



*"An earnest enthusiasm
for education"*

Sarah Christie Stevens Schoolwoman

Jean Christie

"I AM DETERMINED on having an education," young Sarah Jane Christie told her father in 1862. Like many of her contemporaries, this Wisconsin farm girl had set herself to achieve the knowledge and intellectual training that offered self-fulfillment and, for some, held out the promise of advancement in the world. For boys, indeed, education might prove to be, if not the sufficient, at least the necessary condition for upward mobility, the crucial step beyond manual labor, the foundation for a

variety of occupations and careers. For girls, schooling opened a narrower range of opportunities, including above all, teaching in the common schools. That activity, it was widely admitted, fell within the proper sphere of single females who as yet had no children of their own. Some women ventured to argue that they should be able to participate in choosing boards of education and even asserted that the presumed feminine talent for child care qualified them not only for classroom teaching but for supervision of schools as well.¹

¹ Sarah to James Christie, November 11, 1862, in James C. Christie and Family Papers, 1823-1949, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), hereafter cited as Christie Papers; Richard N. Current, *History of Wisconsin*, vol. 2, *The Civil War Era, 1848-1873*, 528-530, 533 (Madison, 1976).

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Such a woman was Sarah Christie Stevens, whose early ambitions finally culminated in a modest success: her election in 1890 as superintendent of schools in southern Minnesota's Blue Earth County. Numerous family letters reveal much of her personality and of the circumstances that enabled a farm wife to become a school administrator. They portray her as articulate, intense, and self-assertive, yet in some respects insecure, a conscious and spirited champion of women's abilities who nevertheless retained certain conventional ideas of women's role. The voluminous family correspondence documents the experience of an individual, but it also illustrates society's expectations of women and suggests both the limitations on their activities and the opening of

wider opportunities during the latter part of the 19th century.

Born in Ireland in 1844 to a Scottish father and Scotch-Irish mother, both industrial workers, Sarah Jane Christie was brought in 1846 to settle on a farm newly cleared from the forest in Clyman Township, Dodge County, Wisconsin. Her mother, Elizabeth Reid Christie, died in childbirth in 1850, and Sarah, the only daughter, spent her early years with four brothers. They were cared for by a self-effacing stepmother in a household dominated by their father, James, a man of little formal education but of intense intellectual interests. Like her two nearest brothers, Thomas and Alexander (Sandy), Sarah grew up with a drive to learn, an ambition to make an honorable career, and an aspiration to "do great good in the world."²

Won over by Sarah's passionate entreaties, her father sent her to nearby Wisconsin Female College at Fox Lake in September of 1862. When his funds ran low, two of her brothers contributed to her expenses out of their pay as soldiers in the Union Army. Her stay at the college introduced her to many new experiences. At the urging of a professor, she joined the Baptist church. An ardent Unionist, as were her family and friends, she participated eagerly in the Soldiers Aid Society, a home-front organization that made bandages, sewed, and cooked delicacies to send the troops. A visit to the state prison at Waupun left her with "very sad feelings," for the system, she observed, provided no good influences and did not offer the convicts "any chance of amendment at all." Previously a stranger to the arts, 18-year-old Sarah saw her first oil painting (at the home of two male students) and commented to her father that "I never knew what singing or music was till I came here and now I can hear the music going every hour in the day."³

She also began the study of algebra — "I love it," she declared. To her father's warning against this "masculine attainment" she replied: "I cannot see as it is any more *that*, than a Feminine attainment. It is they [men] who keep women where they are. It is the education which a woman gets and the false ideas that are crammed into them, that keep women where they are. Now I believe that the weakness of women lies in their education. They have the same power given them that is given to men, and if they were cultivated and strengthened, in the same way, and direction, woman would be just as able to make her way through life as man is." She resisted social pressure to marry and, in spite of her family's fears that study would ruin her health, declared her intention to pursue a scholarly life.⁴

Although she had hoped to continue on to college, lack of money made this impossible, and Sarah left Fox Lake in late 1863. In 1867 she did spend a term, apparently, studying at the high school in Watertown (countering her landlady's efforts to marry her to a local



THE PATRIARCH of the Christie clan, James Christie, photographed in Mankato about 1880

young man), and for some time she clung to the vision of higher education.⁵ Even in her secondary schooling, then, there were gaps; and yet she acquired considerable familiarity with the middle-class culture and an intellectual base for further reading and self-education. Her letters demonstrate a sizable vocabulary and an acquaintance with current issues and trends of thought.

²For brief sketches of family members, see Inventory, Christie Papers; the quotation is from Sarah to Bessie Stevens, October 23, 1902. Other correspondence among Sarah and her family reflects such values. See, for example, Sarah's assessment of a new position in 1873: "If I succeed it will be a grand good thing for me . . . & I may be the means of doing good to others"; Sarah to James, September 13, 1873, Christie Papers. Unless otherwise noted, all letters cited in this article are from the James Christie Papers.

³Sarah to James Christie, November 3, 1862, January 5, 1863, Sarah to Sandy, January 23, 1863. Wisconsin Female College (sometimes called Fox Lake College or Seminary) was in reality a secondary school and took in both female and male students. Later called Downer, it eventually merged with Milwaukee College. See Grace Norton Kieckhefer, "Milwaukee-Downer College Rediscovered Its Past," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 34:210-214, 241 (Summer, 1951). Sarah's half-brother William and brother Tom fought through the entire Civil War in the Minnesota First Battery of Light Artillery; later Sandy, born in 1846, also enlisted; *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865*, 650 (St. Paul, 1890). General information on Wisconsin is derived chiefly from Current, *History of Wisconsin*, vol. 2, see especially p. 371.

⁴Sarah to James, November 11, 1862. Sarah corresponded with Sergeant James Dempsey of the 17th Wisconsin Infantry, who was killed in October, 1862, at the battle of Corinth. How much he meant to Sarah, or whether his death affected her decision, is not revealed in the letters. *Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers*, vol. 2, p. 61 (Madison, 1886).

⁵See Sarah's letters of May 10, [18], 1867.



THREE CHRISTIE brothers, David, Tom, and Alexander, posed for photographer E. F. Everitt during an 1880 visit to Mankato.

SARAH had early announced her intention of becoming a teacher, which brother Tom (a year older) assured her was "one of the highest and most important of Human pursuits." On July 1, 1863, after creditably passing an examination given at Fox Lake, she obtained a recommendatory certificate issued by the normal school regents that entitled her to teach in any common, intermediate, or grammar school in Wisconsin. By the winter of 1863-64 she was prepared to enter seriously

⁶Tom to Sarah, August 6, 1862, and certificates dated April 3, July 1, 1863, Christie Papers.

⁷Sarah to Sandy, May 17, and to James, July 2, both in 1869. The one-room schools have their defenders, among them Wayne E. Fuller, who insists that the old educational system "promoted democracy, strengthened community life, unabashedly taught generations of Midwesterners the three R's, and made the Middle Border the most literate part of the nation throughout the years." See his *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West*, 245 (Chicago, 1982).

⁸Sarah to Sandy, October 2, 1870, and Inventory, Christie Papers.

⁹Here and below, see Sarah to Sandy, October 2, 1870. Numerous letters furnish only hints as to the source of Sarah's troubles.

upon her vocation. Although in reality — once she had decided against marriage — she had little choice among alternative means of support, she embarked upon teaching with exalted, if vague, visions of a fulfilling future.⁶

Her hopes soon collided with actual conditions, however. Haphazardly organized, lacking any regular road to advancement, teaching in a one-room school hardly offered a "career"; though many women and men entered it, few remained for more than a few years before leaving for other occupations — in the case of women usually for marriage. Nor were teachers expected to stay long in any one school district; like most of them, Sarah moved from one to another in constant search of higher pay and smaller classes. Everywhere women were paid less than men, and she resented the fact. Casting about, she dreamed of becoming a doctor, embarked in 1869 on an ill-fated dressmaking enterprise in Beloit, Wisconsin, and at one time, impressed by a visit to a Catholic hospital, alarmed her Protestant family by proposing to join the Sisters of Charity.⁷

Sarah once remarked of herself and her brothers that "we are all too sanguine . . . always attempting too much and falling short." The family struggled with slim finances. Her oldest and youngest brothers, William and David, whose schooling was brief, remained on the land in Minnesota and Montana. After spells of school-teaching, the more ambitious Tom and Sandy went on to college: Sandy studied at Harvard and obtained a scientific post in the United States Coast Survey; Tom, reorienting his life after a religious conversion, graduated from Congregationalist Beloit College and from Andover Theological Seminary. Like many others in that era of Christian expansionism, he went forth as a missionary and eventually headed a school in Turkey.⁸

From 1869 to 1871, Sarah and Tom kept house together in Beloit, an outpost of New England, where he attended the college (not yet open to women); she, after the disastrous dressmaking venture, returned to teaching in the nearby rural districts and in the graded schools of the town. Her Beloit salary for instructing 40 children was \$6.00 a week.⁹

Partly, at least, through careless management and openhanded ways of living, both young people ran heavily into debt. Tom enjoyed hunting and canoeing expeditions with classmates (for which Sarah prepared the food) and seems to have spent improvidently on hiring carriages and other luxuries while courting a succession of young women. Besides the business failure, Sarah befriended several younger women so generously that her father suggested that she was running a charitable institution. Even so, how she came to owe large sums remains mysterious; conceivably Sandy, though he was given to dramatic imaginings, was correct in suspecting that she had fallen into someone's power and was

being blackmailed. For brother and sister the outcomes differed. When in desperation Tom decided to abandon his studies and do manual labor so that he could pay off the creditors, a sympathetic professor came to the rescue by finding him a well-paid high school position in Beloit. With a striking sense of family responsibility and at some sacrifice, Tom and Sandy (who was teaching in various Wisconsin schools) helped out their sister, but they could not pay off all her debts.

In 1873, perhaps through acquaintances at Beloit College, Sarah obtained an interview with the Reverend James W. Strong, president of Carleton College, and impressed him so favorably that he appointed her an instructor at that six-year-old coeducational Congregationalist institution in Northfield, Minnesota. She was grateful to God: "What I am astonished at is, that in all my weariness, suffering & discouragement, that I didn't turn aside & marry for a rest — a home — as so many poor women do. But somehow I have been saved from that."¹⁰

The work was taxing. As an instructor in English and German she taught other subjects as well, for a total of five courses, had to stay up at night to blow out the dormitory lights at 10 o'clock, and rose at four in the morning to prepare for classes. (To keep one jump ahead, one imagines.) In addition, she found herself helping Mrs. Strong with her children and nursing many of the college "boys" through an epidemic of measles. She also made friends, especially with some of the older students.

For reasons that are not clear, Sarah left Carleton in 1875. After applying to various colleges, including the University of Michigan, which was "not ready" to employ any lady to teach, she held a position at Wheaton College in Illinois till 1877. That experience ended in disaster when creditors pursued her and the college paid them off in lieu of salary.¹¹

During the 1860s, her father, half-brother William, and youngest brother David had joined thousands of other early Wisconsin settlers in a move to the west, and in the winter of 1876–77 a discouraged Sarah retreated to the homestead of James and David in Blue Earth County, Minnesota. Financial need and restless temperament, however, sent her once more into schoolrooms as far away as Iowa City, Iowa.

EARLY in 1879, in her middle 30s, Sarah married William L. Stevens, once a pioneer and now a relatively prosperous farmer, a widower with four children who was 19 years older than she. It was perhaps a marriage for security, but also of affection for one whom she described as "a wise man & a good one. . . a good husband to me — always thoughtful and kind." Her home was still in Blue Earth County, near Good Thunder. Even though married, she planned to continue teaching

— "I will pay my own debts by my own work" — and for a term or two she did so, but pregnancy put an end to that.¹²

In the 1880s, Sarah's mind should have been "at rest." She was settled now with home and husband, four stepchildren, and soon two daughters of her own. Caring for the family and running a household frequently augmented by hired men, she sometimes helped in the fields — one July she ran the horserake for three days to harvest the barley — but she assured Sandy that "We hire all the heavy work done." She aided and counseled neighbor women and advised her ailing father on medication and diet. But somehow she made time to read current publications such as *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *Century*, and *Atlantic* that she exchanged with Sandy who was still in Washington with the Coast Survey.

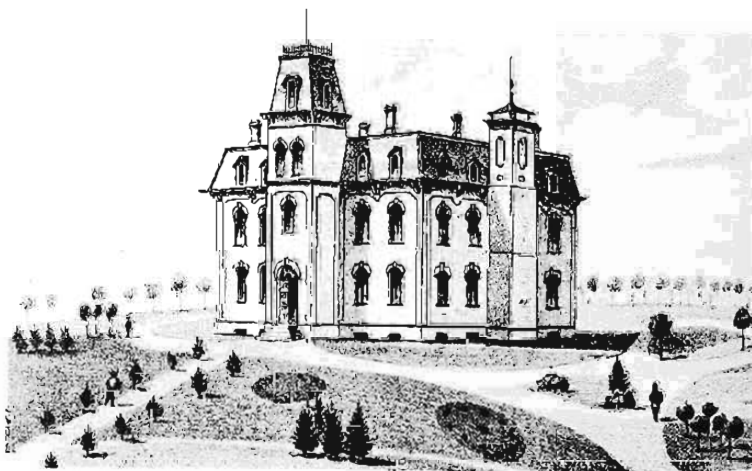
Energy and unfocused ambition kept Sarah from contentment. In the eyes of brother Sandy, her existence was "a sort of penitentiary life for one of her activity of faculty." She read medicine and sometimes indulged in hope of practicing. (She considered herself as well qualified as most of the doctors around.) Ever mindful of the importance of education, she arranged a way for William's daughter Estella to earn expenses at Iowa College (later Grinnell) — a plan that the girl rejected — and

¹⁰ Here and below, see Sarah to James, May 24, 1874. On Carleton College, see Merrill E. Jarchow, *Private Liberal Arts Colleges in Minnesota: Their History and Contributions*, 21–24 (St. Paul, 1973).

¹¹ Here and below, see University of Michigan to Sarah, April[?], 1876, Sarah to Sandy, September 27, 1878; David to Sandy, January 14, 1877, David B. Christie and Family Papers, 1871–1933, MHS.

¹² Here and below, see Sarah to Sandy, July 21, 1879, February 20, 1880.

CARLETON COLLEGE'S entire campus, Willis Hall, shown here about 1874.



considered anxiously how best to ensure that daughters Bessie and Mary would have more opportunities for learning than the local district school could provide.¹³

The Baptist church, to which she still belonged, the temperance cause, and the Farmers Alliance movement afforded some outlets for her energies. Voicing the grievances and the demands of farmers increasingly dominated by railroads, bankers, and Wall Street, the Alliance movement had grown during the hard times of the late 1880s; in 1890 its Minnesota chapters formally adopted the principles of the National Farmers, or Northwestern, Alliance and for the first time entered politics directly as a third party. Sarah and, more actively, her husband were associated with the local groups, which in Blue Earth County found their center of strength in Good Thunder. In the church, a Ladies' Mission Circle affiliated with the Woman's Baptist Home Mission Society met regularly to sew for freedmen's schools in the South or for working girls in the cities; Sarah was elected secretary in 1886.¹⁴

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) demanded the suffrage, freedom to participate in public affairs, and general respect for the abilities of women. Its crusade for "social purity" tended in some aspects to counter the prevailing prudery. One Blue Earth group,

for example, advocated "mothers talking freely with their children, their boys as well as their girls, casting aside all Modesty, and telling them before they learned it from other children of which they surely would." Sarah joined the Good Thunder WCTU, became its secretary, and gave lectures on "Temperance Hygiene." Further, the state WCTU appointed her superintendent of its Mothers' Meetings.¹⁵

That Sarah should join the women "screeching" at public meetings greatly perturbed her father James. In one letter, he took advantage of the news that her children were ill with whooping cough to insist that "there are but few married women, Mothers, who can give their thought and time to almost anything outside of the Home duties, for their [sic] is danger that when they do they will become too much taken up with them to the serious detriment of their family affairs." And he begged her not to dissipate "the generating power of the feminine heart."¹⁶

Though she loved her father, Sarah again refused to be put in her place. Other, younger, male relatives, including Sandy and her stepson Buell, as well as her loyal husband, supported her aspirations. Since antebellum years when feminists had first challenged traditional restrictions, women's public activities had gained some guarded public acceptance. Throughout the region lyceums had presented such lecturers as Mary Livermore, Susan B. Anthony, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton, so that few persons still viewed the spectacle of female speakers as in itself bizarre. In Minnesota, although full suffrage seemed for the moment unattainable, certain local opportunities had been opened: in the mid-1870s women had gained the school franchise and admission to educational office, and there were 10 or 11 female superintendents in the then 78 counties of the state.¹⁷

WITH A BASE among women's groups, the local Alliance, and the Prohibition party, Sarah Christie Stevens decided to try for election in the fall of 1890 as county superintendent of schools. The post Sarah sought was not only administrative but also political, since the holder was chosen by the voters every two years. So, at the age of 45, she plunged into electoral politics.

Circumstances favored her that year. The Alliance party, risen "to new heights of membership in the early months of 1890," and the Prohibition party, both of which welcomed women as members, nominated her; among her many acquaintances it was not hard to round up individual backers. Moreover, and of crucial importance, the local Democrats were supporting most of the candidates put forward by the Alliance. The *Review*, Mankato's Democratic paper, for example, backed her bid for election, saying that Sarah offered "ability, fidelity, and an earnest enthusiasm for the cause of popular education."¹⁸

¹³Iowa College to Sarah, November 25, 1881; Sandy to James, December 12, 1888.

¹⁴Minutes of the Mission Circle, 1886. Christie Papers. On the Alliance movement in Minnesota, see especially William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3:169-171, 187-189 (Revised ed., St. Paul, 1969); Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*, 582-587 (New York, 1976). See also Thomas Hughes, *History of Blue Earth County and Biographies of Its Leading Citizens*, 191, 265 (Chicago, [1909]). Alliance demands included the secret ballot, government ownership of the railroads, an income tax, free textbooks, and equal pay for equal work by men and women.

¹⁵Minute book for Vernon Center, July 2, 1891, in Minnesota WCTU Records, 1862-1879, in MHS program, Mankato teachers' meeting, January 19, 1889, Sarah to James, February 5, 1889, and E. L. Condit to Sarah, October 9, 1889 — all in Christie Papers.

¹⁶James to Sarah, October 2, 1888, July 1, 1889. James Christie wrote from Bridger Canyon, Montana, where his son David, in a successful attempt to cure his asthma, had taken up a ranch. James died there early in 1890.

¹⁷Minnesota, *Laws*, 1875, p. 18; Marilyn Ziebarth, "Woman's Rights Movement," in *Minnesota History*, 42:225 (Summer, 1971); Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Seventh Biennial Report*, 1891-92, p. 92-134, 146 (St. Paul, 1892).

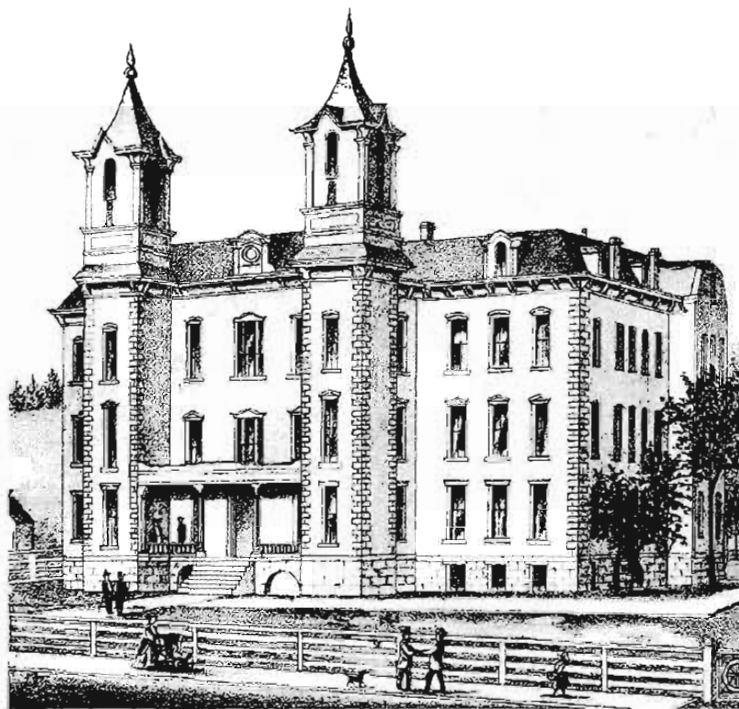
¹⁸Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 259; *Review* (Mankato), September 2, 1890. Accounts of Sarah's three campaigns are drawn chiefly from correspondence, notes on the 1894 campaign, clippings in the Christie Papers, and local newspapers (*Amboy Herald*, *Good Thunder Herald*, *Lake Crystal Mirror*, *Lake Crystal Union*, *Mankato Free Press*) which were examined most carefully for the periods from late summer to mid-November of the election years.

As the argument for Sarah ran, a country resident such as she was the proper person to have charge of the country schools; furthermore, a woman would make the most appropriate director of a system that guided the development of children. Confronting the issue of gender, Sarah asserted her rights on the basis of a modified traditional ideology. In one "scholarly address" at Garden City she cited historical cases in which, she said, women had "successfully administered affairs without losing their womanly graces," and made the point that they now had a duty to accept the responsibility that accompanies the privilege of voting. To her aid came Eva McDonald of Minneapolis, journalist and "girl orator," to urge the claims of Mrs. Stevens and of the whole Alliance ticket. As reporters observed, "ladies worked in getting out voters with the energy of male politicians."¹⁹

Angry accusations also marked the campaign. The Reverend F. L. Patterson, Republican candidate for superintendent, and his supporters charged that his Alliance opponents had bought up certain newspapers and had gone so far as to poison his Newfoundland dog. They complained that Sarah had vilified her rival (her friends insisted that she had never uttered a derogatory word), and at the end of the campaign, Patterson declared that he had "had to contend against a villainous conspiracy [and] scandalous stories."²⁰

In the outcome, the Republican ticket was "lost sight of" and Blue Earth "joined the ranks of those counties . . . which have placed their school interests in the hands of a lady." Out of a total vote of 6,858 she had won by 301. As a sympathetic local editor analyzed the vote: "She ran well in the country towns, especially where she is best known. Our foreign born people, except the Irish, are averse to a woman's holding office, and the Germans and Scandinavians generally voted against her. The Irish supported her heartily, as did most of the Americans. The women in our city [Mankato] mostly voted against her, excepting the most intelligent and progressive, while those in the country supported her." But the campaign had been so bitter that some on the defeated side remained irreconcilable.²¹

Jubilantly, Sarah and her family moved to the county seat, Mankato, where a system of graded schools and "the Normal" would provide better education for her children. (They seem to have rented the farm.) In spite of her outward self-assertiveness, Sarah suffered from an awareness of her own deficiencies that might not have troubled a more run-of-the-mill male politician. She turned for counsel to several persons, including Professor A. F. Bechdolt, head of the Mankato schools, and her brother Sandy in Washington. Sandy poured out advice: he suggested books for her office and dispatched many volumes from his personal library, drafted speeches for teachers' meetings, and anxiously adjured her not to "give gossips a chance to wag their tongues — observe in



MANKATO'S Normal School, 1874, where many Blue Earth County teachers trained for their vocation

strictness all the rules laid down in this evil world for regulating the relations of the sexes."²²

As county superintendent, Sarah was to oversee the 137 "common" ungraded schools, each in its own district under its own elected board of trustees. (Graded and high schools were not under her jurisdiction.) She drew a salary of \$1,000 per year, slightly higher than the state average. Singlehanded, she had to visit the schools; examine and certify teachers and further their training; spur trustees to improve buildings, grounds, and equipment; encourage the planting of trees on Arbor Day; and gather statistics for an annual report to the state superintendent in St. Paul. In a biennial report, her superior recognized the difficulties confronting a county superintendent: "Attending faithfully and consci-

¹⁹Letter to editor, *Mankato Journal*, October 25, 1890; *Review*, November 11, 1890; accounts in news columns of the *Journal*, Christie Papers. See also Rhoda R. Gilman, "Eva McDonald Valesh, Minnesota Populist," in Barbara Stubler and Gretchen Kreuter, eds., *Women of Minnesota: Selected Biographical Essays*, 55-76 (St. Paul, 1977).

²⁰*Lake Crystal Union*, October 22, November 12, 1890; *Enterprise* (Mapleton), November 7, 1890; *Register* (Blue Earth), October 30, 1890.

²¹*Register*, November 13, 1890; John C. Wise to Sandy, November 10, 1890.

²²Sandy to Sarah, November 10, 23, 1890. Bechdolt's influence is clear in Sarah's undated speech notes for 1890 and 1891.

entiously to all his other duties and exercising only a general supervision over the individual schools, he finds himself the hardest worked and most underpaid officer in the state. To ask him to give each district the careful salutary inspection needed is to ask for an impossibility."²³

At the end of 1891, the county, with a population of 29,210, had 130 frame and 7 brick common school buildings. Almost half sat on the prairie ungraced by trees; thanks probably to the efforts of Sarah, who was sensitive to natural beauty, the number of treeless schoolyards was reduced from 64 in 1891 to 32 in the following year. At a time when school districts were only beginning to provide free textbooks, the 137 schools in Sarah Stevens' jurisdiction had 1,362 books — about ten apiece — in their libraries.²⁴

The school year, consisting of three terms, fall

(sparsely attended), winter, and spring, averaged 6.1 months in 1891 and 7 months in 1892. Total enrollment in 1891 amounted to 3,337 persons of ages from 5 to 21, of whom 1,934 were between 8 and 16 years old. State law required the latter group to attend for 60 days during the year, but enforcement was another matter and many did not meet even this modest requirement. It was taken for granted that male teachers, who constituted 27 per cent in 1891, would be paid more than the females: in that year they received monthly wages of \$35.82 and \$26.35, respectively. (This gap was slightly larger than in the state as a whole.) The staff lacked both continuity and training. Most were not even graduates of high school or normal school, and college graduates were rare indeed; their teaching certificates were awarded on the basis of tests administered by the county superintendent. The turnover was truly astonishing: in 1891, only 31 per cent of Blue Earth County's teachers had stayed in the same district for as much as one year or more; in 1892, 46 per cent had done so. Over the state the respective figures were 35 and 40 per cent.

AS THE INCOMING superintendent, Sarah was determined to enhance the skills and to elevate the intellectual level of teachers and students. Already, state-sponsored, week-long institutes held every year or two provided some training for teachers and awarded certificates to those who attended with diligence. Sarah organized numerous shorter meetings at various places in the county. On a Friday evening and Saturday morning some 14 or 15 authoritative persons, perhaps from the Mankato system or the Normal School, would discourse on a variety of subjects: music, a course of reading for teachers, manners and morals, chemistry of common things, arithmetic, calisthenics, writing, school government, primary reading, history, "general mental exercises," geography, and local geology. She herself would speak at these gatherings, expatiating on "the importance of the common schools for American democracy," or advising more specifically on aims and methods. She urged teachers to specialize in making the pupils good readers. They themselves must read and study and thoroughly master their subjects; if not, they would not be interested themselves and, in turn, would be unable "to get up any very lively interest on the part of pupils." In arithmetic, she insisted, they must explain basic principles rather than rely on rote learning. Good order, of course, was crucial and, following the counsel of Professor Bechdolt, she instructed them to exact entire and instant obedience from their pupils. In mitigation of such authoritarian precepts, however, she constantly exhorted the teachers to stimulate the children's own desire to learn.²⁵

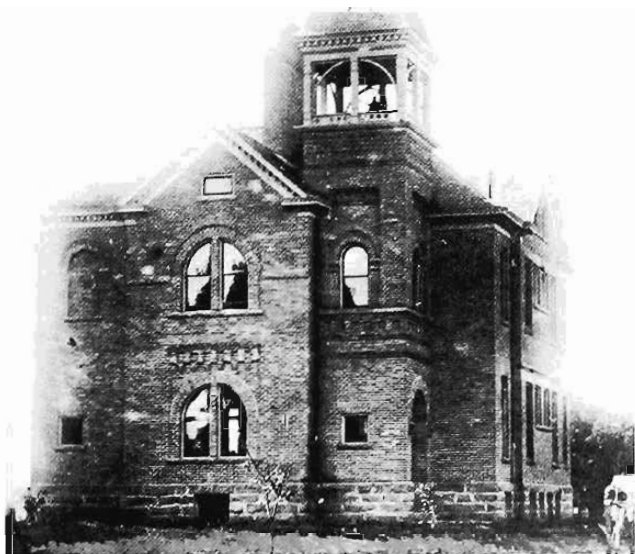
For teachers, school trustees, and parents, Sarah held meetings to discuss such matters as "school sup-

²³Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Eighth Biennial Report*, 1893-94, p. 28-29 (St. Paul, 1894).

²⁴With one exception, the figures here and in the following paragraph are found in, or derived from Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Seventh Biennial Report*, 170, 174, 180, 182, 184, 186, 190. For county population, see United States, *Census*, 1890, *Population*, part 1, p. 195.

²⁵See for example, "Announcement of Institute for Blue Earth County," March 23, 1891, and "Program for Teachers' Meeting," January 16 and 17, 1891, and undated notes, in Christie Papers.

TYPICAL of the common schools in Sarah Stevens' jurisdiction was this public school at Vernon Center



plies, text-books, school libraries, and how to promote a more regular attendance of pupils." Addressing the trustees, she explained the school laws, pleaded for accurate records, asked for improvements to buildings and for more dictionaries in the libraries, and advocated free textbooks, both to save money (through certain economies of purchasing) and to promote democracy among the children of rich and poor, of concerned and of indifferent parents. Her short-lived paper, *Blue Earth Co. Education*, served as a vehicle for news and announcements. In its pages she suggested that each school should purchase a flag: the stars and stripes, she believed, "stand for liberty the world over." The pupils should be made to understand this, and be made familiar with their country's flag, and with its history."²⁶

Desirable innovations came readily to her mind. Some, like kindergartens and industrial schools, could only be goals for the distant future. But she could and did introduce a modest health measure, as she circulated a local physician's article on the care of children's eyes and instructed teachers to administer tests for refraction errors. In another direction, she introduced a series of examinations in the various "branches" taught in the common schools, so that in time a pupil could obtain a certificate to ensure admission to a secondary school. In initiating this practice she participated in a movement that was spreading through the Middle West to measure and to recognize a certain level of achievement, whether, for most children, to mark the completion of formal education or, for others, to facilitate the passage from elementary to more advanced training in high school or academy.²⁷

Part of the superintendent's duties was the often arduous task of traveling throughout the county to visit all the district schools. In 1891, Sarah reported 138 visits, calling at some schools more than once and leaving 35 unobserved. Strangely, in the following year she included no figures for visits in her annual report, although at a later date she claimed to have made 141. Whatever the precise numbers, she seems to have neglected some of the more remote districts — a serious mistake. (This may be partially explained by the fact that early in the year her daughter Mary went through an illness so severe that, Sarah wrote, "I had an awful fear in my heart, that it was possible I would have to lose her.")²⁸

Although throughout the whole region county superintendents found it difficult or impossible to inspect all the schools, Sarah's dereliction left an opening to her rivals and seemed to lend substance to a common complaint expressed, for instance, by a new state superintendent who answered an inquiry from Sarah in August, 1892, when, preparing to run again, she no doubt hoped for a favorable reply. He wrote that there were women

county superintendents of schools in Minnesota who "give as good satisfaction as the same number of men holding similar positions." But he added: "You ask if they [women superintendents] are in every way as well qualified as men. I think not. While in most particulars I think they accomplish their work as well as men in similar positions, they are not as well able to endure exposure in the winter in riding over prairies and through the woods to visit schools."²⁹

As her term drew to an end in 1892 she began her campaign for re-election, though in conditions less favorable than two years before. She had now compiled a record to be judged by; moreover, the Minnesota Alliance movement was breaking apart as a sizable wing refused to follow Ignatius Donnelly into the People's party. According to the *Good Thunder Herald*, an Alliance newspaper, the movement of 1890 had little in common with the People's party of 1892 which "had no time for the humble needs of our farmers" but supported the Omaha platform, "that indecent libel upon this great and prosperous nation, that curious conglomeration of all impracticable visions." Members of an abortive, anti-Donnelly "Alliance Party" of Minnesota failed to find willing candidates and, presumably, drifted back toward the Republican party. Hoping that all groups would agree on her for superintendent, Sarah presented herself as a nonpartisan educator, but Democrats and Republicans each put up their own candidate and she was left with the nominations of the Prohibitionists and of what remained of the People's party.³⁰

Personal accusations again marred a contest entwined with issues not directly related to the schools. Sarah pointed to "many original lines of work" that she had embarked on. In a fiery speech at Mankato, the famous Kansas Populist leader Mary E. Lease asserted that "Our schools should be out of politics and when a community has a successful woman county superinten-

²⁶Notice of educational meetings, April and May, 1892. Christie Papers: *Blue Earth Co. Education*, May and June, 1892. There were apparently only two issues of this paper; copies in MHS.

²⁷Fuller, *Old Country School*, 213-215.

²⁸Sarah to Frank Stevens, February 6, 1892.

²⁹W. W. Pendergast to Sarah, August 27, 1894. In *The Old Country School*, especially p. 192. Fuller contends that the relative absence of supervision was not to be regretted, since it allowed the teachers greater flexibility and opportunity to use their own judgment and personal understanding of their students. This puts a lot of faith in the abilities of teachers who, moving constantly from one school to another, must in many cases have lacked the opportunity to gain any deep acquaintance with individual students.

³⁰*Good Thunder Herald*, July 6, September 28, 1892. On the 1892 election and the Omaha platform, see John D. Hicks, "The People's Party in Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 5:542-547 (November, 1924).

dent, she should be sent back to the office again and again." Following another, *ad hominem* line of attack, some of Sarah's supporters made the potentially damning statement (indignantly denied) that her chief opponent, 30-year-old Republican George W. Scherer, former editor of the German-language *Mankato Post*, had once joined a society in New Ulm that believed "neither in Christ, man or the devil." They also spread stories of his intemperance, to which his more forthright adherents replied that indeed he was not "the goody goody sort, but a straight, intelligent and capable man." Ignoring Sarah's boasted improvements, Scherer and his friends zeroed in on her failure to visit all the schools and, in a statement with obvious implications, pledged that he would "give his entire time to the duties of the office." Perhaps even more important, Republicans put him forward as the candidate of solid "men who stand high in business circles."³¹

SARAH CHRISTIE STEVENS lost the election: she had 2,055 votes, Scherer 2,968, and David E. Fleming, the Democratic candidate, 1,562. In addition to her own mistakes, the county's politics had taken a conservative turn that worked to her detriment. Or, rather, the county and the state had returned after a brief aberration to their normal Republican allegiance. Nationally, Democrat Grover Cleveland gained the presidency with 277 electoral votes to Benjamin Harrison's 145, while the Populist candidate, General James B. Weaver, showed remarkable strength with 22 votes. But in Blue Earth and in Minnesota Harrison won the majority, his party garnered most state offices, and Weaver trailed far behind.³²

Locally, if those Sarah and her husband considered the "best people" favored her, others disliked precisely the "goody-goodies," suffragists, and Populists she stood for. Understandably, even her brother Tom, who had supported her in so many ways, admitted that "there are many things about the whole business that make me sometimes wish Sarah had never entered on public life."³³

Yet in 1894 she tried again. Logically, the nationwide depression that began in 1893 should have brightened

³¹ *Good Thunder Herald*, September 14, 21, 1892; *Mankato Daily Free Press*, October 26, November 1, 1892; *Lake Crystal Union*, October 5, November 2, 1892; *Lake Crystal Mirror*, November 4, September 9, 1892. The New Ulm society was, of course, the Turners.

³² Minnesota, *Legislative Manual*, 1893, p. 342, 468.

³³ Tom to Sandy, November 8, 1892. Through the whole Great Lakes region the Populists "did unexpectedly poorly": Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 321.

³⁴ Sarah to David, October 19, 1893, David Christie Papers. Both the Prohibition and the People's party endorsed woman suffrage that year; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 3:200.



SARAH CHRISTIE STEVENS, probably in the 1890s

the prospect for election of a candidate allied with the Populist protest of hard-hit farmers. Like her neighbors, Sarah and her husband were "really & truly very hard up — we owe all the banks and they are coming down hard." She blamed the "rings that hold the gold and the wealth of the country — to force the repeal of the silver clause in the Sherman Law." Holding the Republicans responsible, she might well suppose that others, many worse off than she, would recognize that the People's party stood for them and their interests.³⁴

Sometimes accompanied by Sandy, who had lost his job the previous year and had come west for a visit, she canvassed vigorously, calling on acquaintances and speaking twice a day in the little school districts. Comparing her record with that of her successor, she insisted

that she had made more visits than he and had accomplished for the schools much more of permanent value. "Good growth is silent and slow, like that of grass and trees." The image she projected may be suggested by the letter written in her support by "A Woman Voter" for whom Sarah Christie Stevens — a "grand and noble woman" — was "one of those vigorous and robust women of which Blue Earth county is proud to boast."³⁵

The effort failed. In spite of the depression Republicans made a clean sweep in county and state, and defeat by a wide margin ended Sarah's public career. Back on the farm, she sold eggs, experimented with growing ginseng, and embarked on several unsuccessful business ventures. Leaving her Baptist affiliation, she became an Episcopalian. Fragmentary diaries paint vignettes of her daily life: she rejoiced that the flowering almonds were in bloom, friends dropped by for a whole day's visit; a tramp took supper; a neighbor boy brought her a dozen duck eggs — "Eddie would take nothing, saying as I tried to make him take a quarter — 'no, you have given us so many things.' I conclude therefore that apples cast about freely return in duck eggs after a while."³⁶

Like her three married brothers, she knew the sorrow of losing a child, for her daughter Mary died of tuberculosis at 18. Her other daughter, Bessie, attended the medical school at Hamline University. Although her choice of occupation was unusual, and she belonged to a small female minority at the medical school, she encountered little hostility and judged her male classmates to be "thorough gentlemen." Her gratified mother hoped that "you will make your mark in a good & great way on those lines — I am sure you must have inherited some of my life ambitions." Thus Sarah found vicarious fulfillment of an early dream.³⁷

Although shifting political alignments weighed heavily in Sarah's initial election and in her subsequent rejection at the polls, her gender surely played some part. Toward the end of the 19th century, changing mores, reflected in the laws, permitted a woman to hold public office; yet both prejudice and her own life situation obstructed her public career. Always bitterly resentful of unequal pay and unequal opportunities for women, Sarah spoke scornfully of the "arbitrary medieval principles" exemplified in such statements as "'wimmin ain't fit to hold office,'" which indicated, she bravely insisted, "a benighted condition of the individual which is not likely to be sustained by a majority of votes in an enlightened community." No doubt she encountered such crass attitudes, and her robust, womanly, and reformist style was precisely what many voters detested. Yet by those closing years of the century, male tolerance of women's "outside" activities had developed to a point where persons

who considered themselves "enlightened" would express their opposition in more subtle terms. Old politicians were "amused," said one journalist in 1890, at the contest among the "ladies" to bring out the "lady voters." With seeming respect but delicate disparagement, George Scherer's supporters spoke of Mrs. Stevens as an "estimable lady," and observed with obvious truth that personal accomplishments were desirable but not sufficient for the superintendent of schools. Though on the one hand, aggressiveness may antagonize voters, ladyhood may also cripple the aspirant to office.³⁸

Furthermore, the arguments over Sarah's visits to the schools point both to a false perception and to a reality of female existence. To combat the assumption of fragility, a woman superintendent would have been wise to exert extraordinary efforts to reach *all* the districts, and yet, because of her responsibilities for a household and children, this might have been impossible. Now and then, in Sarah's letters, we catch a hint of impatience with the burden of household duties, but whether in her own mind she ever envisioned a feminist rejection of woman's domestic role, we cannot know. Outwardly she conformed and utilized the argument of women's special gifts. But when she asserted that the motherliness of women made them peculiarly fitted to supervise the common schools, opponents could counter by suggesting that maternal duties made them *unfit* for the task. Handicapped by gender as well as by the decline of the local Alliance movement, she needed to prove herself more effective than any man — which is only to say, she would have had to be a Supervoman — a familiar dilemma.

Who will manage the household? Who will take care of the children? Today we are only beginning to solve these problems. At least we can ask such questions, as in her time Sarah Christie Stevens could not.

³⁵ Sarah's undated notes, Christie Papers; letter to the editor, *Mankato Free Press*, October 5, 1894.

³⁶ The vote: Scherer, 3,162, Stevens, 1,466, W. R. Thompson (Dem.), 1,323; Sarah Stevens, *Diary*, 1894, in Christie Papers; *Legislative Manual*, 1895, p. 346, 463.

³⁷ Bessie to Sarah, September 22, 1902; Sarah to Bessie, October 24, 1902. Bessie married a classmate, Dr. Hugh Monahan, and they practiced together in northern Minnesota and later in Minneapolis.

³⁸ Notes for "An Appeal to Voters," October 24, 1892, Christie Papers; *Lake Crystal Union*, November 5, 1890; *Lake Crystal Mirror*, November 4, 1892.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS on p. 248 and 250 are from Alfred T. Andreas, *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota*, 72, 89 (Chicago, 1874); all other pictures are in the audio-visual library of the MHS.



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