

VIRGINIA C. VAN NOSTRAND AN OMAHA PIONEER WOMAN

How a Young and Delicate Girl Left the Refined Surroundings of a Cultured Eastern Home to Follow Her Husband to the Wild Life of a Frontier Village in Indian Days

THE wives of the Pilgrim fathers who crossed the seas in the early days of this country have been lauded in song and story for two hundred years for their bravery. But there are women living today in Omaha who showed as strong a courage, as great steadfastness of purpose and proved themselves just as devoted helpmates to their husbands in the pioneer days as the Pilgrim mothers. These women played the woman's part in life, a part which does not show as bravely in the printed pages of the history of a country, but which is just as great, at least, as the part played by the men in conquering a wilderness and converting it to the use of civilized and progressive man. The Pilgrim mothers entrusted themselves to the mercies of the sea and sought the new country to the west. The mothers of the present generation in Omaha braved the dangers of the unsettled and Indian-infested plains of the west, made a home for their husbands and for the families that came later and took part in those gentler activities which discriminate the civilized man from the savage.

Among these women pioneers of Nebraska no name is held in greater reverence or spoken with greater fondness than that of Mrs. J. W. Van Nostrand, who, raised in the lap of luxury and refinement in New York, unacquainted with any but the pleasures of life, sought with her husband the wilds of the west. Here broad opportunities were presented and her great and charitable heart unfolded itself, perhaps finding its fullest and richest maturity in the new state of Nebraska. Both she and Mr. Van Nostrand were very young and their youth painted everything with a rosy tinge, so they were able to overlook much sorrow, and revel in much joy.

Mrs. Van Nostrand, whose maiden name was Virginia C. Stoutenborough, was born in New York City, May 15, 1833. She was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Stoutenborough and the seventh of twelve children. From a small child she was religiously inclined, spent a great deal of time reading the best literature and took her education as one of the pleasures of life, and not as an irksome duty imposed upon a young girl. Her parents being people of wealth, indulged her literary tastes and educated her in two private schools. First she attended Mrs. Mulligan's school and later Prof. Tappan's school, both in New York. She proved exceptionally bright in mathematics, and later in life had various opportunities to make use of this particular talent, but always being quite delicate in health she was not able to confine herself to teaching, which was a great disappointment to her. She was a born leader, and always found it easy as well as a pleasure to impart her knowledge to others. She was married to Mr. J. W. Van Nostrand on October 17, 1855, at Holy Trinity, Brooklyn, New York. Here they remained for two years before they ventured to the plains of the west. They left New York on March 31, 1857, by steamer, arriving in Baltimore the next morning. From there they went by rail to St. Louis and from St. Louis by boat to Omaha.

Incidents of Journey Up River

It took them two weeks to come from St. Louis to Omaha, and the impressive incident of that trip was the fact that her case of jewels was stolen, thieves breaking into her trunk to secure them. They must have become accustomed to all manner of strange happenings or the carelessness of youth was prevalent, as this hole in the trunk meant very little to this happy couple, who were drifting to an unknown country on the wings of love, until two weeks later she woke up to the realization that she was minus some very valuable jewelry. This did not mar their happiness for long, all misfortunes could only at best cast momentary gloom over this enthusiastic couple. They might have been inclined to be more pessimistic if while they were sparring all the day and tied up at shore all night they could have had a glance at our modern times, when the same trip can be made in two days. On this boat they made the acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. Ezra Millard. Their son, Mr. Fred Millard, was then but a small baby. Captain and Mrs. Rustin were also on board on their way to Sioux City, but afterwards located in Omaha. These people became life long friends of Mr. and Mrs. Van Nostrand.

Early in the afternoon of April 19, 1857, Mr. and Mrs. Van Nostrand and party of seven others, including their maid, landed in Omaha. These poor children, so unsophisticated and ignorant of what the unknown shore held for them, were greeted by a scene never to be forgotten. It was a cold, blustering day, the ground was covered with snow and the first to greet them was a band of Indians in blankets and gay colored feathers. Mrs. Van Nostrand never having had any experience with Indians and thinking their main occupation in life was to secure the scalps of white people, looked at them with terror, never expecting to be able to climb the hill to her destination alive. No sidewalks, no paved streets, mud and slush ankle deep, and only a few buildings scattered here and there, gave the settlement a very crude and primitive appearance, and it is not to be wondered at if they were dismayed in comparing their new surroundings with the thriving city they had just left.

Housekeeping in Early Omaha

On arriving at the hotel, which was located at the corner of Fifteenth and Harney streets, kept by George & Mills, they were abashed to find that they could only procure one room for a party of nine. This was no stumbling block, however, they readily took it and adapted themselves to circumstances. Mrs. Van Nostrand's mother had very opportunely tucked in the trunk headed for what seemed to many the mythical west, a large piece of unbleached muslin, which was ingeniously draped by Mrs. Van Nostrand and served as a partition. Here they lived for seven weeks, waiting for the house they were to live in to be vacated. During the time many varied experiences were realized by this delicate but ambitious girl. It remained very cold for three months after their arrival, and up to the Fourth of July it was necessary to have fire night and morning. The next day after their being installed in the one room of this hotel Mrs. Van Nostrand found herself plunged into the realistic practice of domestic life, and with the desire to make the first meal that she ever cooked in her life a success she started out to find something that looked palatable. After a thorough search she returned with some beef, a can of peaches, a pound of onions and no butter. Her dishes had not arrived, and the only thing available was an old wooden box for a table and silver in abundance. But surrender was not thought of by this inventive little woman, and spotless white linen covered these rough boards, beautiful silver was arranged and an old yellow mixing bowl served for the meat, as no platter was available. Such was the characteristic of Mrs. Van Nostrand, all through life every obstacle that she met was a difficulty to be surmounted, not to be ignored or slid over.

Mr. and Mrs. Van Nostrand finally got possession of their new house, they lived at Fifteenth and Harney streets, directly back of the Paxton hotel of today. They had for their neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Alexander McAusland and across the street from them was the residence of Mr. W. D. Brown, one of the first settlers of Omaha and who established and maintained the ferry between Council Bluffs and Omaha. At this time Mr. Van Nostrand was prominent in politics and Mrs. Van Nostrand in church and charity. At this early time there were plenty of doctors, but no trained nurses, and to the calls of the sick and dying no one was more responsive than Mrs. Van Nostrand. She was gifted with the love of doing good for the pleasure it gave others, rich and poor were administered to alike and her noble, generous nature is echoed today by those who knew her best and have watched her busy life up to the present time.

At Work for the Church

It was not her disposition to theorize when there was work to do. From the second day of her arrival in Omaha Mrs. Van Nostrand took an active interest in the Episcopal church, which was then in a large upper room in the Pioneer block on Farnam street. She attended the services regularly and within a very short time was canvassing for scholars so as to start a Sunday school, and in this



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she was very successful, and today has the distinction of establishing the first Sunday school in the Episcopal church of Omaha. The church was not supplied with all of the appliances of instruction and even the room where the services and Sunday school were held was crude in its construction. The devout were obliged to sit on boards supported by chairs and kneel on a dirty floor, with the click of billiard balls ringing in their ears from a nearby room. But this did not prove a handicap and in May, 1858, in this same room Mrs. Van Nostrand, Miss Monell, afterwards the wife of Senator Hitch-

cock, and Miss Emma Homan, now the wife of Mr. Elmer Thayer of Colorado, met as teachers for the new Sunday school. They set to work diligently to teach these children to lead a Christian life. They taught them the creed, the Lord's prayer and the ten commandments and such other parts of the church catechism as was necessary to accomplish their aim. For music, no hymn books were available, so the prayer book was used as a substitute. Mrs. Van Nostrand never prided herself on her ability as a singer, but giving vocal instructions came as one of the numberless duties imposed

upon her, and she tuned her notes to harmonize with the occasion and more than succeeded.

A very ludicrous incident arose in the early history of this little church, when in August of 1857, it was made known that Rt. Rev. H. W. Lee, bishop of Iowa, was to make Omaha a visitation. A real live bishop was a new sight to many of the citizens, and of course it was their desire to make as good an impression as possible with the few facilities available. A little band of women with Mrs. Van Nostrand as leader set to work and accomplished marvelous feats out of what would seem to many impossible material. The first thing they did was to scour the rooms, making cleanliness, free of all adornments, an accepted background. They next procured a large drygoods box, covered it with a fair linen cloth which was used as an improvised altar; a bench covered with a blanket was to do duty as an altar rail; a silver cup to be used in place of a chalice. At the last minute it seemed the plans of the congregation were to be defeated. They had no pattern! This was a most startling discovery and some of the good women sat down and just had a "good cry." But Mrs. Van Nostrand knew no defeat. She had overcome too many obstacles in her life to retreat before such problems. She sat down and thought while others indulged in tears. Suddenly she gave a happy cry. "I have it," she said. "What?" asked one of the women less distressed than the others. "The pattern," she said. She hurried to her home and returned in a short time with a silver butter dish, one of her wedding presents that she had brought over with her on the boat from New York. Tears were quickly dried. It served very successfully and also for baptismal purposes; in fact they continued to use it until they occupied their new church on lower Farnam street. Only one more difficulty presented itself, and that was to find a suitable chair for the bishop, as he was a very large man. This was finally secured from Colonel J. A. Parker, Jr., and from that time preparations for the august bishop went on to a happy conclusion.

Charity Work Occupies Her

There was no organized charity at this time, every one worked blindly, but all worked as brothers and sisters, ready to answer any or all calls. Mrs. Van Nostrand did not restrict herself wholly to this kind of work. In the year 1881 a number of women expressed to each other the desire to provide for themselves facilities for instruction and training in the principles and practices of art. They had already attained some proficiency in drawing and painting in oils and water colors. In the month of November they resolved to invite such of their friends and neighbors as they supposed might be in sympathy with their aim to meet for consultation. They were assembled at the home of Mrs. Van Nostrand. Among those present were Mrs. Frank Colpeter, Mrs. Mary S. DuBois, Mrs. Robert Doherty, Mrs. G. I. Gilbert, Mrs. R. C. Moore and Mrs. Hume. At this meeting of the permanent organization Mrs. Van Nostrand was elected president, Mrs. Robert Doherty vice president, Mrs. George I. Gilbert treasurer and Mrs. Jewell secretary. This organization grew very rapidly. They had over seventy-five members the first year. The Creche or day nursery for the care of children of women who are compelled to go out from home to work was the outgrowth of a suggestion made by Mrs. O. C. Dinsmoor to a society of women called the "Unity club." Mrs. Van Nostrand has been vice president for this widely beneficial society for nearly eighteen years. This society has been in existence for over twenty years and holds the remarkable record of never having had a death in it. Other notable organizations of which Mrs. Van Nostrand has either been one of the originators, charter member of or is actively associated with are the Tenth Street Mission and the Woman's auxiliary, she was secretary of Merciful Savior for three or four years, started the Woman's auxiliary of St. Barnabas' church, in which she is actively connected now. Such has been the busy life of this noble woman. Today Mr. and Mrs. Van Nostrand are enjoying the happiness of good health and the golden fruits of their countless good deeds. They were never blessed with any children, but Mrs. Van Nostrand has been god-mother to about fifty. All of the neighborly kindness scattered by Mrs. Van Nostrand as freely as sunshine to the sick and sad has linked her to her eternal friendships, but has preserved the modesty, simplicity and gentle nature that has characterized her life, and precious memories that bind the heart to the past must brighten the whole vista of a fifty years' residence in Omaha.

France and Work the Y. M. C. A. is Doing There

MY VISITATION of France was scattered through a comparatively long period of time, but included only four cities—Paris, Nancy, Bordeaux and Marseilles.

Paris, the largest city on the continent of Europe, situated on the River Seine, with a population of 2,500,000 inhabitants, is doubtless the most beautiful large city in the world. As a general thing it is built up solidly, with buildings quite uniform in size and shape. The city has numerous squares, about which are remarkable structures in size, architecture, elegance and convenience. Some of these squares have handsome columns, statuary, etc. Many attractive small parks are found in the city and very large ones outside. The boulevards are wide, well paved and are systematically extended through the whole city for convenience of travel and traffic. These boulevards are almost constantly alive with carriages, cabs and omnibuses and their sidewalks and crossings with pedestrians. The electric omnibus or motor has about driven the horse conveyances out of business.

The river Seine, running through the city, has been made a thing of beauty and service. In the summer it affords the passengers on its boats cool and otherwise pleasant transportation. It requires weeks to see Paris as it ought to be seen. I can make but mere mention of some of its notable and wonderful things:

Squares or Places—Place de la Concorde, de la Republique, de-la Bastille, de la Nation, etc.; boulevards too numerous to mention. The Champs Elysee is pre-eminently the finest; it extends from the Arc de Triomphe to the Place de la Concorde. "A large avenue is opened from the Champs Elysee to the Esplanade des Invalides, passing over the new bridge Alexander III, between which two new palaces are erected, one on each side of the avenue, form one of the principal attractions of the Champs Elysee." Notable buildings—the Grand Opera house, the largest theater building in the world; the site cost \$420,000, or more than \$2,000,000; the structure cost over \$7,000,000. It is artistically magnificent without and exquisite within. Trocadero palace and gardens, a most popular resort; the new Exposition building, the Palace de l'Elysee, the residence of the president of the republic; the Palace du Luxembourg and gardens, the Palais and Musee du Louvre and picture gallery, the most important building in Paris. It contains more pictures probably than any other building in the world; it is the building in Paris first visited by tourists; the Hotel de Ville, which cost \$1,000,-

000; the Pantheon, the Eiffel Tower, 985 feet high; the highest structure in the world, 430 feet higher; than the Washington monument, the highest permanent structure in the world.

Churches—The Notre Dame, the archbishopric of Paris; the Madeleine, lighted from the roof; the Church Invalides, in which is the tomb of Napoleon; the Sacre Coeur, on the highest point in Paris. It has been a long time building, is of the Byzantine style and will cost \$1,000,000. The bell to go on it is the largest in the world that can be rung. The bell and clapper weigh nineteen tons.

Paris has also a fine Young Men's Christian association building, made possible by the gift of James Stokes of New York City. Paris is a city given to pleasure more than perhaps any other city in the world, and in its life and pleasure has doubtless the lowest standard of personal chastity or purity of any other large city of Christendom. I am informed that Paris does not have as wide and controlling an influence in France as it once had. However, there are many good people in Paris, trying to do all they can for its highest welfare.

Bordeaux, in southwestern France, is a large city of 260,000 inhabitants and situated on a river navigable for the largest ships. It has a fine wharf, a magnificent bridge and a large shipbuilding dock. The chief articles produced in the neighborhood of Bordeaux are wine and asparagus. The city does a considerable trade in fish, oysters and vegetable oil, the last article from southern Spain. Bordeaux is a rich city. It has 4,000 wine merchants, that doubtless do a paying business. It is a large shipping point by boat and rail. It has many large buildings, particularly its theater, railroad station and cathedral. It has fine broad streets, beautiful squares and parks. Its residence houses are attractive and convenient. Bordeaux has many institutions to take care of the poor and injured. It is almost wholly Catholic, but has 8,000 Protestants and a good Young Men's Christian association.

Marseilles, beautifully situated on the Mediterranean sea, in southern France, with a population of more than 500,000 inhabitants, is the second city in size and importance in the French republic. Its outer bay does not seem very well protected, but several smaller inside harbors or docks are well sheltered and full of vessels. The city and surroundings are quite hilly. It has large streets and boulevards, well kept, also large and convenient squares. Several of these squares and avenues are high up in the city and from them fine views of the sea, the harbor and the suburbs of

the city can be had. One of the boulevards was turned into a street show, with attractions of every sort for making money. Booths with all manner of things for sale, side shows of many kinds with displays and curious things to entertain and amuse all classes, and daring exploits to tempt the venuesome. The whole boulevard was crowded and everything seemed to be patronized to the full. Near this boulevard was a very handsome cathedral, with two towers. It had a most commanding front in itself and in its location. The great cathedral, a very showy one, was close to the harbor or bay. It had a splendid situation, that made it appear to the best advantage from sea or land, but it did not seem to be in a convenient place for worshippers of the city. At or near the entrance of one of the smaller docks or harbors is a ferry unlike any other in the world that I have seen. There are iron or steel towers at both sides of the entrance. A very long iron or steel truss or bridge is constructed over the entrance and supported by these towers at a great height so that vessels with the highest masts can go under it. From this bridge or truss there are wire ropes or rather iron fastenings that go down to the flat ferry boat, which was drawn back and forth over the entrance by power exerted on the bridge above. The ferry moves along very smoothly and quickly, carrying a large number of vehicles and passengers. Marseilles has a large traffic in business and passenger travel.

Nancy, in northern France, is a quaint and homelike old city, with a population of 102,960 inhabitants. It has a large and handsome cathedral. The Stanislaus square is very unique and attractive. It is large and surrounded by many well constructed public buildings. Many streets enter this square and each street has an iron or steel gate artistically fashioned and richly painted with gilt trimmings. In one corner of the square is a fountain fashioned in harmony with the gates, but more elaborately decorated. In the center of the square is a statue of Stanislaus. The city has a very wide and comparatively long esplanade, with avenues, paved walks, trees and monuments. At the far end of the esplanade from the center of the city is a fine stone arch or gate like the ones in Rome. The whole esplanade is a beautiful and charming place.

I arrived at Nancy, France, on October 31, 1906, and left for Belgium on November 3. I went to Nancy to attend the national convention of the French Young Men's Christian association. There was a good attendance of strong representative association delegates and the convention was

well managed. A good report of well done work was submitted to the convention by the national committee. The convention was marked for its earnest prayer and thorough discussion of all its work. There was a close adherence to the Paris basis. Here, as in Norway, I was delighted to see all the delegates participate in the Lord's supper. The first morning of the convention all the delegates went to the Protestant temple. A most spiritual service was held, including prayer, singing and an earnest sermon. Then all the delegates, without exception, partook of the Lord's supper. It was a blessed occasion, a most fitting opening of a convention of Christians whose motto is John 17:21. Oh, when will this be for all Young Men's Christian association conventions? Oh, Lord, hasten the day. I attended all the sessions of the convention the first day. By request, I addressed the convention for a short time. I presented them some of the greetings I had with me from various nations of the world. I emphasized the great importance of the association work and urged them to stand faithfully upon the Paris basis and carry out its letter and spirit in their work, by so doing their true success would be assured. The next day I attended several of the sessions of the convention, including a banquet, which was participated in by many leading citizens of Nancy, to interest them in the local association work. The addresses following the banquet made a good impression upon all present. During the convention I had many personal interviews with the national secretary, Mr. E. Sautter, and with local secretaries; also with members of the French national committee and of local committees. I had a very desirable visit with Mr. M. Rideout, special American secretary in Europe. I enjoyed the convention very much, which gave me a deeper insight into the French association work than I could have secured in almost any other way.

I reached Paris on December 5, 1906, and remained there until the 11th. During this time I had frequent interviews with the national secretary, Mr. E. Sautter, and planned with him for my visits to Bordeaux and Marseilles, France. Mr. Sautter wrote ahead to these places about my coming. He also gave me a place in his office to do my writing. His assistants were very kind to me. I also met the general secretary of the principal French association in Paris. I had also a special meeting with the president, general secretary and others of the board of directors of the association. After this meeting another appointed meet-

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