



FREE METHODIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

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B.T. Roberts
(1823-93)

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Marston Memorial Historical Center Begins Renovation

The first phase of the expansion and partial renovation of the Marston Memorial Historical Center is set to begin as this issue of the *Newsletter* goes to press.

This first project will give the Center new and larger archival space. This achieves three things: Provides an up-to-date climate-controlled area for records storage; allows adequate work space for the archivist and digital librarian; and frees up space in the present Historical Center for library expansion and additional display areas. It also provides much better protection for rare and climate-sensitive documents.

The project is being supervised by InterDesign, Inc., the Indianapolis company we've been working with for several months. InterDesign will now help develop the second phase of the project. This phase will begin as soon as sufficient funds have been raised.

Moving the denominational archives into the new space requires relocating our heavy compact shelving units. In preparation, the staff has begun emptying shelves and storing documents and other materials temporarily in the library. "The library will be stacked high and will not be usable" for awhile, reports Cathy Fortner. It will take about a week to move these units, which involves reinstalling the track system in the new space.

The new archival room will utilize the World Ministries Center's former production room and also the chapel (in total, about 850 square feet). As part of phase two, we are considering fitting up a new chapel in the Historical Center that



would be reminiscent of a typical Free Methodist Church building of the late 1800s or early 1900s. This would serve both as worship and meditation space and as a place where visitors can learn more about our heritage.

This first phase of renovation more than doubles the Historical Center's archival space. It enlarges the Historical Center by almost fifty percent, providing additional space for display, library expansion, visitors' research, and the new/old chapel. □



Mother Martha Lee

(1842-1916)

She was dressed in a long, black, gathered-at-the-waist dress topped with a starched white collarband. The forty-five-year-old woman's stern face and tight lips belied her nickname, "Mother."

She opened the shuttered door of the dimly lit 1880s brothel and walked in. Martha "Mother" Lee and her Free Methodist companions had stayed up late to visit in the Omaha slums, knock on doors, distribute gospel tracts, and tell anyone who would listen about "the love of Jesus and His power to save, and how He saved me."

Lee entered the brothel's gathering room, took in the scene of young women smoking, drinking, playing cards, and reading novels, and boldly declared the religious reason for her visit. Immediately she heard "the hollow, mocking laugh that went up from nearly every one of the nine throats in the room, [laughter that] would have done credit to the inhabitants of the lower regions." As Lee persisted to tell of Jesus' love, one woman stammered, "You don't mean to say that God can save such as we are, that there is hope either in this world or the one to come for those fallen as low as we?"

Lee discloses in her autobiography how that question lingered before her. "Oh, how my heart ached to tell these poor girls to come with me to learn to live for God. But it was as they said, there was no place open to them. They could not do right where they were, so must remain in sin. But from that time we determined to open a place of refuge for just such as these."

Through gritty determination, Lee convinced a widow with young children to allow her to set up a rescue home for "fallen" women, using several unoccupied rooms in the home. Soon after, when a nine-room house at 403 Bancroft Street in Omaha became available for rent, Lee moved the rescue home there on the east side of town alongside the railroad lines and Missouri River banks. A decade later a benefactor, Samuel Tinley, bought the home and enlarged it to include four city lots and three small houses. Thus began the Tinley Rescue Home for Fallen Girls and Women. Tinley set up Lee as superintendent. Lee's son and daughter-in-law also worked at the home.

BUSY MOTHER TO MANY

Running a rescue home kept Mother Lee busy from the morning worship service to the midnight knock from a woman



▲ Mother Martha Lee;
Omaha Rescue
Mission (1891) at
403 Bancroft St.

seeking shelter. In between came three daily meals to prepare, letters to write for donations or to thank benefactors, babies to wash, feed, and dress, and residents to instruct in basic housekeeping skills. Lee regretted the inordinate amount of time and energy consumed by these tasks, limiting her time for talking to residents about religious matters. She confessed to discouragement over the amount of daily upkeep, but she realized that the place had to look attractive so that women would feel at home and want to stay.

And there were successes. Pretty Cora, for instance, "a beautiful young girl with the bloom of her country home still on her cheek" who stayed in the home until she was truly penitent, and only then returning to her family.

Lee's rescue efforts expanded over time, beyond Nebraska. She opened Good Will Mission, a rescue home in Kansas City, Missouri, in a square, two-story, frame building on Tenth Street. She fitted up two rooms on the ground floor.

One was a gathering room where services were held, flanked by a small bathroom and dressing room in the back. The other room housed a kitchen

and dining room "where the inmates of the [brothel] houses about could come to get a meal or to visit if so inclined."

Lee's mission offered food, temporary shelter, and a nightly evangelistic service. Given her passion for rescuing prostitutes, Lee was glad that Good Will Mission stood in "plain sight" of "the girls," whom "she could see from the house at all hours of the day and night." She did not stay long with this Kansas City mission, however, but soon returned to Omaha and her first rescue home.

EARLY LIFE AND CONVERSION

Martha Lee was born in Indiana in 1842. When only fifteen she married Thomas Lee, a Union soldier. Three years later Thomas went off to fight in the Civil War, leaving Martha with two small children to mother. Martha eventually bore five more children.

But Lee had not yet met Christ. Not until 1885, in her forties, was she converted. The transformation happened in the home of

Mrs. E. D. Furness in Omaha, Nebraska. Her obituary by Lydia Newberry notes that Lee “was sanctified at a tent meeting in the same city, held by Rev. J. N. Bovee.” She became a charter member of the Omaha Free Methodist Church.

Martha Lee “nobly rose above her own sorrows and was in the front ranks of every enterprise for the maintenance of the sick and poor about her,” writes Newberry. “At the time she was sanctified, while slain under the power of God, she clearly felt the divine call to go forth to the rescue of the erring girls of this country.”

Mother Lee influenced many. She was instrumental in Lydia Newberry’s and other women’s entering into rescue work. With Newberry, Mother Lee “opened up another house of refuge, called the Home of Redeeming Love, which Mother Lee named, in Wichita, Kansas,” notes Newberry, and helped start work in other cities.

The Holmes Home of Redeeming Love in Oklahoma City was Mother Lee’s residence when she passed away on December 26, 1916, at age seventy-four. Newberry wrote, “As rescue workers, we feel that our Mother and counsellor is gone and that we have no one who can in any wise fill her place.”

MISSION AND LEGACY

Mother Lee dedicated the last quarter of her life to rescue work. Why? She traced the reason to her own remarkable conversion and sanctification. In the forty years prior to her religious awakening, she lived a life of deep sorrow and scarcity. She tells only a few of her woes: Her husband’s lingering death from measles contracted while a Civil War soldier that rendered him blind and eventually paralyzed. The abject poverty that forced her to chop frozen potatoes out of the ground with an axe as the only available food for supper. She worked at all sorts of business ventures to make money for the family’s survival, including selling wares to train passengers, until her husband died and her children grew into adulthood.

Lee herself heard about “the love of Jesus” only because “the people of God found me and began to visit me.” She marked her sanctification by abstaining from pipe smoking, a habit she had enjoyed for twelve years. Her body remained weak from its effects, however, which in turn hindered her evangelistic work. But prayers for healing took hold: “The healing power went through me, leaving me every whit whole.” In response, she dedicated her life to the “rescue of those fallen outcasts” and to the God who

had rescued her from spiritual and physical devastation.

The Free Methodist Church at the turn of the century established a long line of rescue institutions like Mother Lee’s, often in cities served by expanding railroad connections. As historian William Kostlevy remarks, “It was not uncommon for even small Free Methodist congregations to sponsor rescue missions or homes for unwed mothers, hold street meetings, or, at least, circulate religious literature among the poor” (Kostlevy, 66).

These now nearly forgotten institutions that materialized virtually overnight in city basements, rented homes, abandoned church buildings, and empty factories, remained chronically underfunded, and most did not last long. For instance, no records exist for Lee’s rescue home after 1916. Nevertheless Lee’s passion to rescue those on the margins remains a remarkable witness that must not be forgotten. □

Bibliographic Note: Lee’s statements come from Richard Artemus Lee, *Mother Lee’s Experience in Fifteen Years’ Rescue Work With Thrilling Incidents of Her Life* (Omaha: Richard Artemus Lee, 1906; available on Google Books). Her obituary was published in *The Free Methodist*, January 30, 1917, p. 14. See also William Kostlevy, “Benjamin Titus Roberts and the ‘Preferential Option for the Poor’ in the Early Free Methodist Church,” in *Poverty and Ecclesiology: Nineteenth-Century Evangelicals in the Light of Liberation Theology*, ed. Anthony L. Dunnivant (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 66; Howard A. Snyder, *Populist Saints*, 669; “Where There is No Vision, The People Perish,” *Gathered Sheaves* 10:1 (January 1921) pp. 5-20, which includes photos (Pamphlet 502, MMHC collection).

Priscilla Pope-Levison, author of *Turn the Pulpit Loose: Two Centuries of American Women Evangelists* (2004) is Professor of Theology and Assistant Director of Women’s Studies at Seattle Pacific University. Martha Lee will be featured in Pope-Levison’s forthcoming book, *Building the Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era* (NYU Press).

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▷ VISIT THE MMHC WEBSITE for more information about the history of Free Methodist witness and the growing ministries of the Historical Center. New material is being added frequently.

▷ THE LATEST ISSUE OF *CHRISTIAN HISTORY* MAGAZINE (Issue 104), on “Christians in the New Industrial Economy,” features the work of Free Methodists, among others. See especially the article by Jennifer Woodruff Tait, “Eating Bread with Widows and Orphans” (Issue 104). The magazine is available at christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/index.php/sales.

▷ FREE METHODIST MALE QUARTET CONVENTION, May 17-18 in Indianapolis. Participants are expected from California, Colorado, Michigan, New York, Florida, Ohio, Washington, Indiana, and Canada. The event begins at 10:00 a.m. Friday and concludes with a concert—open to the public—at 2:00 p.m. on Saturday.

▷ EXTRA COPIES of the Newsletter are available free of charge upon request (up to ten copies to one address). If you wish to send current or back issues to friends or family, contact the Historical Center by phone or letter or by email at History@fmcusa.org.

News
& Notes

Book Review

PK: A Preacher's Kid Comes of Age During the Great Depression and World War II, by Bob Haslam
(Xulon Press, 2012). 124 pp. (paper).



Rapidly changing times like ours may be exhilarating, but they have a downside. Stories—true stories, the kind rich in nostalgia and vivid personal memories—are being lost. The worlds between generations have diverged so greatly, we barely know each other.

Bob Haslam writes to bring his grandchildren and all of us into the fascinating story of his own childhood and youth. His keen mind recalls small details, like wind blowing through knot-holes in the mill town parsonage his dad and brother built with lumber donated by a logging company. His stories also illustrate practices of a bygone era in the church, like the congregation “pounding” the pastor’s family by showing up with pounds of flour and sugar and then sticking around to consume delicious pies together.

Bob writes intimately, recalling embarrassing moments from his boyhood, temptations of his teen years, and encounters with God that changed the course of his life. Many of his vignettes must have become the living narrative of the Haslam household, like the “grape juice bomb” his brother made by adding just a smidgen of yeast to a mason jar of juice and leaving it in the attic for the sun to ferment. You can almost see Grandpa Bob sitting in an easy chair surrounded by grandchildren, starting another story with, “Did I ever tell you about the time...?”

Our personal stories come to life in the larger story of our nation and world, and Bob helps those of us who were not around for the Great Depression or World War II get a feel for those formative times. From the odd jobs Bob took to the creativity of his loving parents in providing for their children during bleak times, the values that shaped a generation shine through these tales.

Bob and his wife Frances served for years as missionaries with the Free Methodist Church, and later Bob edited *Light and Life* magazine from 1986 to 1996. Fran Haslam directed the work of the Marston Memorial Historical Center from 1989 to 1997.

I think I understand my parents better for having read this book. Mom was born just twelve days after Bob and, like him, grew up in a Free Methodist pastor’s family. Some of our family folklore sounds a lot like his. Whether the experience of poverty that shows up in “bread and lard” stories or the beauty of caroling around the Christmas tree, our families made memories and then passed them on to

us. Like the Israelites in the Old Testament who were exhorted to explain the monuments and symbols of their heritage to their children and grandchildren, Bob passes on his faith through the stories in this book. Not only his family, but all of us who read *PK* will be blessed at the simple treasures he offers. May the Story live on.

— Linda Adams,
Director, International
Childcare Ministries

the QUOTABLE Ellen Roberts

“I liked the tone of his mind.”

Ellen Stowe’s reaction after her first conversation with young B. T. Roberts in 1848, at Wesleyan University.

— Howard A. Snyder,
Populist Saints (2006), p. 142.

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