

Bethany Home.

Abby G. Mendenhall

[From Mendenhall, Abby G. Some Extracts from the Personal Diary of Mrs. R. J. Mendenhall. No publication data; probably Minneapolis, for private distribution, ca. 1900.] Edith Jones Library, Minneapolis Friends Meeting.

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[P 523] Some twenty- three years ago a number of philanthropic Minneapolis women organized the society now known as the Sisterhood of Bethany under the name of the Minneapolis Branch of the Minnesota Magdelene Society, the parent society being located in St. Paul. Its first board of officers were: President, Mrs. George Couch; Vice -President, Mrs. J. B. Crocker; Secretary, Mrs. A. G. Mendenhall; Treasurer, Mrs. Charlotte O. Van Cleve.

The work of the society was confined to visiting such cases as came to the knowledge of the members and assisting to [P 524] pay the expenses of the parent society. A short experience convinced the members that an independent organization- was necessary for effective work, and on the suggestion of Mrs. Van Cleve the society severed its connection with St. Paul and in 1876 adopted its present name. The scope of the work was enlarged and a house as rented on Sixth Street S. E., a matron, employed and Bethany Home was opened as a refuge for those who wished to lead a new life.

Articles of incorporation were taken out in 1879 by Mms. Charlotte O. Van Cleve, Harriet G. Walker, Abby G.-Mendenhall, Euphemia N. Overlock, Ellen Holmes, Martha M. Emery, Hannah J. Moffit, Alexina Walker and Melissa Chase, and the first four have formed a board which has continued in office without a break until the death of Mrs. Overlock about a month ago.

The home on the East Side soon proved too small for the work of the society, which removed out on Seventeenth Street when Seventeenth Street was considered as almost outside the city limits. In a few years: another change was rendered necessary, and T. B. Walker built the house now occupied by the Unity House Social Settlement for the use of the Sisterhood of Bethany. One other change was made before removing into the present commodious and comfortable building at 3719 Bryant Ave. S.

The house and grounds were the gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. F. Brown and were presented to the society in 1885.

Large as the home was then deemed, a three-story addition was built in 1891, and already the society has been forced to rent a cottage nearby for the accommodation of the older children; and it is only a question of time before some permanent arrangement for increased room must be made.

Bethany Home is a comfortable three-story brick building situated in the midst of a generous lawn. In summer the place is gay with flowering plants set out by Mr. Mendenhall, a staunch friend of the society. The little baby wagons with [P 25] the neatly dressed, careful nurses brighten the lawn. Within the rooms are pleasant and cheerful. There is very little of the air of an institution about them, and the object of Miss Rhodes, the matron, to make the place home-like, seems to be realized as far as possible in such a place.

The dining-room, kitchen and laundry are in the basement; reception room, parlor, and matron's rooms on the first floor. The nursery with its rows of snowy cots each containing from one to three happy babies, occupies a large share of the second floor. The rooms for the inmates are on the second and third floors. There are no dormitories for them, and only two occupy a room together. In the wing is a large airy room that is used as a sewing room, and where those who are anxious to learn how to handle their needle in a skillful manner gather under the direction of Mrs. E. A. Allen.

When a girl enters Bethany Home she pledges herself to remain a year. The society has been both criticized and commended for this provision. Rescue workers say it does not take a year to convert a girl. That is true, but it does take a year to establish principles and character that will make her strong enough to stand alone when she leaves the Home. There are no bolts and bars and the front door stands unlatched so that it would be an easy matter for an inmate who had changed her mind to walk deliberately down the front stairs and out of the door without anyone knowing anything about it. But that is not the way they prefer to do. The girl who has changed her mind waits until night and then climbs out a window and over the back fence and walks to town. Fortunately, such cases are rare, and the majority of the inmates realize the object of the society is not to make prisoners of them, but to aid them to live a better life in the future than they have in the past.

Many sensational and interesting cases come to the home, which, told without any exaggeration and bound in yellow, would find ready sale. But the board keeps these confidences [P 526] sacredly, and if its advice is followed the story of each inmate is kept to herself. While it is necessary for the members of the board to know the real name of each girl, they suggest and advise that a temporary name be chosen during the stay in the home, so that when the year is over and the girl goes out into the world again, she drops all connection with those whom she has met there. Consequently there is a preponderance of Mary Browns and Jane Smiths and Emma Larsons. But it is a wise suggestion, and has been of untold benefit.

The work of the home is largely done by the inmates. A cook, laundress and seamstress are employed and instruct those who wish to learn more in any of these branches. Some of the girls are anxious to learn as much as they can, others would spend the day lazily doing nothing. The latter, however, are very much in the minority.

"I'm not going to bother about such things," said one of the girls, lazily. "I know enough about sewing."

"What did you come to Bethany home for?" suggested Miss Rhodes, gently, "if it was not to learn to do things better."

When the girls leave they must decide whether they will take their babies with them or leave them at the home for adoption. In the former case the directors try to find a home in the country where they can keep their children with them. If that is impossible, they furnish the address of a woman who will care for her children for a reasonable sum and provide a situation in which the money can be earned. Where the girl goes into the country the next thing the director very often hears of is that she is going to marry an honest farmer and many women who have learned their first lessons of right and wrong in Bethany Home are today presiding over comfortable farmhouses, not only in Minnesota but in other states.

"We seldom have babies enough to supply all the people who apply for children for adoption," laughed Miss Rhodes, [P 527] when questioned in regard to the children who were left behind when their mothers went out into the world. "People come from all over to see our children, and we do have nice babies. Women who want to adopt children usually think they know what they want and ask for blue-eyed girls or black-haired boys, but it very often happens that the women who asked for a blue-eyed girl goes away with a brown haired boy. The children take fancies to people who come and very often run to welcome them and call them "mama" or "papa." This pleases the man or woman and the suggestion becomes a reality."

Bethany Home does not permit children to be taken on trial and when a baby is taken away it goes into a permanent home. "If it were sent to you by God you couldn't change it," was Miss Rhodes's answer to a woman who suggested that she take home a little 3 year old to see if she would like to keep it. Taking children on trial recalls the story of a small girl who was taken from an institution so often and returned that she grew discouraged, and after three such disappointments refused to call the fourth woman who had taken her, mother. "I'll wait until I see if you keep me." she said, wearily.

Of the large number of children sent out from Bethany home every year, not one has given cause for any anxiety to the directors, who always keep a watchful eye on them. "I believe in heredity," said Mrs. T. B. Walker, "But my experience with Bethany Home has caused me to think that environment is of the utmost importance." The children from the home are found in families all through the northwest and are proving as clever and good as children born under more fortunate circumstances."

The directors have no endowment on which to draw to meet the many expenses of the home. The city appropriates two or three thousand dollars a year toward its support, so that cases may be sent from the city. Girls from Minnesota [P 528] are admitted for the year on payment of \$50 and those from outside the state for \$100. The industrial department does considerable sewing on underwear and infants' and children's clothing, and adds about \$400 a year to the revenue. The vegetables are raised on the institutional grounds and a cow is kept. The Needlework Guild makes an annual donation and the friends of the home do their share, which is a generous one. The Northwestern Hospital sends two nurses from the training school to get experience in obstetrical cases.

The observance of Christmas is one of the festivals. Some day between Christmas and New Years is selected to insure, the attendance of the members of the board and a week previous to the date cards are sent to all who are interested, asking for contributions of provisions, dry goods, clothing, or money. Several hundred cards are issued and the responses are very satisfactory. Large numbers of gifts of clothing, bedding, dress goods, shoes, toys, confectionary and provisions arrive throughout the appointed day and the sums of money often amount to over \$100. A bountiful dinner is served at noon and each inmate is presented with new gingham for a dress, white goods for two aprons; each baby receives a new dress and the older children toys. The house is decorated and guests go out from town to wander through the cheerful rooms and admire the babies in the nursery all day.

Just at present there are seventy Children and sixty adults in the home. There are fourteen children- and a matron at the cottage. The children are happy, jolly little people whose only trouble is that they are not allowed to play outdoors all day long, regardless of rain or shine. There is no kindergarten at present to direct their play, though a school is maintained at home for the benefit of the mothers.

The work of the home has been great and far-reaching and its influence can hardly- be overestimated. The little group of philanthropic women who saw the need of such an [P.529] institution and organized the Sisterhood of Bethany undertook a work that is not for today and tomorrow but for all time.

A.G.M.

The Bethany Home for Unwed Mothers: Fighting for the “Fallen”

[1 Reply](#)



In celebration of International Women’s Month it seems appropriate to explore one of the many untold stories surrounding the women of Hennepin County. Being a woman, much less a mother, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was no easy feat. Women were confined to the private sphere and expected to be homemakers who reared the children. However, all too often, this idyllic vision of family-life created harmful stereotypes and devastating consequences for women who became pregnant out of wedlock. These mothers were shunned and at times completely exiled from their communities and families. In the 19th century they were called “fallen women.” Under Christian religious doctrine, it was believed these women had fallen from grace after losing their purity and would not enter heaven. This stigma perpetuated the myth that the female sex was promiscuous and untrustworthiness. This often led to incidents of domestic abuse and the separation of mothers from their children so they would not “corrupt” them. However, during this dark period of women’s history, some women in positions of power and privilege took a stand.

In July 1876, in Minneapolis, a small group of upper-class women, known as the Sisterhood of the Bethany, a Quaker religious society, joined together to establish the Bethany Home for Fallen Women, with the hope of giving unwed mothers a second chance. The founding of the Bethany Home would not have been possible without the work of two extremely dedicated women fighting back against the stigmas of their time. Charlotte Ouisconsin Van Cleve and Abby G. Swift were both active members of the community with an unstoppable desire to better the lives of women.

Abigail Grant Swift was born on August 19, 1832, in West Falmouth, Massachusetts. As the daughter of a highly-regarded father, Capt. Silas Swift, she received a fairly comprehensive education, a privilege not offered to most girls at the time. On February 11, 1858, Abby married Richard Junius Mendenhall, a wealthy plantation owner from South Carolina. The newlywed couple moved to Minneapolis, arriving on April 25, 1858. Abby recounts her daily life and activist work in her diary, now kept in the archives at Hennepin History Museum, which dates from her first arrival in Minneapolis until her death in 1900. Abby acted as the first treasurer of the Bethany Home, serving in her role for 23 years.

Charlotte Van Cleve was born on July 1, 1819, in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. Charlotte was an early outspoken advocate of women’s suffrage in Minnesota. She became the first woman elected to the Minneapolis School Board in 1876. Charlotte’s stepped into the public sphere as she joined forces with other women in the Sisterhood of the Bethany, including Abby Mendenhall, to establish a home for “fallen women.” She was the president of the Bethany Home from its founding until her death. Charlotte had twelve children of her own and fostered another ten children from the Bethany Home over the course of her life.

The first mention of the Bethany Home in Abby’s diary is on July 24, 1876. She writes, “Went to St. Paul to find a matron for our Bethany Home (Magdelene work) as it is now. Did not succeed.” This pattern of employment and financial troubles plagued the early years of the Bethany Home. In these formative years Abby and Charlotte made great sacrifices in their personal lives which culminated in the official incorporation of the Bethany Home on March 21, 1879, exactly 140 years ago during this 2019 International Women’s Month.

The basic premise of the Bethany Home was to help women who had become pregnant out of wedlock, whether through sex work or by failed relationships. Upon entering the home, they signed a contract for a year and agreed to obey the house rules, although there was no security and the “inmates” could leave if they so choose. Once their infants were born, every mother was given the choice to keep their child with assistance from staff at the home for the next three to four months or to place their child up for adoption. Most women entered the home under aliases to protect their identities wither from disapproving families or male superiors seeking to return them to prostitution.

Over the next decade, the Bethany Home became a pillar of the women’s community of Minneapolis. Charlotte Van Cleve and Abby Mendenhall began targeting the powerful men running the sex industry, rather than blaming the young women who had been coerced into the profession. Once, when interviewed by a newspaper regarding the integrity of the “fallen women,” Charlotte memorably remarked, “Where are the men who make these girls what they are? Go find them in our business marts, drawing rooms, and churches...Men are getting rich on the toil and tears of famishing women and children.” With the mindset of targeting the source of illegitimate births, Charlotte and Abby took advantage of the already established laws and turned them in their favor.

In the 1880s, the City of Minneapolis enacted fines against known houses of prostitution and brothels within city limits. This meant that these locales had to pay monthly fines to the city to continue operation. With money always being in short supply at the Bethany Home, the women set about to turn the tables on the stigma of “fallen women.” Charlotte and Abby convinced the city to give them two-thirds of the monthly collected fines to help fund the Bethany Home, directly supporting the women who were victims of the industry. With a solid budgetary plan and a persuasive argument, the women were victorious and acquired funding for years to come much to the dismay of some of the male council members.

Following the passing of Abby Mendenhall, in 1900 and Charlotte Van Cleve, in 1907, the Bethany Home fell on hard times undoubtedly due to repeated attempts by the City Council to cut the facility off financially. The home closed its doors after being condemned sometime around 1924 and was replaced by the Harriet Walker Maternity Hospital, which continued operation on the site until 1945. An article published in 1921, detailing the work of the Sisterhood, claims that 8,000 women have

been helped over the course of the Bethany Home's 45-year operation. Both Charlotte's and Abby's obituaries commemorate their years of tireless dedication to the Home. Although confined by the societal expectations and politics of their time, these women challenged the accepted standards and sought to give unwed mothers a new lease on life.

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