

WORK OF WOMAN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION IN OMAHA

How a Great Charity Has Been Built Up and Sustained by the Unremitting Efforts of Some Energetic Women Whom Adversity Has Never Daunted in Their Undertakings

TWENTY-FIVE years come Friday, December 4, the first organized charity in Omaha came into being and on the sixth day of the present week, that charity, the Women's Christian association, will celebrate its silver jubilee. The history of this institution, its memories of days and events passed, are dearest to the members of the association, and particularly so to the women who have with abiding zeal and enthusiasm worked for all this quarter century; but because they have worked so long, so hard and so successfully, the story of their labor and achievement belongs in a measure to the city of Omaha, and in their success all its citizens may and do feel proud.

A tale of long continued, well directed benevolence is a pleasant thing to hear, a pleasure to recount. None but he in whom the milk of human kindness has soured completely, he in whom "there is no more mercy than milk in a male tiger," can feel otherwise than glad when he comes to think of the well nigh countless deeds of ministry and mercy which have come to pass in twenty-five years of human life, of human suffering and misery. Particularly to those whose daily routine bring them in frequent contact with the seamy side, with thieves and "hop" or "coke" fiends, with "stickup" men or shoplifters, with all the men and women who have made shipwreck of their lives, to one who sees overmuch of this phase of human existence, a chapter like the history of the Women's Christian association gives new zest and inspiration to the reading of the book of life.

It was in the parlors of the First Methodist Episcopal church that a great work had, like most great works, its seemingly small beginning. As the fifth annual report of the association says in recounting the history of the charity's inception, there was little but zeal with which to begin: "At our first meeting one woman promised to give \$5 with which to pay the rent of three rooms in the city hall building. With this small amount of money, but with a larger amount of faith, we commenced our work in this apology for a home. Efficient committees were appointed in every ward in the city, and all cases of need were thoroughly investigated before help was given. The dispensing of public charities has been from the beginning a prominent feature of our work—there being then no organized charity in the city. However, since the organization of the Bureau of Charities last winter (1888), the work of the relief department has been dropped in a measure, although that work will ever remain prominent in the labors of the association."

Two Serve Long Time

Mrs. P. L. Perine was then president of the association and Mrs. George Tilden one of the trustees. The latter is now president. She and Mrs. Perine, who served as the executive head until illness necessitated her resignation, have been officers of the association all through its existence. It is worthy of note that three of the early prominent workers in the charity have celebrated their golden weddings, these three being Mrs. Perine, Mrs. J. J. McLain and Mrs. G. W. Clark.

By force of circumstances and its own desire the association, which started to administer outdoor relief only, came to broaden its activities and the Old People's Home was instituted. Old women were at first solely received there. Speaking of them in her annual report of 1889, Mrs. Perine said: "I speak first of our Christian association home on Burt street. The elderly women there are now in a comfortable condition; and did we need any reward for our work and anxiety, we surely have it as they press our hands and say, with tearful earnestness, 'I thank God for what you have done for us.' Dear old friends! May we never grow weary while we have the power to brighten the dismal pathway now so wearily trodden by faltering footsteps."

"Little children, too, claim a large share of our sympathy in that home—so small yet so full. Dear little things! whose lives have known nothing of a home where love is the ruling power. What is sadder than a joyless childhood? Let us take them into our hearts as well as into the home, and give them an experience which shall help them through the early years, when temptations are strong and the little hearts are weak to resist."

By this time the Women's Christian association was also conducting a home for young women, which supplied the necessity later filled by the Young Women's Christian association. Of this work, Mrs. Perine reported:

"The Young Women's home is a delight to us all; so many dear girls there sheltered from the intrigues of strangers, and a home where they may come when the wearisome day and the monotonous tread are over—a home of brightness, warmth and genial comfort, with good books, music and all that is attractive."

"Our Woman's exchange, though only of recent organization, has already through the good management and perseverance of its committee, become one of the most successful departments of our work. It helps people to help themselves, and opens avenues for many branches of art and industry to become a medium of support to our burdened women who might shrink from coming in contact with the homeless public."

The Old People's home is unique among institutions of the kind, because the title "home" is not in this case a misnomer. It is not an easy task to prevent a large institution, in which methodical systems must be followed, from acquiring an air and atmosphere so cold and formal that even the chance visitor feels something of constraint on entering the doors. Except in military barracks such severity of aspect is a thing which matrons and superintendents of homes and asylums, etc., know that they should avoid, but find themselves generally powerless. The reason for this is not hard to discover. Unless such strict and methodical formalities be the custom, things are apt to grow confused, all semblance of discipline is lost, cost of operation increases and the whole institution becomes demoralized.

Difficulty Skillfully Avoided

This difficulty, peculiar to such institutions as the Old People's home, has been skillfully avoided in this almost single instance. Partly this has been accomplished through the plain, but not homely nor severe furnishing of the home; partly through the spirit in which Mrs. Scott, the matron, and the executive board conduct the institution; partly through the fact that many of the members of the home have paid or had paid by relatives and friends a life fee when the old man or old woman in question became a resident there. The first factor is more important than would appear at first sight, because to even more than ordinary persons does the nature of their physical environment, the furniture, carpets and pictures, affect those who pass practically every hour of their lives within the four walls of a single building. To such the difference between a cheery room and a drab surrounding is of prime consideration, for they are by reason of age unable to escape. The youth, male or female, constrained to sleep in a hall bed room need not spend all his time there. Bright and cheerful theaters and cafes or hospitable Young Men's or Young Women's Christian associations hold open the door for him or her of an evening, but for the aged and infirm these attractions might as well not exist at all.

One need not emphasize the fact that kindness and consideration from those in charge of an institution are vital factors in the equation of the happiness of those living under their dispensation. Suffice it to say that at the Old People's home this consideration and kindness is meted out to all alike, whether the old man or woman be appreciative or not, and whether or not he or she is an easy person to care for.

The third reason cited is also worthy of note. Those who have been able to pay this \$300 life fee may justly feel that they are not



MRS. IDA V. TILDEN,
President Omaha W. C. A.

entirely charges upon the bounty of others and that their personal pride need suffer no sting because they are living in the home. Pride of this sort is of the kind which is most desirable, for unless it is carried too far, it is nothing else than proper self-respect. It is a fact that the small sum named will not do much more than pay the cost to the home of the one person's keep for a single year, but this is beside the point, for it is the principle which is involved and not the actual figures.

It is an unfortunate fact that the words "one big family" have grown to be a cant phrase, so much so that it is almost a joke nowadays, in much the same fashion that maudlin usage of the sentiment of devotion to one's maternal ancestor has caused the phrase, "good to his mother," to become the butt of near-humorists. For were the "big family" phrase not worn threadbare it would more aptly than any other combination of words describe the Old People's home.

It is true that as in other families some of the component members are easier to serve and aid than others; some cheerful and appreciative in all circumstances; some grumpy and growly occasionally. But of the latter, the matron will tell you there are but few, and these not complaining all the time by any means. In fact, some naturally cross-grained elderly personages have notably grown better natured since they came to live and move and have their being at the home.

The oldest resident of the institution happens to be the one farthest from the occasionally grumpy class. Mrs. Lucy Parker, a young old woman of 92 summers and winters, is the cheeriest soul in the home, not even excepting the matron, Mrs. Scott, whose face is significant of a kind and thoughtful nature. All who have met Mrs. Parker once at the home ask for her when chance or design leads their footsteps thither a second time. Mrs. Parker, in fact, has callers numerous enough to make jealous even a debutante, one of the just-out, on-a-mad-hunt-for-a-good-time kind.

Thanksgiving day as one caller, a young man, left Mrs. Parker's presence, other callers were announced.

"You are a regular belle, aren't you?" suggested the departing caller.

"You ought to be ashamed to say flattering things to one's

face," retorted Mrs. Parker with spirit, and the other left abashed. Mrs. Parker first saw the light of day in _____ county, near New Albany, N. Y. She was born in 1817, when James Monroe was president and "the era of good feeling" was on. It is not likely that this fact has anything to do with the sunniness of her disposition, but it may be said that she has remained true to the good omen of her birth time all her life.

Leaves New Home in Infancy

Her residence in the Empire state was not long continued, for when she was 2 1/2 years old her parents moved in the dead of winter to the vicinity of Zanesville, O. They made the trip by wagon through country still thoroughly wild. Some parts of the Pennsylvania mountains which they traversed are not even yet free from wolves and bear, and in 1820 Pittsburg was still an outpost of civilization. It may seem something of an ordeal to expose a child of 2 years to the rigor of a winter in a covered wagon, but Mrs. Parker endured little more on that trip than did the children of most men and women of that day. Something of a selective process resulted, too, from these hardships, and the harder children lived and the weaker went to early graves. Read the old family Bibles if this statement is not believed and one will find there that while our great grandparents had many children—a dozen was the average—all did not grow to adult years. It is no wonder then that those who survived, being the hardier ones, have often lived to a green old age as has Mrs. Parker.

Pioneer life seems to have been her destiny in life. "We came to Iowa in 1854," said Mrs. Parker, "and settled near Charlton and there I lived until seventeen years ago, when I went to Oregon for some years. Iowa was then in its infancy, you know. My brother remained in Charlton, and I mean to write him a letter Thanksgiving, though I am not sure that he is alive yet. I have not heard from him in some time." This thought caused the first expression other than cheerful to flit across the old woman's face. She quickly recovered herself and went on:

"Iowa's a great state. It's the best state in the country. Don't

you think so?" she appealed to her caller. That person agreed with ease, being a Hawkeye-born. Mrs. Scott, also born across the river, proved more loyal to Nebraska, however, and protested indignantly in behalf of the state of her adoption. "Iowa's all right," said she, "but it is not any better—not so good, in fact—as Nebraska."

Mrs. Parker's life reaches back over all the important periods in American history after the revolutionary war, for the echoes of the war of 1812 had hardly died away when she was a child. She was a slip of a girl when John Quincy Adams sat in the White House and 20 years of age when Andrew Jackson caused the first panic which the United States had known. She was a grown woman, a wife and mother of several children when the Mexican war came in 1848. By 1854, when she removed from Ohio to Iowa, the slavery question was the great and burning issue and Charlton, near her home, was a depot for the great "underground railway," the secret relay system by which escaped slaves were helped to Canada and freedom. In the state in which she is probably to end her days, and in Kansas, the question was beginning to be agitated as to whether they should come into the union free or slave and bands of Missourians for the one side and New Englanders for the other were enroute to fight for their conviction.

Comparison of Events

When the fall of Sumter electrified the north, Mrs. Parker was 54, a score of years older than the average longevity. The civil war is now forty-three years past and Mrs. Parker is hale and heartier than the average man or woman of 35 years. August 17 last her 92d birthday was celebrated at the Old People's home with elaborate ceremony. Prediction is a vain thing and prophecy a snare and a delusion, but it may safely be said that there seems every likelihood that Mrs. Parker will for quite a number of years to come continue to cheer the home with her bright mind and youthful spirit.

She may indeed live to see the Old People's home established in a building better suited to its needs. The present home is a good one in many ways, but it is four stories, counting a basement, and the stairs are a trial to stiff and elderly knee hinges. An elevator is an impossibility because of the construction of the building and would be a considerable expense besides. Some day or other there will be built a large two-story building and then the Old People's home will be ideally located, provided that considerable ground surrounds the building, the lack of which is another fault in the present situation.

The membership roll of the early days of the association is interesting, not only because of the fact that it reaches back to a bygone portion of Omaha history, but many well-known names are there inscribed. The life membership in 1889, five years after the beginning of the work, included Mesdames Guy C. Barton, Virgil G. Bogue, Samuel Brown, H. C. Cady, R. H. Clarkson, Frank Colpeter, Thomas Creigh, O. F. Davis, M. A. Detwiler, P. H. Himebaugh, N. Merriam, J. H. Millard, Ezra Millard, W. V. Morse, C. Oskamp, A. J. Poppleton, E. H. Sherwood, E. L. Stone, A. P. Wood, Clark Woodman and Mrs. James Woolworth.

Mrs. Byron Reed and Mrs. John M. Thurston, first wife of the former senator, were honorary members, while the active membership list was as follows: Mesdames P. H. Allen, W. N. Babcock, L. L. Boltz, R. P. Bosworth, D. J. Collins, A. Carlisle, H. M. Clayton, George Darrow, S. J. Ferris, C. J. Fisher, William Fleming, Charles Gardner, T. S. Grigor, W. Hanchett, J. A. Hatnes, James A. Haynes, L. S. Haller, John L. Heth, R. D. Hills, A. P. Hopkins, Phillip Igoe, J. B. Jardine, George A. Joslyn, George A. Joplin, F. B. Johnson, L. B. Knight, George Little, Horace Lucington, George L. Lyman, J. J. McLain, J. H. Miller, Thomas McCague, James H. McConnell, P. L. Perine, O. H. Pratt, A. Roberts, Robert Ringwait, Robert L. Reynolds, J. A. Robinson, A. S. Stiger, C. E. Sillsbee, A. B. Somers, R. M. Stone, W. B. Taylor, Cadet Taylor, George Tilden, S. R. Towne, John M. Thurston, H. Van Geisen, W. J. Welshans, James Woolworth, E. B. Wood and Wilbur.

Banner Year Was 1903

In an institutional way the most eventful year in the history of the Women's Christian association was that of 1903, for during that twelve months' period the removal took place of the Old People's home from the Burt street building to a new and commodious building in Kountze place. December 8 of that year the association celebrated its twentieth anniversary and the inauguration of a period of larger benevolence by an elaborate program preceded by a luncheon in the parlors of the First Methodist Episcopal church, at which the ministers of the city and their wives were guests. The program included two interesting historical sketches of the association's work, one by Mrs. Perine, for upwards of a decade the chairman of the home committee, as well as former president, and the other by Mrs. William Fleming, whose mother, the late Mrs. W. V. Doolittle, had been the beloved second president of the association.

This was a significant annual meeting, too, because during the preceding year the articles of incorporation had been so amended as to admit men as well as women, and the name accordingly changed from "The Old Ladies' Home" to "The Old People's Home."

At the head of the association at the present time is a woman whose record for public usefulness in Omaha is unexcelled. On Mrs. George Tilden has rested through these years most of the work of the financing of the association, aside from active labors on her part in active benevolent direction, and to her goes much of the credit for the present large size and efficiency of the work. Likewise active for five and twenty years in the association is the first vice president, Mrs. G. W. Clark. Mrs. S. R. Wilcox is now second vice president, and the other officers are as follows:

- Recording Secretary—Mrs. John W. GHI.
- Corresponding Secretary—Mildred Merriam.
- Treasurer—Mrs. Clinton Miller.
- Trustees—Mesdames F. H. Cole, Edward Johnson, Cadet Taylor, A. K. Gault, W. B. Taylor, Charles Van Court, Jeff W. Bedford, C. M. Fowler, Andrew Traynor, J. J. McLain, M. A. Elliott, L. L. Boltz, L. O. Connor and P. L. Perine.

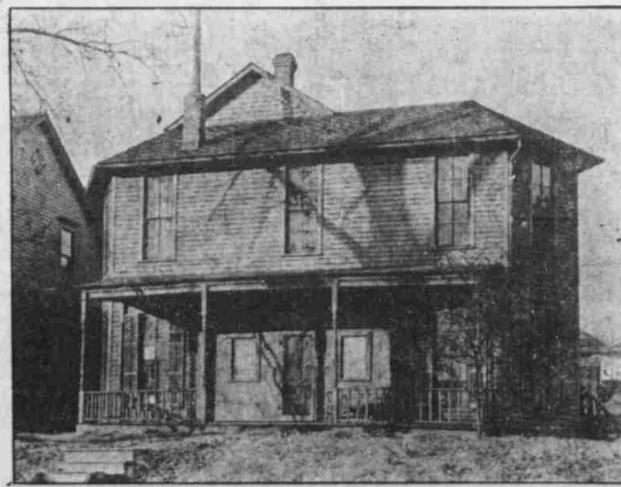
Any and all of these good women can tell the inquirer some interesting events which have come within their experience in benevolent work. Like all other organized charity workers of recent years they have had to exercise care lest kindness be imposed upon and care lest those capable of self-support too willingly permit themselves to be pauperized. They have heard untrue tales which are pathetic enough in recital to wring tears from a statue of Iago and have been the targets at which the shafts of the most elaborate deceit have been aimed. They have seen those too proud to receive aid which circumstances necessitated that they should receive and have seen pain at the suffering of chick and child to humble the haughtiest spirit.

They have discovered what every charity worker finds: That aims are sometimes given out of all proportion to income; that those in pinched circumstances are occasionally the most liberal of purse, but they have also learned that the reverse is far from an invariable habit and that some of the biggest-hearted, most free-handed men and women in Omaha are of its wealthiest citizens.

Charitable workers come and go. As the years elapse the names of those now most active will perforce vanish from the roll of members of the Women's Christian association. But it must be a source of pleasure to those now prosecuting a good work, and a great work, that the fruit of their labors will not perish with them; that an institution like this will not die and that in time far to come the work will be carried on as zealously and as effectively as in this year of grace 1908.



OLD PEOPLE'S HOME ON WIRT STREET.



FIRST HOME OF THE W. C. A. IN OMAHA