Feminist Frontiers

Women Who Shaped the Midwest

Edited by
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Truman State University Press
Contents

Illustrations vi
Acknowledgments vii
Introduction ix

Frances Dana Gage
“Turning the World Upside Down”
Jeffrey E. Smith 1

Mary Sibley
Genteel Reformer
Mary Ellen Rowe 21

Amanda Berry Smith
Pioneer for African American Child Care
Marcia Chatelaine 39

Linda Warfel Slaughter
Cultural Education in North Dakota
Barbara Handy-Marchello 53

Marietta Bones
Personality and Politics in the South Dakota Suffrage Movement
Nancy Tystad Koupal 69

Carry Nation
The Kansas Cyclone
Patricia Ashman 83

Alice French
Indiana War Mothers: From World War I “Kitchen Soldiers”
to Postwar Immigrant Reformers
Elizabeth Cafer du Plessis 99

Efrieda von Rohr Sauer
A Life Reinterpreted
Carol Piper Heming 119
Contributors
Index

Illustrations

Map: Areas of activity of women in this volume xxiii
Frances Dana Gage, Courtesy of Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University 1
Mary Easton Sibley, Courtesy of Lindenwood University, St. Charles, Missouri 21
Linda Warfel Slaughter, Courtesy of State Historical Society of North Dakota 53
Map: Marietta Bones’s Locations 70
Carry Nation, Courtesy of Kansas Historical Society, Topeka 83
Alice Moore French, Courtesy of Indiana Historical Society, M0458 99
Elfreida von Rohr Sauer, Courtesy of Concordia Historical Institute 119
Esther Twente, Courtesy of Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas 139
Genora Dollinger, Courtesy of Sol Dollinger and Ron Dollinger 155
Harriett Friedman Woods, Courtesy of Andrew Woods 175
I hope this volume proves to be only a beginning for scholars interested in exploring the unwritten histories of midwestern women. This project began about ten years ago during a lunchtime meeting with two colleagues, Patricia Ashman and Shari Bax. Shari and I had already written and presented a paper on Harriett Woods. We discussed the fact that we had few resources on Missouri women, and the three of us decided to research and write on other Missouri women. We approached several other colleagues at the University of Central Missouri, and Carol Heming, Ann Legreid, Mary Ellen Rowe, and Maureen Wilt expressed interest in the project. Over time, we began discussing the possibility of a book, and decided to look for women throughout the region who were interested in researching and writing about midwestern women.

All the essays in this volume are original, written specifically for this project and designed to demonstrate the economic, ethnic, and racial diversity of the Midwest, as well as the gender challenges faced by women. I became editor by default, but I certainly have had many helping hands along the way. Together the core group of women at UCM examined papers from conferences such as the Women’s and Gender Historians of the Midwest Conference held in St. Louis in 2004. Other colleagues, such as Sara Sundberg, suggested scholars they had encountered in their own research and writing about the upper Midwest. Unfortunately, some of the papers and scholars we encountered along the way were not included in this volume for one reason or another. I hope those scholars continue their research, because we need more inclusive histories, and I’m sure that much of their research will be included in future volumes.

The scholars whose essays were included in this volume are as diverse as the regions they write about, and they are committed to midwestern women’s history. I want to thank all of them for their patience and perseverance. This project was a long time in the making. I especially want to thank Carol Heming, who patiently helped me proofread and edit several of the chapters in the book, and my husband, Mike, who also patiently read and reread for me.

Yvonne Johnson
St. Louis, Missouri
May 2009
Introduction

Yvonne Johnson

For more than two centuries, women in the United States have fought energetically and earnestly for both civil rights and recognition of their human individuality. In no region of the country is this struggle more evident than in the Midwest. From the struggle against slavery, for temperance, and for women’s suffrage to the fight for seats in the U.S. Senate, midwestern women helped create the Midwest’s image as a “crucible for reform.” The People’s, or Populist, Party came from the Midwest, and most of the reforms espoused by the Populists were adopted by the Progressive Party. Midwestern women were powerful orators who contributed to the formation of the Populist Party, and midwestern women helped create the Progressive Party in their fight for temperance, suffrage, and other reforms. While historians do not all agree that the Progressive Party affected the broad-based reform it advocated, its stated platform certainly gave voice to early twentieth-century political liberalism. Although midwestern politics became increasingly conservative in the twentieth century, the optimism that came from the settlement of the frontier, combined with the era of progressivism and political liberalism, continued to open doors for midwestern women well into the twentieth century. In their analysis of women’s participation in states’ policy-making processes, Marcia Whicker, Michelle Collins, and Bradley C. Canon concluded that “the Midwest and West are more liberal in the inclusion of women.”¹

The essays in this book focus on the lives and careers of eleven nineteenth- and twentieth-century midwestern women. They were all community leaders whose experiences influenced and reflected the region in which they lived. These women challenged or negotiated either the gender or racial roles that sought to confine and define them, and one challenged both roles. They fought for rights on a variety of fronts, across class and racial lines, seeking always to improve their private and/or public lives. Some exhibited intellectual prowess, others led seemingly “ordinary” lives. Others, like Carry Nation, burst onto the stage with enough flamboyance to create national and international renown. It might be argued that these women were not all

feminists as defined by twenty-first century understanding; however, most of them were feminists in a broader sense, for they were committed to human rights as they understood them. In this volume, the reader is asked to equate the term “feminist” with the notion of a universally recognized belief in human equality. From the earliest settlement of parts of the Midwest, women participated in cultural reform, engendering what Andrew R. L. Cayton terms a “proto-feminist” critique of that culture.²

According to Cayton and Susan E. Gray, “There is no coherent regionally specific history of women in the Midwest.”³ Cayton and Gray claim that while cogent histories of western and southern women are embedded in the “master narratives” of those regions, there is no larger regional narrative for the Midwest and thus no comprehensive history of midwestern women. One might argue that Frederick Jackson Turner introduced a midwestern master narrative in the nineteenth century, one based on the frontier as a unifying factor; however, that narrative completely excluded women. As late as 1959, Russel B. Nye’s *Midwestern Progressive Politics* delineated the lives and political careers of midwestern men only.⁴ While he characterized Midwest Progressivism as “part of a larger ethical as well as political movement,” in the entire volume he mentions only three women—Jane Addams, Annie Diggs, and Mary Elizabeth Lease—and even then, he mentions them only in passing.⁵

How are the experiences of midwestern women different from those of their counterparts in the West, the South, or the Northeast? While this is a complex question, the answer lies with two nineteenth-century aspects of the Midwest. Both the transformation from frontier farmland to agricultural and industrial giant and the growing progressive movement resulted in the characterization of the region as a “crucible for reform.” The early history of the American Midwest is of a frontier region settled by westward-moving pioneers, primarily of European background. Ray Allen Billington, who peripherally included women in his overall history of westward expansion, describes these newcomers as “the restless, the men and women of action, and the venturesome.” While the majority was middle class, migrants included men and women from all classes who sought to improve their lives, men and women who were willing to “gamble against nature for the chance of self-betterment.”⁶ According to Billington, the Euro-Americans who migrated to the frontier regions were well equipped by training and background to capitalize on the available new resources, carrying with them beliefs in social, political, and economic progress.⁷ The search for physical and financial betterment may also have contributed to the mobility of midwesterners. Many nineteenth-century women who moved to the Midwest “represented a large and

⁴Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics*.
⁵For more inclusive histories, see Chambers, *Tyranny of Change*; or Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*.
⁷Ibid., 684–85.
diverse number of regions,” and both nineteenth- and twentieth-century midwestern
women are notable for their numerous moves within that region.8 The mobility of these
women may have contributed toward a more socially and politically progressive spirit
that insisted on political inclusion.

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his “frontier thesis” to the American
Historical Association in Chicago, stating that the frontier created freedom, democracy, and a distinctly “American” culture that promoted individualism and provided
an outlet for men who rebelled against the “civilization” of the East.9 It is also possible
to extend Turner’s image of the man who rebelled against eastern conservatism
to most of the women in this volume. If Turner’s notion of the independent, creative
frontiersman is extended to women, it might explain why midwestern women took
the initiative to establish a number of separate women’s organizations and movements,
including the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and the settlement
house movement, as an extension of their domestic roles. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, settlement houses, women’s clubs, and “other separate female
institutions were an effective strategy by which women gained leverage in the larger
society.”10 Mary McDowell, head resident of the University of Chicago Settlement
and founder of the Settlement Women’s Club, urged women to become “municipal
housekeepers,” to move from the private to the public sphere as they worked to clean
up their communities and society.11 Harriet Sigerman states that, “With such institutions women quietly challenged the values of a social and political order dominated
by men.”12

One of the most common stereotypes of “westering” women is that of “sturdy
helpmate and civilizer of the frontier.”13 Certainly, most nineteenth century mid-
western women’s lives were centered in domesticity or “women’s work.” Despite this
image of “sturdy helpmate,” post–Civil War laws in western portions of the Midwest often allowed women to retain both property and children in case of divorce,
unlike those in eastern states.14 Since the delivery and publication of Turner’s thesis,
historians have argued that one of the characteristics of the westward movement
was to “accelerate the trend toward democracy.”15 Building on this thesis, it might
be argued that this characteristic is the reason midwestern and western states were
the first in the nation to grant women the right to vote. Despite their absence or
minimal presence in many published histories of the Populist and early progressive movements, midwestern women were active participants in both. Nye considers

8Riley, Female Frontier, 29.
9Faragher, Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner.
10Mason, “Mary McDowell and Municipal Housekeeping,” 62.
11Ibid.
13Myres, Westering Women, 2.
14Riley, Female Frontier, 21.
progressivism “a distinctly midwestern thing” and part of “a major shift in social and political and economic philosophies.”\textsuperscript{16} He states that progressivism “was an attempt to adapt the old democratic system to the needs of a new society.”\textsuperscript{17} Had he included midwestern women in his history of progressivism, his argument for a major shift in social and political change would have been stronger. Midwestern women helped produce the progressive movement and laid the foundation for a new society. Amanda Berry Smith and Carry Nation were not only community leaders but, as leaders of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, they also helped lay the groundwork for the Progressive era. Esther Twente, who was schooled during the Progressive era, carried its precepts into the 1930s and beyond as she helped develop what Nye called “the new liberal movement in higher education.”\textsuperscript{18}

The land itself has been inhabited by diverse cultures for thousands of years. While Native Americans were the first known inhabitants of the Midwest, the first Euro-American midwesterners came from the upper South, with New Englanders and migrants from the Mid-Atlantic following. By the mid-nineteenth century, European immigrant communities from Sweden, Norway, Finland, Poland, and Germany were established in the middle and upper Midwest. After the Civil War, African Americans, most notably the Exodusters, moved into the Midwest, founding separate communities and towns primarily in Missouri and Kansas.

In addition to mobility and immigration, Lucy Murphy and Wendy Venet have identified at least three other features that characterized midwestern women’s experiences. First, there is evidence that “in some situations, women’s religious affiliations maintained or increased women’s leadership capabilities and their opportunities for political and social influence.”\textsuperscript{19} The best example in this volume of such leadership is the life of Elfrieda von Rohr, the \textit{frau pastorin} who most likely wrote her husband’s sermons and became a female leader in the German-American community of Winona, Minnesota. Second, women and women’s organizations were critical in the establishment of institutions “such as schools and hospitals,” later termed “municipal housekeeping.”\textsuperscript{20} Midwestern women such as Amanda Berry Smith, Mary Sibley, and Linda Slaughter all exhibited such leadership. Finally, Murphy and Venet state that “work patterns have varied considerably for women in the Midwest.”\textsuperscript{21} Work patterns of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women varied greatly over time as industrialization, unionization, and agribusiness transformed the midwestern economy and brought labor activists such as Genora Dollinger into the spotlight. There were undoubtedly a variety of “oppositional gender categories” and gendered labor systems in the Midwest.

\textsuperscript{16}Nye, \textit{Midwestern Progressive Politics}, 126.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 187.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 148.
\textsuperscript{19}Murphy and Vnet, “Introduction,” 11.
\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 12.
as race, class, ethnicity, and gender intersected on the prairies and on the plains.  

Linda Kerber embraces the idea of the “frontier as a site of gendered negotiations” but only after the “assumptions and indeed the language” of traditional historical prose have been changed. The first step toward recognizing these gendered negotiations is to “undermine the generic claims” as well as the language of traditional historic prose. Not only did historians such as Turner and Nye omit women from their narratives, but they also used masculine images and terms to describe the settlement of the frontier. Women, like men, transformed the midwestern frontier, and women have remained an active and creative presence into the twenty-first century. The essays in this volume subvert the traditional narrative by focusing on the lives of and methods used by nineteenth- and twentieth-century women to negotiate their own destinies and affect the destinies of their generation and of generations to follow.

While most of the women in this volume led well-documented public lives, others led more obscure lives, forcing their researchers to read between the few lines left by them or their family members. Whether the lives of the women in this collection were public or private, they all had an impact on their communities, for all of them were community leaders.

Glenda Riley emphasizes the commonalities of female life on the nineteenth-century frontier, arguing that while men’s lives were typically heterogeneous since they pursued a variety of occupations, women’s lives tended to be more homogeneous. She states that the lives of most nineteenth-century midwestern women were defined by a “pervasive domestic orientation.” Because this collection covers several generations of women, a more complex scenario emerges in the lives of women leaders who focused on community involvement outside their hearths and homes. While several of the nineteenth-century women in this volume were oriented by or “confined” by European-derived notions of domesticity, others certainly were not. As women neared the turn of the twentieth century, their lives became much less defined by domesticity, as they focused more on community building, networking, and eventually on social and political action. Many midwestern women negotiated a new meaning for domesticity in the process. These women included those whose biographies appear in this collection, midwesterners who lived in Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Ohio, Minnesota, Michigan, and the Dakotas.

The first two women in this collection were born in the first decade of the nineteenth century. According to Cayton, “because the ‘cult of domesticity’ assumed that women were pious and virtuous, they had been encouraged to be active in temperance and antislavery societies.” The ideal woman, the “true woman” was expected to

23 Kerber, “Gender,” 42.
24 Ibid., 42.
25 Riley, *Female Frontier*, 200.
27 Cayton and Onuf, *Midwest and the Nation*, 100.
be pure, pious, submissive, and domestic, and to keep her focus on the home and her family. According to Jeffrey Smith, Frances Dana Gage, who was born in 1808 in Ohio, claimed that her “hatred” for the “limitations of sex” sprang from an incident in her life when she was ten years old. By the early 1850s, Gage had announced her commitment to the abolition of slavery, woman suffrage, and temperance through her articles that appeared in a wide array of newspapers and magazines. She also made regular appearances at conventions and on the lecture circuit throughout the 1880s and 1890s. During this era she recognized herself as a pioneer for women’s rights and temperance. When Amelia Bloomer visited the Midwest from the state of New York, she stayed with the Gages, who had relocated to St. Louis, and the two women shared the lecture platform there. Bloomer later moved to the Midwest, settling in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where she continued her battle for woman suffrage. In 1851, as chair of the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, Gage made one of her most controversial decisions by allowing Sojourner Truth to deliver her now-famous “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” speech, and then transcribing it for posterity. According to Nell Painter, the famous “Ar’n’t I a Woman” refrain was actually “Gage’s invention.” Painter argues that had Truth actually uttered and then repeated the refrain, it would have been included in other accounts, especially Marius Robinson’s early account, and suggests that much of Gage’s account was written for dramatic effect.

In the years following the Civil War, Gage joined the ranks of abolitionists who supported ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, granting voting rights to African American men. Then she turned her writing and speaking abilities to the subject of temperance, a subject she intertwined with women’s rights. She continued to write and speak on behalf of women’s rights until her death in 1884.

Mary Easton Sibley’s social conscience is more difficult to locate than that of Frances Dana Gage. Biographer Mary Ellen Rowe describes Sibley as a complex and conflicted character. Like many earlier midwestern women, she was born in eastern “climes,” in Rome, New York, in 1800. Her parents moved the family to Missouri when she was just a young child, and she married George Sibley when she was fifteen years old, several years younger than typical frontierswomen. By 1828, the Sibleys were living in St. Charles, Missouri, and in 1831, Mary opened a school for girls on the couple’s Linden Woods farm. Such prairie schools were fairly common in Missouri in the 1830s and Mary was the “driving force” that established the school. According to Julie Roy Jeffrey, women were often the ones “who started the educational process.”

28 See Welter, “Cult of True Womanhood.”
29 Amelia Bloomer settled in Council Bluffs, Iowa, in 1855 where she lectured on temperance and women’s rights. During the Civil War, she founded the Council Bluffs Soldiers’ Aid Society. After the war, she returned to her temperance and women’s suffrage activities, founding the Iowa Woman’s Suffrage Association in 1870. She died in 1894. See Riley, Female Frontier, 167–68.
30 Painter, Sojourner Truth, 168–74.
31 The average age for marriage by young women in nineteenth-century Missouri was nineteen. See Riley, Female Frontier, 49.
as many considered teaching a “natural extension of motherhood and, thus, an eminently respectable occupation for them.”32 After a religious conversion in the Presbyterian Church, Mary brought her religious convictions into the school. She required that students read the Bible, pray daily, and attend religious services on Sunday. She also brought abolitionist and religious speakers such as Elijah Lovejoy to the school on many occasions. After her conversion, Sibley also committed to moral and social reform, writing articles against slavery, on temperance, and on religious topics. Even though she spoke against slavery, she and her husband owned six slaves. As a member of the Female Benevolent Society of her church, she helped organize a Colonization Society to send slaves back to Africa and, at the same time, she started a Sunday school for slaves. In 1836, while continuing to teach in the school, she also assumed administrative duties. In 1853, through Sibley’s tireless efforts, the school was incorporated by the Missouri legislature and became a Presbyterian college.

While Mary Sibley’s attitudes toward slaves and Native Americans were largely paternalistic, Amanda Berry Smith negotiated both the racial and religious landscape as a woman of color. Smith was born in Maryland in 1837 to slaves. Her father purchased his own and his family’s freedom and moved the family to Pennsylvania when she was a young child. She began attending camp meetings as a young adult, became a “sanctified” convert, and preached and sang at African Methodist Episcopal and Methodist meetings. She then traveled abroad as a missionary, living in England, India, and Liberia, where she adopted two African sons. In 1890, she returned to the United States and wrote her autobiography. In 1893, like many other post–Civil War African Americans, she decided to make Chicago her permanent home.33 Lincoln Steffens described the Chicago of this era as “first in violence, deepest in dirt; loud, lawless, unlovely … the ‘tough’ among the cities.”34 He also described it as a city of reform, one that was “half free” of political corruption and in some ways one of the most progressive cities in the nation. In 1899, Smith purchased a store building in North Harvey, a suburb of Chicago, and opened the Amanda Smith Orphanage and Industrial Home for Abandoned and Destitute Colored Children. According to Andrew Cayton and Peter Onuf, “the long-term development in the late nineteenth-century Midwest was toward increased social segregation and economic marginalization of blacks.”35 Nonetheless, as biographer Marcia Chatelain points out, Smith found support for her home in Chicago’s religious and secular communities, among both whites and blacks. Cayton identifies “black bourgeoisie” who were “involved in a world of voluntary organizations and committed to an ideology of progress” in cities

32Jeffrey, Frontier Women, 89.
33According to Cullom Davis (“Crossroads and Cross Section,” 147), Illinois was “an important destination in the post–Civil War Negro exodus to northern cities. Convenient travel routes, the lure of new mining and factory jobs, and perhaps the lingering image of Lincoln the Great Emancipator combined to draw a disproportionate share of restless blacks to the state.”
34Steffens, The Shame of the Cities, 163.
35Cayton and Onuf, The Midwest and the Nation, 96.
such as Detroit and Milwaukee. Cayton concluded that these individuals also made progress not just in “half-reformed” and brawling cities, but also in progressive cities like Chicago. Smith was considered one of Chicago’s most prominent African American women, as well known as the great anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett. The home grew rapidly, and Smith, an active member of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, was asked to serve as the organization’s national evangelist.

The chapter on Linda Warfel Slaughter also focuses upon interracial and intercultural encounters in the diverse nineteenth-century Midwest. Barbara Handy-Marchello recounts Slaughter’s experiences as she accompanied her husband to Fort Rice, Dakota Territory, in 1870. Slaughter was born in Cadiz, Ohio, in 1843. Her parents encouraged her education, enabling her to graduate from high school and attend Oberlin College periodically. After the Civil War, she published a book of poetry and taught briefly in freedman’s schools. She married Frank Slaughter and moved west with him after the Civil War. In newspaper articles, memoirs, and histories, she wrote openly and forcefully about the political aspects of military matters as well as U.S. Indian policy. At Fort Rice, she befriended Arikara men and women, survived attacks by Sioux Indians, and came to understand the cultural implications of the struggle for land and power on the Great Plains. She interacted with the nearby Hunkpapa and, like many frontier women on the northern plains, she wrestled with contradictory emotions as one culture confronted another. Many other “westering” women recorded their ambivalent feelings, “expressing fear, distrust, and contempt on one hand and curiosity, admiration, and sympathy on the other.” Unlike many of these other women, however, Slaughter questioned the notion that whites and their civilization were superior. Nonetheless, Slaughter struggled with her own contradictory emotions and beliefs as well as the complex interactions of race, class, and gender. In the end, Slaughter developed an understanding and sympathy for Native American culture, recognizing the humanity of people whose culture was different from her own. Handy-Marchello explores both the intellectual and emotional life of Slaughter, drawing on her 1892 memoir, her twenty-five part serialized novel *The Amazonian Corps*, her historical accounts that recorded the oral traditions of Native Americans, and documents from the State Historical Society of North Dakota. Slaughter established the Ladies’ Historical Society of Bismarck and North Dakota and in 1895 was appointed first vice president of the State Historical Society of North Dakota. As a historian, she recognized the atrocities committed against Native Americans and did not shrink from telling the truth of the wars of conquest on the Great Plains.

Marietta Bones was a contemporary and acquaintance of Linda Slaughter. She

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37 The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union was founded in Chicago in 1873, and then “surged to prominence” in 1879 when Frances Willard, college president of the Evanston College for Ladies, became its president. See Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 287–88.
was born just one year earlier than Slaughter, in 1842 in Clarion County, Pennsylvania. According to biographer Nancy Koupal, she corresponded with Slaughter and considered herself a friend. She was educated in Pennsylvania, then moved to Iowa where she married and divorced. Her successful legal battle to retain custody of her children and her unsuccessful bid for support of those children caused her initially to promote the women’s suffrage movement. In the early 1880s she married Col. Thomas A. Bones and the couple moved to Webster, Dakota Territory. She quickly became active in her community, serving as deputy county clerk to her husband, championing the cause of orphans, and joining the WCTU and the Women’s Relief Corps. She also joined the National Woman Suffrage Association and in 1881, became vice president for the organization in Dakota Territory. By the end of the decade, the WCTU had become racked by internal strife, as the organization split into partisan and nonpartisan factions. Marietta Bones, who supported the nonpartisan branch, was drummed out of the Webster, South Dakota, chapter. Shortly afterwards, she withdrew her support for woman suffrage as a result of the decision to merge the National Woman Suffrage Association with a competing organization, the American Woman Suffrage Association. Bones opposed the merger because of Susan B. Anthony’s support of Frances Willard and the WCTU, and she joined forces with Matilda Joslyn Gage to form the Woman’s National Liberal Union in 1890. As the animosity between Anthony and Bones grew, Bones ceased to be a suffrage leader in the state, leading her to eventually withdraw her support of women’s suffrage altogether. In the final few years of her life, she waged a letter-writing campaign against women’s suffrage, a casualty of the tensions and strife within the leading women’s organizations.

One of the most well-known nineteenth-century midwestern women is Carry Nation, the prohibition crusader. Biographer Pat Ashman describes her first as the leader of a chapter of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and then as a direct actionist who helped midwestern women to transcend their gender roles. She was born Carry Amelia Moore in Garrard County, Kentucky, in 1846, but she moved to Missouri with her family at the age of nine. Carry Nation organized a local chapter of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union in Medicine Lodge, Kansas, in 1892. The manufacture and sale of alcohol was prohibited in Kansas, but the law was not enforced, so in 1894 Carry and a few other WCTU members entered a local drug store, rolled barrels of whiskey into the street, and smashed them. Her own life was transformed by this direct action protest as she became a social critic and moved from the realm of domesticity into public life.

It is likely that Nation’s active membership in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Movement aided her transformation. According to Cayton, “the WCTU became the means by which women stretched and ultimately transcended bourgeois gender roles.”

\[39\] She entered saloons, where after prayer and singing, she proceeded to

smash bottles and chop bars with a hatchet she carried with her. She “crusaded” first in Kiowa, Kansas, and then moved on to Wichita, Topeka, and Lawrence. WCTU members approved of her actions and she was lauded in the press. She was jailed on several occasions, and she even met with physical harm in Enterprise, Kansas. Consequently, Nation was suddenly in demand as a speaker, from California and New York to Canada. She spoke at universities, including Harvard and Yale, where she became the butt of student jokes. Until recently, some historians have refused to take Nation’s life or crusade very seriously. Steward Holbrook, writing in the same decade as Russel Nye, described her as an “amazon, five feet eleven and one-half inches tall, who kept her weight down to one hundred and seventy five pounds by prodigious exercise for the Lord.”

Holbrook also compared Nation, and the hatchet for which she was known, to “Miss Lizzie Borden of Fall River, Massachusetts … remembered for a slightly larger symbol, which was the ax.” Recent publication of Nation’s autobiography and reassessment by feminist historians has provided a more balanced account of her life and her role as a precursor to the direct actionist progressives of the early twentieth century.

Elizabeth Cafer du Plessis examines the life of the founder of the World War I Indiana War Mothers, Indianapolis resident Alice Moore French. She describes the group’s calls for wartime food conservation, their “rhetoric of maternalism,” and their exclusion of those who were not birth mothers from the organization. French and the War Mothers appealed to their communities in Indiana specifically as mothers, both supporting the government’s war efforts while simultaneously holding the government accountable for their sons’ welfare. This Indiana-based organization functioned as a part of the government’s “war for the American mind,” reflecting the patriotic rhetoric of the Committee on Public Information. The Marion County mothers challenged French’s control of the organization, but French regained control of the organization by incorporating the Indiana organization into the American War Mothers. While the War Mothers claimed no interest in politics, they continued to use the “language of maternalism,” well into the decade of the 1920s to “assert their political rights and responsibilities.” The state organization retained its traditional and anti-immigrant stance perhaps in part because of the earlier influx of southerners into the south-central portion of the state. According to Peter T. Harstad, there is a real “resistance to change on the part of the Indiana citizenry” that made it one of the most conservative of the midwestern states. Harstad states: “The layer of political progressivism so clearly visible in several of the heartland states is thin or nonexistent in Indiana.”

French and her organization did not reflect the progressive mood of the remainder of the Midwest because even as they asserted political power, they denied they were doing so, clinging to older rhetoric

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40 Holbrook, Dreamers of the American Dream, 97.
41 Ibid., 105.
42 Harstad, “Indiana,” 181.
as well as conservative traditions in their gendered negotiations. Ironically, toward the end of her life, French’s correspondence suggests that she had adopted a broader, more internationalist perspective as she advocated the establishment of a world court. Perhaps her viewpoint had changed because she lived abroad for several years in the decade of the 1920s.

In a similar sense, many first- and second-generation Euro-American immigrants maintained more conservative postures than their counterparts. Because the lives of such nineteenth- and early twentieth-century middle class women were marginalized, their biographers are forced to search for them in family documents, local records, obituaries, letters, and in family biographical sketches. Elfrieda von Rohr, who was born in 1877, lived a longer and more economically comfortable life than many women of her era. Nonetheless, biographer Carol Heming was forced to search for her in letters, in her only publication (a cookbook), between the lines of Lutheran publications, and in the article written about her by her son. Von Rohr, as the daughter and wife of Missouri Synod Lutheran ministers, lived the traditional life of a *frau pastorin* in the town of Winona, Minnesota. As such, her intellect and personality seem confined, perhaps even stunted, by the expectations of her patriarchal church and family. As a young woman, von Rohr attended Winona State College, traveled in both Europe and America, and attended Emerson College of Oratory in Boston, where she excelled in pulpit oratory; she undoubtedly had dreams and ambitions that were to remain unfulfilled. As the dutiful daughter of first-generation German-American immigrants, she returned to Winona after one year at Emerson, and married Alfred Sauer. Heming argues persuasively that despite her duties as a pastor’s wife, von Rohr Sauer practiced a type of “domestic feminism,” as she refused to abandon her intellectual interests or her ambition and education. She evidently served as her husband’s assistant pastor, as well as led the women’s church organizations and produced the cookbook that was to go through three editions. Her biographer can only surmise many of her emotions, however, perhaps in part because of the German cultural tradition in Minnesota that, according to Annette Atkins, forbade “revealing discussions of personal issues.”

In many ways von Rohr Sauer mirrored the experiences and sentiments of many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German-American women. Like most women of German-American heritage, her female identity included “competence in household management and housework; a commitment to the family, … and a healthier lifestyle, in addition to self-control, discipline, modesty, decorum, and a sense of internationalism.” Most German-American women rejected the Anglo-American women’s movement with its call for suffrage, but one cannot conclude that they were not “feminists” within their own society. Christiane Harzig, exploring the interrelationship between the public and private worlds of immigrant women, identifies

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44 Harzig, “Ethnic Female Public Sphere,” 154.
German-American feminists as women who “had an understanding of themselves as a social group, and their knowledge of two cultures also made them aware of the social construction of women’s position.” Elfrieda von Rohr Sauer’s accomplishments reveal that she did indeed identify herself with a social group; her knowledge of two cultures, midwestern and German-American, leads one to conclude that she was most likely aware of the social construction of women’s position. Like many women, however, she maintained a sense of propriety and did not compete with men. She thus accepted her role as a *frau pastorin*, limiting her activities to those accepted for women in her ethnic community.

Although she was born and raised in Missouri, Esther Twente spent most of her working life in Kansas. Her biographer, Maureen Wilt, notes that she drew upon the Midwest region’s tradition of progressivism as she chose her life’s work, and like many other women training in social work in the 1920s, she sought undergraduate and graduate training at two of the region’s foremost institutions of higher learning. After completing a degree in sociology at the University of Missouri (she later completed a master’s degree in social work at the University of Chicago) she moved to Brooklyn, New York, working as a “visitor in training” at the Brooklyn Bureau of Charities. After a year in New York, she returned to the Midwest to work at the St. Louis Provident Association. In 1924, she moved to Kansas, where she managed a combined social work and Red Cross agency in Arkansas City. Kansas had been at the center of the populist movement, and according to Leo Oliva, had participated in the progressive reform movement, but “did not provide the kind of leadership that it had for the People’s party.” Twente drew upon the progressive era for both her training and her inspiration as she began her career as an educator. Susan Ware’s description of women in the social work profession in the 1930s applies to Twente: “The outlook these women brought to social work reflected the progressive spirit which dominated American reform in the early twentieth century.” In 1937, Twente joined the sociology department at the University of Kansas, training social workers statewide and developing the Department of Social Work on the campus. She became the first chair of the Department of Social Work when it was established in 1946. In 1966, she published *One Hundred Years of Social Work in Kansas*. Her monograph actually became much more than a narrow history of social work, as it noted the broader contributions of women and the impact of organizations and social movements on the history of Kansas. Twente’s contributions to the Social Work Department have been recognized in Kansas and internationally. Also her leadership of the Department of Social Work at the University of Kansas certainly contributed to making the Midwest in 1996 the only part of the country where women held more than 50 percent of

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45 Harzig, “Ethnic Female Public Sphere,” 154.
46 See Ware, *Holding Their Own*, 74.
47 Oliva, “Kansas,” 261.
48 Ware, *Beyond Suffrage*, 38.
the deanships of master of social work programs.\textsuperscript{49}

The most politically radical of the women in this collection was Genora Dollinger, who founded the Women’s Emergency Brigade in Flint, Michigan, in 1937. She was born Genora Albro in 1913 in Kalamazoo, Michigan, but her parents relocated when she was one year old, raising her in Flint. Although she came from a financially comfortable, middle-class family, Dollinger was attracted to the Socialist Party as a young woman. According to her biographer, Carlton Jackson, she was drawn to the Socialist Party because it espoused equality for all people, including workers, minorities, and women. Her attraction to the Socialist Party may have been derived, in part at least, from the culture of Midwest progressivism coupled with the attitudes and culture of the state of Michigan. Martha Mitchell Bigelow states that the one factor that makes people in Michigan different is not just their “midwestern optimism,” but the “boundless enthusiasm” that enables them to “see themselves in the vanguard of all movements and activities that enhance and protect the quality of life and the rights of human beings.”\textsuperscript{50} In the late 1930s, Genora Dollinger undoubtedly saw herself as part of the vanguard of the autoworkers’ union movement. After years of unresolved grievances, in late 1936 the United Auto Workers in Flint, Michigan, began a sit-down strike against General Motors, with workers occupying their workstations. Genora Dollinger formed the Women’s Emergency Brigade shortly after the strike began, after police officers fired buckshot and tear gas into Fisher Plant Two. Dollinger spoke to the women who came to support their male relatives in the plant, telling them to take action and to help unionize the auto industry.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Dollinger continued to see herself as a protector of the “quality of life and the rights of human beings”\textsuperscript{51} when she ran for the U.S. House and U.S. Senate on the Socialist Workers Party ticket, and when she became a member of the executive board of the Flint NAACP. In the 1960s, she continued her support of the NAACP, served as development director of the ACLU in Flint, and supported both the National Organization for Women and the Equal Rights Amendment. In 1962, she was elected president of the Detroit chapter of Women Strike for Peace. When she and her husband moved to Los Angeles in the later 1960s, she continued her social justice struggle. Although she was unsuccessful in her bids for national election, it may be argued that Dollinger’s campaigns for the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives set a precedent for female Michiganders like Debbie Stabenow to run for national office. Stabenow, who became the first woman elected to the U.S. Senate from the state of Michigan, took her seat in the Senate in 2001.

Harriett Woods, the only woman in this volume to have held a national political position in the twentieth century, was born in 1927. Her tennis-star mother and role


\textsuperscript{50} Bigelow, “Michigan,” 37.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 37.
models such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Amelia Earhart inspired Woods to set political
and social goals that were far beyond the realities of any of the nineteenth-century
women described in this volume. After graduating from the University of Michigan,
Woods accepted a position as a journalist for a St. Louis newspaper. She used her
journalistic skills as host of a public service-oriented television show, became a city
councilwoman, served as a senator in the Missouri assembly, ran twice for the U.S.
Senate, served as Missouri’s first female lieutenant governor, and finally, served two
terms as president of the National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC). As president
of the NWPC, Woods helped bring pressure on the Clinton White House to appoint
women to cabinet-level positions, and to support Anita Hill in her allegations of sex-
ual harassment during the Senate confirmation hearing for Supreme Court nominee
Clarence Thomas. She donated information regarding her campaigns for the Mis-
souri General Assembly and the U.S. Senate to the Western Historical Manuscript
Collection. These papers, personal interviews, and her book, Stepping Up to Power,
served as the primary resources for this chapter. Yvonne Johnson’s and Shari Bax’s
short biography of Woods focuses primarily on her political victories, defeats, and
challenges, as well as her political philosophy. Her legacy still needs assessment, but
most agree that her two runs for the U.S. Senate, one of which she lost by an extremely
narrow margin, paved the way for the successful election of the current female U.S.
Senator from the state of Missouri, Claire McCaskill. Woods, like most of the women
in this volume, believed in the equality of all humans. Her autobiographical history
of the women’s movement in the last quarter of the twentieth century reveals the
growing political consciousness of twentieth century women and their determina-
tion to foster an egalitarian, just society.

The women in this collection helped to shape the culture of the Midwest as they nego-
tiated the directions of their own lives, the lives of their kinswomen, and the lives of
women and men in their larger communities. Most of them were wives and mothers
who managed households and had duties such as raising children in addition to the
public or semi-public lives they led. Whether politically conservative or liberal, they
were all risk-takers and they were all community-builders. While nineteenth-cen-
tury midwestern women’s lives were expected to conform to prescribed gender roles,
these women, to varying degrees, flouted those prescribed expectations. The women
who grew to adulthood in the nineteenth century were not able to step up to power
as were their twentieth-century counterparts, but each of them pushed the bound-
daries of her prescribed spheres. While the organizational activities of these women
crossed the political spectrum from conservative to liberal, from domestic feminism
and acceptable reformist action to rampaging physical confrontation, they all made a
space for the women who followed them. All of the women in this collection, in part
because of class and educational opportunities, were able to organize their lives in
a manner that allowed them to make unique societal contributions: from founding universities, academic departments, and historical societies, to paving the way for the first woman senator from Missouri to be elected in her own right.
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Index

Italicized numerals indicate images or figures.

A

Aberdeen Daily News, 76
Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer, 76
abolition, xiv, 6, 7, 14, 15, 54, 71, 85, 149
Adams, Irene G., 79
Addams, Jane, x, 141 n2, 142 n25, 145
compassion of, 142, 142 n22, 147
J. Edgar Hoover’s characterization of, 140
and progressive reform in Chicago, 48
renown of, 152, 152 n78, 152 n88, 152 n89
See also Hull House
African Americans
in Chicago, 41–42, 45–46
and civil rights, xv–xvi, 3 n8, 6–7, 14,
177–78
and Midwest migration, xii, xv n33, 40,
41, 46, 179
ICHAS and, 46 n22
Ku Klux Klan and, 144
and labor reform, 164
Port Royal Experiment and, 4, 4 n12, 9
suffrage for, 5 n15
African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, xv,
40, 44
Albers, James W., 120–21, 121 n10, 122
Albro, Genora. See Dollinger, Genora Albro
Albro, Raymond, 163 n32
Alden, Silas A., 127
Amanda Smith Industrial School for Girls, 49–51
Amanda Smith Orphanage and Industrial Home for Abandoned and Destitute Colored Children, xv, 41–43, 44–45,
45 n19, 46–49, 48 n3, 50
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), xxi,
164, 169
American Colonization Society, xv, 30
American Equal Rights Association, 4, 4 n12, 74
“Americanization” movement, 101, 105, 113–14
American Socialist Club (ASC), 168
American Temperance Union, 85
American War Mothers, xviii, 100, 106, 107,
116. See also War Mothers of Indiana
American War Mothers magazine, 116
American Woman’s Suffrage Association (AWSA), 70, 73, 74–75, 76–77
Anderson, S. J. P., 34
Angel Guardian Orphanage, 45
Anthony, Susan B., xvii, 70, 72, 73, 74–81
Antin, Mary, 132, 132 n78, 134
antislavery movement, xiii, 85, 149–50
“Ar’n’t I a Woman?” speech, xiv, 6–7. See also
Truth, Sojourner
Arikara Indians, xvi, 55, 55 n5, 58–59, 60–61,
61 n21
army wives, 54, 54 n3, 56, 59–60 n17, 60 n18, 65
Ashcroft, Janet, 182
Ashcroft, John, 182, 183, 187
Atkins, Annette, xix
“Aunt Fanny.” See Gage, Frances Dana
Ayers, Bill, 140

B

Baker, George P., 127
Barker, Frances Dana. See Gage, Frances Dana
Barker, Helen M., 74, 75, 78
Barnard, Harry, 110–11
Barnum, P. T., 15
Barr, Daisy Douglass, 114
Batehem, Josephine, 3
Batehem, Michael, 3
Baum, L. Frank, 76, 78–79
Bear Bite, 58–59
Beecher, Catharine, 10, 21–22
Benezet, Anthony, 84
Berry, Samuel, 40
Bethany House, 35–36
Bigelow, Martha Mitchell, xxi
Billington, Ray Allen, x
Bishop, Marion, 134
Bismarck Tribune, 57, 61–62
Black, Agnes Knox, 127–28, 131
Black, Eben Charlton, 131
Bloomer, Amelia, xiv, xiv n29, 3, 5–6, 9 n28,
13–14, 15 n45, 18

199
Bond, Christopher "Kit," 180, 181, 183, 187–88
Bones, Marietta M., xxiii, 69
  as civic activist, 71–72, 73
  and Frances Willard conflict, 70, 74
  marriages, 71
  NWSA and, 69–70, 72, 73–74, 76, 80
  as suffrage organizer, xvii, 69–70, 72–73
  and Susan B. Anthony conflict, 70, 72, 75, 76–80
  WCTU and, 69–70, 71, 73–74, 79–80
  and woman's suffrage opposition, 77, 80–81
Bones, Thomas A., xvii, 71
Bordin, Ruth, 86
Bower, Anne, 134
Bradwell, Myra, 176
Brauer, Ruth, 120, 121n14
Breckenridge, Sophonisba, 51
Breen, William J., 107
Bronson, A. M., 9, 9n28
Brown, Hallie O., 42n13
Brown, John, 93
Brown, Olympia, 6
Browner, Carol, 190
Burroughs, Nannie, 50
Bush, George H. W., 188
Butler, Mary, 32
Bystrom, Dianne, 178

C
Cain, Kate, 89, 90
Cannon, James P., 168
Canon, Bradley C., ix
Carr, Elizabeth, 112–13
Carlson, Millie, 141, 147
Catt, Carrie Chapman, 78
Cayton, Andrew R. L., x, xiii–xiv, xv–xvi, xvii
Central Missouri, University of, 88, 191
Chappell-Nadal, Maria, 191
charitable cookbooks, 134–36, 134n90
Chase, Salmon, 4n12
Chautauqua movement, 93, 126
Chicago
  African Americans in, 41–42, 45–46
  industrial schools for girls in, 49–50, 49n37
  NPWCTU convention in, 74
  orphanages and children's homes in, 45–49
  Progressive reform in, xi, xvi, 48–49,
  176–77
  See also Smith, Amada Berry
Chicago, University of, xx, 48, 132n81, 146, 177
Chicago Defender, 42
Chicago Foundling Home, 45
Chicago Herald-American, 177
Chicago Home for the Friendless, 45
Chicago Industrial Home for Children, 47
Clark, Carroll D., 145–46
Clay, Henry, 26–27
Clay Seminary, 87
Clinton, Bill, administration of, xxii, 190
Clinton, Hillary, 192
Colby, Clara B., 73, 78
Collins, Michelle, ix
Columbian Exposition, 39, 43
Comer, Virginia, 56, 57n10
Commoner, Barry, 171
Custer, George Armstrong, 61, 62

D
Danforth, John C., 185–86, 189
Daughters of the American Revolution, 108
Davis, Cullom, xv n33
Debs, Eugene V., 113–14, 115
Declaration of Independence, 14, 84
Declaration of Sentiments, 14
Detroit Free Press, 172
divorce, xi, 72, 74–75
Docking, Robert, 140
Dollinger, Genora Albro, xxiii, 155
  Communist charges against, 157–58
  death of, 172
  divorce and remarriage of, 163–64
  Emergency Brigade (EBs) and, 156, 160–62,
  167, 170, 172
  and feminism and unionism link, 156,
  162, 173
  and Flint "death watch," 162–63, 173
  and Flint Sit-Down Strikes of 1937, xxi,
  155, 156, 158–60, 160n18, 172, 173
  government scrutiny of, 167–68, 169
  health issues of, 162, 165, 172
  political activism of, xxi, 164, 167–71, 172
  and Socialism, xxi, 155–57, 158, 173
  and Socialist Workers' Party (SWP),
  163–64, 165, 166, 168, 171
  travels of, 168–69
  and Trotskyism, 163, 168, 169, 173
Dollinger, Ron, 168–69
Dollinger, Sol, 158n10, 164, 165, 166, 168–69,
  170, 171
“domestic feminism,” xix, xxii, 133n85, 136
  domesticity, 10–12, 54, 103, 121, 134–35,
  135n95, 136. See also “woman's sphere”
Douglass, Frederick, 14

E
Eagleton, Tom, 185
Earhart, Amelia, xxii, 176
Index

Easton, Abby, 22, 26
Easton, Alton, 33
Easton, Mary. See Sibley, Mary Easton
Easton, Rufus, 22–23
educational reform, 22, 169, 170, 183
Eighteenth Amendment, 96, 135–36
Emergency Brigade (EBs), xxi, 156, 160–62, 167, 170, 172
Emerson, Charles Wesley, 126–27, 126n42, 126n45
Emerson, Susie Rogers, 126n43
Emerson College of Oratory, xix, 125–29, 126n42, 128n58, 131, 135n97, 136
Emily's List, 175, 175n1, 186, 189
Emmons, Ann Isabella, 110–11
Emory, Julia, 49
Emperor's Gazette, 91
Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), xxi, 169, 170, 181–83, 192
Espionage Act of 1917, 100, 114
evangelical movement, 22, 26, 28, 29, 31, 120
Evans College for Ladies, xvi n37

F

Farmer, James, 178
Fearon, Peter, 146, 147
The Fellowship Herald, 42
The Feminine Mystique, 178
Feminist Daily News Wire, 191
Ferraro, Geraldine, 171
Fifteenth Amendment, xiv, 14–15, 74, 81
Fine, Julia, 160n18
Flint Sit-Down Strikes of 1937, 155, 156–60, 160n18, 172, 173
food “slackers,” 101, 101n8, 105
Fort Osage, 22, 23–24, 25
Fort Rice, xvi, 54, 55, 55n5, 56–60, 58n15, 61, 62
Foster, Judith Ellen, 74
Fourteenth Amendment, 14
frau pastorin (pastors’ wives), xii, xix, 121–22, 121n14, 132, 133
French, Alice Moore, xvi–xix, xxii, 99
and American War Mothers, 107, 116
family life of, 102
and politics, 107–9, 110–11
and USFA, 101–2, 104–5, 106
War Mothers founding by, 99–100, 103–4
See also War Mothers of Indiana
French, Eli M., 102
Friedan, Betty, 178
“frontier thesis,” Turner's, xi, 39

G

Gage, Charles, 3–4n10
Gage, Frances Dana, xxiii, 1
as Akron convention chair, 6–7, 9n28
as “Aunt Fanny,” 1–2, 4
as lecturer, 4–6
and marriage, 3, 12
and morality issue, 9n27, 15, 16–17
suffrage and, 13–15
temperance and, 3–4, 3n10, 15–18, 17n52
and the “woman's sphere,” 9–13
as women's rights pioneer, xiv, 1, 2–3, 13n40, 18
writings of, 3, 4, 17–18, 18n55
Gage, James L., 3–4, 3–4n10, 12–13
Gage, Matilda Joslyn, xvii, 72–74, 76, 77, 77n28, 79
Garrison, William Lloyd, 14
gender roles. See “domestic feminism”; domesticity; “woman's sphere”
General Motors (GM), 155, 156–57, 158–62, 171. See also Flint Sit-Down Strikes of 1937
Geneva State Reformatory for Girls, 51
Genin, J. B. M., 62, 63, 64
German-Americans, xii, xix–xx, 105, 135
Giddings, Joshua, 18
Gilbert, Clayton D., 128
Gilligan, Carol, 141
Gjerde, Jon, 119, 120n6
Gloyd, Charles, 88
Gloyd, Nancy, 88, 89
Goodrich, James P., 104
Gordon, Linda, 103
Gordon, Marsha, 109
Grabau, Amadeus, 132, 132n77
Grabau, Maria von Rohr, 125, 132n77
Grabau, Philip, 125, 129, 132n77
Grabau, William, 125, 132n77
Grace, Fran, 87, 96
Graebner, Alan, 133n86
Greene, Peggy, 143
Griggs, Edward Howard, 128

H

Harding, Warren G., 112
Harstad, Peter T., xviii
Harvey (IL), 41, 42, 43n17, 43–44, 48, 48n32, 51
Harvey, Turlington W., 43
Harvey Herald, 44
Harvey Tribune-Citizen, 44, 48n32
Harzig, Christiane, xix–xx, 133n85
The Helper, 43, 47
Hill, Anita, xxi, 188–89
Hobsbawn, Eric, 100
Holbrook, Steward, xviii
Homestead Act of 1862, 70
Hoover, Herbert, 102
Hoover, J. Edgar, 140
housewives and wartime mobilization, 109–11
Howe, Charles A., 132
Howe, Julia Ward, 14, 70, 74
Hull House, 46, 141, 141n12, 142n22, 142n25, 146n50, 152n87, 152n89
Hunt, Julia, 27–28
Hunt, Mary, 93
Hunt, Theodosia, 27

I
Illinois Board of Public Charities (IBPC), 47, 48, 48n32
Illinois Children's Home and Aid Society (ICHAS), 45n19, 46, 46n22
Illinois State Agent for the Visitation of Children, 45, 46–47
immigrants, xii, 27, 45–46, 86, 105, 119
German, 119–120, 136n104
War Mothers and, xviii–xix, 101, 114–15, 116

Indianapolis Star, 106, 108, 110
Indiana, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116
Industrial Act of 1912, 49, 50
industrial education movement, 49, 50
industrialization, xii, 9n27, 85–86, 107, 176
Iowa Woman's Suffrage Association, xivn29

J
Jackson, Andrew, 10, 26–27
Jeffrey, Julie Roy, xiv–xv
Johns, Laura, 78
Johnson, Carl, 155, 173
Johnson, Genora Albro. See Dollinger, Genora Albro
Johnson, Jack, 157–58
Johnson, Kermit, 155, 159, 161, 163, 164
Jones, Benjamin, 151
Jones, Mary Harris "Mother," 161, 177

K
Kansas, University of, xx–xxi, 139, 140, 146–47, 146n50, 148, 149, 150, 151
Kelley, Florence, 141–42
Kidder, Jefferson P., 71
Kingsbury, George W., 81
“kitchen soldiers,” 99–100
Kolodny, Annette, 57

L
Labor History, 172
Lawrence, Amos, 149
Lawrence Daily Journal, 140
League of Women Voters, 179, 180
Lender, Mark, 84
Levasy (MO), 140, 140n5, 141
Lewis, Diocletian, 86
The Lily, 1, 3, 5, 9, 9n28, 13, 17n52
Lincoln, Abraham, xvn33
Lindemann, Paul, 123
Lindenwood Female College, 34–35, 36–37
Lindenwood University, 25n6, 37
Lindsey, Margaret, 25–26, 36
Lindsey, Thomas, 25, 27, 28, 30
Livermore, Daniel, 131–32
Livermore, Mary, 127, 127n52, 131–32
Louise Manual Training School, 49, 49n37
Lovejoy, Elijah, xv, 28, 32–33
Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. See Missouri Synod
Lutheranism, 120–21
Lutheran Witness, 120, 120n8

M
Madison, James, 107
Mallott, Deane W., 146–47
Marion County War Mothers, xvi, 106, 108, 112. See also War Mothers of Indiana
marriage, average age at, xivn31
Martin, James, 84
Massachusetts Society for the Suppression of Intemperance, 84
Matthews, Mariam, 40
McBeth, Sue, 36
McCaskill, Claire, xxii, xxiii, 175, 191
McCray Act, 105
McDonald, Elizabeth, 49n37
McDowell, Mary, xi
McGerr, Michael, 109
Midway Magazine, 143
Missouri–St. Louis, University of, 188, 190, 191
Missouri, University of, xx, 141, 142
Missouri Synod, 120–23, 120n6, 123n22, 124, 130n67, 133–34, 133n86, 136
Missouri Women's Political Caucus, 181, 185
Moody, Dwight, 43
Moore, Alice. See French, Alice Moore
Moore, Carry Amelia. See Nation, Carry
Moore, Charles, 87
Moore, Charlien, 88, 89, 96
Moore, George, 87
Moore, Joseph J., 102
Moore, Leonard J., 114
Moore, Mary Campbell, 87
Mosely Braun, Carol, 189
Moussa, Hans, 130, 130n65
Murphy, Lucy, xii

N
NAACP, xxi, 164, 167–68, 169
Nash, Bert, 144
Nation, Carry A., ix–x, xxiii, 83
anti-saloon campaign of, xvii–xviii, 88–92, 94, 96
arrests, 91, 92–93, 94
assaults on, 92, 92n35
autobiography of, 91, 94
death of, 95
eyears, 87–88
hatchet as symbol of, xviii, 83, 92, 93
as Home Defender, 91, 92, 94
marriages of, 88–89, 94
mental stability of, 96
notoriety of, 83, 87, 91, 87n14
osteopathy career of, 89–90, 90n23
publications by, 93
as public speaker, 93–94, 94–95
and WCTU, xvii–xviii, 87, 89, 91–92, 93, 96
Nation, David, 88–90, 94
Nation, Lola, 88, 89
National-American Woman's Suffrage Association (NAWSA), 70, 76–77, 78
National Antislavery Standard, 14
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). See NAACP
National Organization for Women (NOW), xxi, 169, 183, 186
National Standard, 3
National Woman's Rights Convention (Cleveland, 1853), 8, 15n45, 16, 18
National Woman's Suffrage Association (NWSA)
Dakota Territory and, xvii, 72–74
and Fifteenth Amendment, 81
AWSA merger with, 70, 74–76, 77
See also Anthony, Susan B.
National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), xxi, 175, 181, 185, 186, 188–90, 191
Native Americans, xvi, 24, 36
and the “blanket Indian,” 63
and “new Indian history,” 58, 58n14
policy toward, 56–57
See also Slaughter, Linda Warfel
Nelson, David, 25
Newman, Jody, 188
“New Northwest,” 57, 57n12
New York Independent, 3
Nez Perce Indians, 36
Nineteenth Amendment, 6, 178
NPWCTU, 74. See also Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)
Nye, Russel B., x, xi–xii, xiii, 140n6, 148n64

O
Oberlin College, xvi, 3n8, 50, 54, 55n4
Ohio Cultivator, 3, 3n10, 3n11, 4, 9, 11–12
Ohio Temperance Convention (1853), 15n45
Oliva, Leo E., xx, 145, 149
Onuf, Peter, xv
Oreille, Sans, 24
Ott, Eliza, 32, 33, 34

P
Painter, Nell Irwin, xiv, 7
Park Ridge School for Girls, 50–51
pastors’ wives. See frau pastorin
patriarchy, xix, 22, 120, 122–23, 192
Penfield, Allen, 76–77
People's Party. See Populist Party
Phillips, Wendell, 14
Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter, 3, 9
“politicized domesticity,” 134–35, 135n95
Populism, 96, 149–50
Populist Party, ix, xi–xii, xx, 149
Port Royal Experiment, 4, 4n12
Posse, Rose, 128
Potts, Ann Benton, 31
Potts, William S., 25–26, 28, 31
progressive movement, ix–xii, xviii, xx, 48–51, 107–10, 140, 140n6, 141, 146, 175
Progressive Party, ix
prohibition legislation, 85, 89, 91, 96
prohibition movement. See temperance
Prohibition Party, 74, 77, 95
property rights, women’s, 4, 10, 17, 86
Putnam, Helen G., 78, 79

R
race and gender interplay, 40, 51–52. See also
Smith, Amanda Berry
Reuther, Victor, 158n12, 159
Reuther, Walter, 166
Reynolds, W.S., 45n19
Index

Richmond, Mary, 147–48
Riley, Glenda, xiii
Robinson, Charles, 149
Robinson, Marius, xiv, 6–7
Rolle, William J., 126, 128
Roosevelt, Eleanor, xxi, 116, 152, 176
Roosevelt, Franklin, 145
Roosevelt, Theodore, 177
Rorabaugh, W.J., 85
Rosenwald, Julius, 46
Rosseter, E. D., 32, 33
Rush, Benjamin, 84, 84n3, 96
Russell, Martha, 28
Russell, William, 27, 28

S

Salem Anti-Slavery Bugle, 6
Salter, Medora, 149
Sanitary Commission, U.S., 4, 86, 127n52
Sauer, Alfred W., xix, 122n17, 130–33, 130n66, 132n81, 136
Sauer, David von Rohr, 132–33n81
Sauer, Elfrieda von Rohr, xii, xxiii, 119, 122n17
as cookbook publisher, 134–35, 134n89
death of, 136
at Emerson College of Oratory, xix, 125–29, 127n49, 128n58, 135n97, 136
as pastor’s daughter, 122, 123, 136
as pastor’s wife, 123, 130–31, 132–34, 136
siblings of, 122n18, 125, 125n39
as teacher, 123–24, 125, 129
travels of, 125, 125n35, 125n36, 136
Sauer, Philip von Rohr (son of Elfrieda), 125, 125n37, 130, 131, 132–33, 132n81, 135, 136
Save 100,000 Babies campaign, 108, 108n42
Schlafly, Phyllis, 182, 183
Sedition Act of 1918, 100
Seneca Falls (NY) convention (1848), 4, 14
settlement house movement, xi, 40, 48, 51
Shaw, Anna Howard, 78
Shear, Sue, 180, 182, 185
Sheridan, Philip, 61–62
Sherman, William T., 56, 65
Sibley, George Champlin, xiv, 22–25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32–33, 34–35, 37
Sibley, Mary Easton, xii, xiv–xv, xxiii, 21
anti-Catholicism of, 28, 29
death of, 37
and Female Benevolent Society, xv, 30, 31
Linden Wood farm school of, 25, 25n6, 27–28, 31–34
marriage of, 22–23
as reformer, 21–22
and slavery, 28, 29–30
Sigerist, Harriet, xi
Sioux Falls Argus Leader, 78
Slaughter, Benjamin Franklin (Frank), xvi, 54–55, 57, 60–61, 62, 63–64
Slaughter, Linda Warfel, xii, xxiii, 53
as army officer wife, 55–57, 65
in Bismarck, xvi, 57, 57n13, 61, 62, 64
and gender roles among Indians, 62–63
and Indian policy, xvi, 58–59, 63–65
as missionary, 54–55, 57, 55n4, 55n5, 59n16
writings, 57n10, 61–62, 63
slavery
Port Royal Experiment and, 4, 4n12
reformers and, xv, 1, 6, 28, 29–30, 85
Thirteenth Amendment and, 14
See also abolition
Smeal, Eleanor, 191
Smith, Amanda Berry, xxiii, 39
autobiography of, 41
as businesswoman, 42–43
death of, 51
Smith Home and, xv–xvi, 41–43, 44–45, 45n19, 46–49, 48n32, 50
in Sebring, FL, 49n36, 51
as WCTU’s national evangelist, xii, 43–44
Smith, Daniel Scott, 133n85
Smith, Melcencen, 178
Smith, Sherry, 59
Socialist Party, xxi, 113–14, 156, 157–58, 162, 163, 173
Socialist Union of America (SUA), 168
Socialist Workers’ Party (SWP), 163–64, 168, 171
social work profession. See Twente, Esther
Society of Colonial Dames, 108
sororities, 102n14, 129, 129n60, 134–35
Southwick, Henry Lawrence, 126–27, 129, 131
Southwick, Jessie Eldridge, 131
St. Louis Globe Democrat, 177, 178
St. Louis Hall of Fame, 190
St. Louis Observer, 28, 32–33
St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 178, 192
St. Louis Provident Association, xx, 142
St. Martin’s Lutheran Church (Winona, MN), 122, 130–31, 131n72, 132–34, 136
St. Martin’s Lutheran School (Winona, MN), 122, 122n19, 123–24, 126
Stanley, William, 92
Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, 2n7, 4n12, 7, 14, 18, 74, 76
State Equal Suffrage Society (Dakotas), 75
Steffens, Lincoln, xv
Stone, Lucy, 74
Strong, Julia, 31–32
Strong, Matt, 90

suffrage, ix, xiv, xiv n29, xvii, xix, 86
for African Americans in 1850, 5n15
in Indiana, 116
in Kansas, 149
and Nineteenth Amendment, 6, 178
and temperance, 69–70, 75
and Susan B. Anthony, xvii, 70, 72, 73,
74–81
in South Dakota, 70–71, 75–81
women's views on, 13–14
See also American Woman's Suffrage
Association (AWSA); individual
reformers; National Woman's Suf-
frage Association (NWSA)

Sullivan, Leonor K., 178
Summerhayes, Martha, 56
Sumner, Charles, 4n12
Susman, Louis, 185
Swisshelm, Jane Gray, 3, 6, 9n28

T
Taylor, Robert, 95–96
teaching profession, xiv–xv, 10, 120, 124–25,
124n33, 144
temperance movement, ix, xiii, xiv, xv, 15n45
and alcohol consumption in U.S., 83–84,
84n3, 85–86
clergy in, 84–85
Crusade of 1873–74 in, 86
and German-Americans, 135–36
legislation and, 85
and suffrage, 13, 69–70, 75
and temperance novels, 4, 11, 16
women’s roles in, 85, 86
and women’s rights, 15–17, xiv n29
See also individual reformers; Nation,
Cary; Woman's Christian Tem-
perance Union (WCTU)

Temperance Battery, 3n10
temperance novels, 4, 11, 16
Terkel, Studs, 172
Thirteenth Amendment, 14
Thoburn, James Mills, 41
Thomas, Clarence, xxii, 188–89
Titus, Frances, 7
Todd, Mary, 121n11, 128n59
Truth, Sojourner, xiv, 6–8, 13
Tubman, Harriet, 4n12
Turner, Frederick Jackson, x, xi–xii, xiii, 39
Turner, Sarah Lucille, 178
Tuskegee Institute, 49, 50
Twente, Esther Elizabeth, xii, xxiii, 139,
139–52, 140n5, 146n50
as community-builder and nurturer,
140–41, 143, 150, 151–52
death of, 150
early career of, 142–44, 150
education of, 141–42, 146n50
family legacy of, 151
as Fulbright scholar, 148, 151
and Jane Addams, 140, 142, 147, 152
as Kansas Emergency Relief Commission
superintendent, 140, 145–46
at Kansas University, xx–xxi, 140, 146–47,
146n50, 148–51
Kansas University Women’s Hall of Fame
induction, 139–40, 150
monograph, xx, 144, 148, 149–51
as social work education pioneer, 139–40,
144–45, 146, 152
tributes to, 139, 140, 150, 151, 152
Tyler, A. F., 85

U
United Auto Workers (UAW), xxi, 156, 158,
161–62, 161n27, 164–67, 171–72, 185
Universalist Church, 6, 126
U.S. Food Administration (USFA), 101–2,
101n11, 104–5, 106, 111

V
Van Uum, Betty, 185
van Wagenen, Isabella. See Truth, Sojourner
Venet, Wendy, xii
Virden, Charles, 46–47
von Rohr, Elfrieda. See Sauer, Elfrieda von Rohr
von Rohr, Emma (Schaal), 122, 122n16, 123,
130, 132
von Rohr, Philip (father of Elfrieda), 122, 123,
125, 129–30, 132, 134

W
Wardall, Alonzo, 75
Ware, Susan, xx, 176
Warfel, Charles, 54
Warfel, Maria Boyd, 54
War Mothers. See American War Mothers;
War Mothers of Indiana
“War Mothers Battle Hymn,” 111–12
War Mothers of Indiana, 108n41
founding of, 99–100
and immigrant reform, 101, 113–15
and “language of maternalism,” xviii, 103–4, 112–13, 116
War Mothers of Indiana, continued
Marion County chapter of, xviii, 106, 108, 112
in postwar years, 111–16
and wartime mobilization, 99n1, 103–5, 109–11
See also American War Mothers; French, Alice Moore
Washington, Booker T., 49, 50
Waters, Adah, 45n19, 51
Wells-Barnett, Ida B., xi, 42, 42n13, 49
western settlement, 57–59
Whicker, Marcia, ix
White, William Allen, 91, 144
Wichita Eagle, 91
Wilkins, James A., 71
Wilkins, Jane Trumbull, 71
Willard, Frances, xvii, 44, 70, 74, 75–76, 77, 80, 86–87. See also Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)
Williams, Samuel Laing, 49
Wilson, Woodrow, 99, 100, 104, 109, 112
The Wingold Cook Book, 134–35, 134n89, 134n91
With Babies and Banners: Story of the Women’s Emergency Brigade, 161
Wittenmyer, Annie, 86
Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), xi, xii, xvi–xviii, xvii, 44, 70, 74, 75–76, 77, 80, 86–87. See also Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)
Wittenmyer, Annie, 86
Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), xi, xii, xvi–xviii, xvii, 44, 70, 74, 75–76, 77, 80, 86–87. See also Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)
abstinence as goal in, 86
and Carry Nation, xvii–xviii, 87, 89, 91–92, 93, 96
and 1874 convention, 86
under Frances Willard, 74, 86–87
Harvey, Illinois, branch of, 43–44
Marietta Bones and, 69–70, 71, 73, 74, 78–80
nonpartisan (NP) branch of, 74
and suffrage, 75–76
Woman’s National Liberal Union, xvii, 76
“woman’s sphere,” 2, 9n29, 9–11, 12, 12n37, 13, 21–22
Woman’s Temperance Association, 16
Woman’s Tribune, 73–74
Women’s Emergency Brigade (EB), xxi, 156, 160–62
Women’s Relief Corps, xvii, 71, 80, 108
Women’s Rights Convention (Akron, OH, 1851), xiv, 6–7, 8, 9n28, 12–13
women’s rights movement, xiv, xivn29, 13n40, 14, 86, 149–50, 156, 192
Women’s Socialist Guard, 162
Women’s Suffrage Association of Missouri, 178
Women Strike for Peace, xxi
Woods, Harriett Friedman, xxi–xxii, xxiii, 175
death of, 191
early political activism of, 177, 179–80
and Emily’s List, 175, 186, 189
and Equal Rights Amendment, 181–83
journalism career of, 177–79
in the media, 191–92
as Missouri lieutenant governor, 175, 186–87, 188
as Missouri State Senator, 181–85, 186, 192
and nursing home reform, 184–85
as NWPC president, xxii, 175, 188–90, 191
role models to, 176–77
St. Louis Hall of Fame induction, 190
and St. Louis political structure, 177–78
and State Highway Commission, 180–81
U.S. Senate campaigns of, 175, 185–86, 187–88, 189
Woods, Jim, 178
Works Progress Administration (WPA), 163
World War I, 99–101, 105, 109, 113, 114, 135, 135n100
World War II, 100, 146, 165
Y
Yeatman, James E., 35, 36
Yoe, Tom, 147
Young People’s Socialist League (YPSL), 157, 162
Z
Ziwinta, 60–61, 62