustees to raise more money, and they were understandably reluctant. They complained that their congregations had been "bled white,"⁶⁸ and at least one repeated doubts, expressed by some of the laity, about the benefits of the school:

I would help, says one, but I have some doubts whether, on the whole, the College is doing any good. Some of the young ladies seem to learn more in pride and dress

⁶³Fifth Annual College Catalog for the Illinois Conference Female Academy, 1853, 12-13. Archives of MacMurray College, Jacksonville, Illinois.

⁶⁴Walter B. Hendrickson, *Forward in the Second Century of MacMurray College: A History of 125 Years* (Jacksonville: MacMurray College, 1972), 10.

⁶⁵Watters, 136.

⁶⁶*Minutes of the Thirty-Fourth Session of the Illinois Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Cincinnati: the Methodist Book Concern, 1857), 29.

⁶⁷Record of the Proceedings of the Quarterly Conference of Carlinville Station, 76.

⁶⁸Everett R. Turnbull, *A Century of Methodism in Carlinville, Illinois* reprinted from the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 24 (July, 1931), 44.

and foolishness than in anything else. They went up to the academy or college modest, quiet, unassuming young ladies and, after a few terms, they came away proud, vain, full of sport, and trifling.⁶⁹

Thus, support for the school wavered and its future seemed bleak. The Catholic church had expressed an interest in buying the facility⁷⁰ and the Methodist preachers, putting denominational jealousies of the time aside, were ready to sell. At that moment the men at the Jacksonville conference were startled to see a woman stand and ask to address them:

The astonished ministers looked and saw a quaint little old lady, very short and very broad; her dress of black was very full; over her shoulders she wore a black silk fringed shawl; on her head was a black bombazine poke bonnet; a kerchief around her neck, the ends neatly tucked inside her waist band. The woman was Mrs. Ann Dumville.⁷¹

At this time in Methodist history neither laymen nor laywomen held speaking or voting privileges in the annual conferences of the church. Indeed it was considered a privilege for the laity even to visit these conferences. Perhaps the preachers at Jacksonville were too startled to object to her request. One eyewitness remarked that "for a woman to rise and address the Conference was well-nigh as unusual and startling as an apparition from another world."⁷² Perhaps, too, the men recognized Mrs. Dumville and knew her reputation. She was allowed to speak:

Ye maun not sell the college. Your daughters must be educated; my daughters must have an education. We must keep the school. It must not be sold. It must not be sold! I am a working woman, but I have in the Chestnut and Dubois bank in Carlinville, one hundred dollars. That I give to save the college to the Methodists.⁷³

The account of eyewitness G. R. S. McElfresh records that the speech, though very brief, was "wonderfully effective:"

. . . for it was the eloquence of brave words accompanied by brave action . . . If an electric bolt had struck the Conference the effect could hardly have been more marked. The preachers shouted and wept and rallied to the rescue, and the College was not sold.⁷⁴

While it has been suggested that Divine Providence led Ann Dumville to be present at that particular church meeting, her attendance can more directly be attributed to her characteristic courage in supporting the causes in which she believed. Given her reputation for speaking her mind, her feelings about education, and her close ties with the academy, it is not surprising that she made her way to the conference on the day the fate of the Female Academy was to be decided.

⁶⁹*Central Christian Advocate*, August 31, 1859 as quoted in Watters, 145.

⁷⁰Watters, 145.

⁷¹Turnbull, 44.

⁷²Watters, 148.

⁷³Turnbull, 44 and Letter from Anna R. Burton to Janette C. Powell, April 16, 1945.

⁷⁴Watters, 148.

During the several years since her daughter's attendance at the academy, the Dumvilles had maintained close communication with friends at the school. W. C. Stribbling, the grandfather with whom Eppie lived, was a member of the board of trustees, and the board included other acquaintances as well: J. A. Chestnut, Carlinville banker and member of Ann's church; and W. S. Prentice, the preacher whom Ann had convinced a few years earlier to build a new church at Carlinville. Furthermore, Ann had traveled to the Jacksonville conference with the wife of Carlinville local preacher, John Halderman, who had been present at the local church discussions of the finances of the academy.⁷⁵ Thus, Ann was undoubtedly well aware of the crisis confronting the academy. Certainly, too, she had heard Peter Cartwright, a founder and trustee of the academy, speak in its behalf. On this issue they agreed: the young women of central Illinois needed the opportunity for the sort of Christian education provided by the Female Academy.

That Ann Dumville followed up on her pledge of \$100 is a matter of record. Board of Trustee records for 1861 show receipt from Mrs. Dumville of \$100 cash on subscription. In fact, it appears she gave more than originally pledged. A separate entry in the ledger accounts for an additional gift of two lots in Ashland (in Cass County about eight miles northeast of Jacksonville) valued at \$100.⁷⁶ Though the school's debt was not completely retired until 1863, the institution survived—a tribute to the power of the “widow's mite.”

During the remaining thirteen years of her life, Ann continued her good works: inspiring her contemporaries, supporting local church and mission efforts, advocating education for Blacks and women. Although she was never wealthy, probate records show that at her death she owned a one-story frame house in Carlinville valued at \$800. In addition, \$1,404.70 was due her in outstanding loans, made primarily to her children. Her will, dated March 23, 1873, provided that her estate was to be divided equally between her daughters Elizabeth and Jemima and the children of Eppie (who had preceded her mother in death).⁷⁷ The *Carlinville Democrat* for April 3, 1873 reported that:

Mrs. Ann Dumville, a well known and venerable “Mother in Israel,” residing in Carlinville from almost time immemorial, died last Wednesday at the residence of her daughter in Missouri, Her remains were brought back to town and buried at Sulphur Springs on Monday.⁷⁸

⁷⁵Record of the Proceedings of the Quarterly Conference of Carlinville Station, 76.

⁷⁶Minutes of a Meeting of the Board of Trustees of Illinois Conference Female College, October 1, 1861, 5-6, Archives of MacMurray College, Jacksonville, Illinois.

⁷⁷Probate Records, Box 42, Macoupin County Courthouse, Carlinville, Illinois.

⁷⁸*Carlinville Democrat*, April 3, 1873.

Epilogue

The prairie at Sulphur Springs is well-cultivated farmland now. No stand of prairie grass invites the sort of tragic fire so commonly faced by the early settlers. A replica of the original union church inhabits a corner of the old cemetery. There, about a hundred yards south of the church-doors and just beyond an ancient, creaking cedar tree are the crumbling tombstones of Ann and Thomas Dumville. Ordinary graves, ordinary people. Perhaps. Yet Ann Dumville's influence has extended well beyond the grave. Seven years after her death, a women's group of the Carlinville church adopted an orphan girl in Paovi, India, and named her in honor of Ann Dumville. Seventy-three years after Ann's death, June 9, 1946, the Carlinville church held an Ann Dumville Memorial Day, to remember her works and once again to raise funds for the college at Jacksonville, this time for a new chapel. Ann's grandson, Dr. Edwin Holme, speaking at that service, told of the Dumville descendants, remarking that "Most of them have been teachers and physicians."⁷⁹ Now, one hundred and twelve years after her death, Ann Dumville is again remembered — a woman of conviction who made a difference in her world in her lifetime and beyond.

⁷⁹"Memorial Service in Honor of Mrs. Ann Dumville," *Carlinville Democrat*, June 13, 1946.