

Women with a Mission: Serving their faith at home and abroad



Williamsport Women
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The church's mission to both non-Christians living in foreign lands and those in need at home was central to many Williamsport women. The Protestant missionary revival of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was bolstered greatly by the acceptance of women, usually unmarried, into the missionary field. It was commonly believed that women infused cultural values into society and that Christian women needed to reach, teach and elevate women of other cultures. Some females in the various local denominations served in the missionary field, and many more established well-organized societies to support this outreach.

The Ladies of First Presbyterian Church

The ladies of the thriving First Presbyterian Church were a perfect example of a group providing leadership in this area. There were any number of missionary groups listed in the weekly bulletins: the Keetah Home Missionary Society (1902-1938), Richard Armstrong Auxiliary (1905-1912), Harriet Elliott Home Missionary Society (1903-1912), Women's Foreign Missionary Society (1903-1912), Ladies Auxiliary (1910-1933), Women's Auxiliary (1933-1943) and Women's Missionary Society (1931-1943). Detailed and beautifully written minutes illustrate the careful structure of the meetings, which opened with hymn singing, a Bible reading and a treasurer's report. Programming would often include a presentation by a missionary, such as one in 1900 on Syria, described in the minutes as a subject for "study and prayer" that was both "entertaining and enlightening."

Missionary work was not restricted to foreign countries. A section in the church bulletin entitled "Our Parish Abroad" had listings for North Carolina, Utah, Oklahoma, Korea, Japan, Alaska, China, the Philippines, Syria and Africa, in that order. The ladies also ministered to the Girls' Industrial Home, diagonally across the street from the church, and held an annual supper of chicken salad and oysters in the church basement to raise funds for the charity.

Sadie Sheffer

Sadie Sheffer (1867-1946), from Grace M. E. Church, heeded the call to do missionary work in the United States. A descendant of early Williamsport settlers, she and her immediate family returned to the city from the Carlisle area, living at 844 Erie Ave. In 1907, after having studied at the Lucy Webb Hayes Training School in Washington



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Pictured above is the ladies parlor at the First Presbyterian Church. At right, are Mulberry M.E. Church mothers and missionary children from Susquehanna Conference. Pictured in the story is Sadie J. Sheffer from *The Chronicle: Journal of the Historical Society of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church*.



D.C., Sheffer began her career as Deaconess of the Italian Mission in Altoona, where she served for 30 years. She became an important force in the lives of this recent immigrant population, the majority of whom were brought to the United States to provide inexpensive labor and lived in poverty. Sheffer conducted sewing classes, distributed clothing and directed Bible school. After raising funds for the purchase of a piano, she gave piano lessons. She referred to the primarily Catholic immigrant children as "hers," regardless of what church they attended, and she was often seen with several children trailing behind her as she walked from her apartment to the mission. Her retirement luncheon, held at Grace Church in 1937, was given by her brothers, successful businessmen who had contributed regularly to "Sadie's children."



SHEFFER

Anna Blanche Slate and Martha and Miriam Whitely

It was a proud mother who sent a daughter or son off to live as a missionary. Several missionaries came from Mulberry M. E. Church (a church started in the chapel of Dickinson Seminary and later located at 341 Mulberry St.), including Anna Blanche Slate and sisters Miriam and Martha Whitely.

Anna Slate had wanted to be a missionary as a little girl, and throughout her early years felt called to spread the teachings of Jesus. She considered her 21 years in Japan as the happiest of her life. While there, Slate supervised native teachers, served as principal of the Bible Training School for young women and then became president of the Yokohama Blind School. Her parents fully supported her work, and they had a hedge built around the Yokohama

Methodist Church in honor of their 50th wedding anniversary.

Miriam Whitely served as a nurse in Algiers, North Africa, and Martha Whitely facilitated educational work in Argentina. In a 1925 church newsletter, Martha Whitely explained how she had become interested in mission work when she was 16: "I was attending Dickinson Seminary, Mrs. Eveland was our esteemed president's wife. She occasionally gave a little talk to the girls at the YWCA service on the subject of missions. Because of these talks, I first thought of being a missionary. ... I used to pray every day that I might become a missionary." This account emphasized another aspect of local mission support — to introduce and influence young adults to serve in the mission field.

In that same newsletter, an article on Mulberry Street missionaries stated how proud the church was of young people rendering Christian service on the foreign field, but stressed its particular pride in the mothers of the missionaries, all of whom were very active in the missionary circles of the local church and Williamsport district: "Sacrifice is made by these noble mothers who gladly give their sons and daughters to this service." A quote from Slate further emphasized this point: "I would like to add a tribute to my wonderful father and mother who gave their daughter to Japan ... who with brave hearts sent me forth three times to the work they felt I had been called to do at the other side of the earth."

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