

Feminist
Frontiers

Women
Who Shaped
the Midwest

Edited by
Yvonne J. Johnson

Truman State University Press

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Acknowledgments

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

¹Whicker, Collins, and Cannon, "Is the State Policy Process Gendered?" Paper presented at the Western Political Science Association, March 1998, cited in DiPalma, "Women's Achievement in Social Work Academia," 137.

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

²Cayton and Onuf, *Midwest and the Nation*, 101.

³Cayton and Gray, *American Midwest*, 13.

⁴Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics*.

⁵For more inclusive histories, see Chambers, *Tyranny of Change*; or Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*.

⁶Billington and Ridge, *Westward Expansion*, 683.

⁷*Ibid.*, 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 “westerling” women is that of “sturdy helpmate and civilizer of the frontier.”¹³ Certainly, most nineteenth century midwestern 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.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Sigerman, “Laborers for Liberty,” 336.

¹³Myres, *Westerling Women*, 2.

¹⁴Riley, *Female Frontier*, 21.

¹⁵Billington and Ridge, *Westward Expansion*, 686.

progressivism “a distinctly midwestern thing” and part of “a major shift in social and political and economic philosophies.”¹⁶ He states that progressivism “was an attempt to adapt the old democratic system to the needs of a new society.”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.”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.”¹⁹ The best example in this volume of such leadership is the life of Elfrieda von Rohr, the *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.”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.”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

¹⁶Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics*, 126.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁹Murphy and Vnet, “Introduction,” 11.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 11.

²¹*Ibid.*, 12.

as race, class, ethnicity, and gender intersected on the prairies and on the plains.²²

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.²³ The first step toward recognizing these gendered negotiations is to “undermine the generic claims” as well as the language of traditional historic prose.²⁴ 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.”²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.”²⁷ The ideal woman, the “true woman” was expected to

²²Cayton and Gray, *American Midwest*, 36.

²³Kerber, “Gender,” 42.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 42.

²⁵Riley, *Female Frontier*, 200.

²⁶Murphy and Vnet, “Introduction,” 8.

²⁷Cayton and Onuf, *Midwest and the Nation*, 100.

be pure, pious, submissive, and domestic, and to keep her focus on the home and her family.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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,”

²⁸See Welter, “Cult of True Womanhood.”

²⁹Amelia 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.

³⁰Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 168–74.

³¹The 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.³⁶ 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,³⁷ 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 “westerling” women recorded their ambivalent feelings, “expressing fear, distrust, and contempt on one hand and curiosity, admiration, and sympathy on the other.”³⁸ 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

³⁶Cayton and Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation*, 97.

³⁷The 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.

³⁸Myres, *Westerling Women*, 59.

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

³⁹Cayton and Onuf, *Midwest and the Nation*, 101.

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.”⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹ 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.”⁴² 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

⁴⁰Holbrook, *Dreamers of the American Dream*, 97.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 105.

⁴²Harstad, “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."⁴³

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."⁴⁴ 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

⁴³ Atkins, "Minnesota," 20.

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.”⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ 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.”⁴⁷ 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.”⁴⁸ 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

⁴⁵Harzig, “Ethnic Female Public Sphere,” 154.

⁴⁶See Ware, *Holding Their Own*, 74.

⁴⁷Oliva, “Kansas,” 261.

⁴⁸Ware, *Beyond Suffrage*, 38.

the deanships of master of social work programs.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."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"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

⁴⁹Marcia Whicker, Michele Collins, and Bradley C. Cannon, "Is the State Policy Process Gendered?" Paper presented at the Western Political Science Association, March 1998, cited in DiPalma, "Women's Achievement in Social Work Academia," 144.

⁵⁰Bigelow, "Michigan," 37.

⁵¹Ibid., 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 sexual harassment during the Senate confirmation hearing for Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. She donated information regarding her campaigns for the Missouri 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 determination to foster an egalitarian, just society.



The women in this collection helped to shape the culture of the Midwest as they negotiated 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-century 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 boundaries 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.



- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Marietta Bones | 7. Mary Sibley |
| 2. Genora Dollinger | 8. Linda Warfel Slaughter |
| 3. Alice French | 9. Amanda Berry Smith |
| 4. Frances Dana Gage | 10. Esther Twente |
| 5. Carry Nation | 11. Harriett Friedman Woods |
| 6. Efrieda von Rohr Sauer | |

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