

Ideas invade post-Civil War town

Townpeople become more worldly as lectures highlight women's movement and lure of West

By June W. Kennedy
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This is the fourth in a series of recollections by Kate Hamlin (1847-1937) about her youth in Westford, recorded late in her life from her California home:

"Immediately after the [Civil] war, and probably for years before, to a certain extent, the question of 'women's rights' was constantly brought up. It is largely to the brave women of those days that we are indebted for the many blessings we enjoy today.

"When the agitation was at its height, I attended a women's suffrage meeting in Boston one day. On the platform sat Susan B. Anthony and many other women, all earnest workers for the cause.

"On the platform sat Wendell Phillips, a staunch advocate. He was called upon to speak. Absolute quiet was in the vast audience, for all knew of his eloquence.

"His speech consisted simply of the following story: 'In Concord, on the morning of the Concord fight, a woman walked behind the militia with a broom on her shoulder. She was jeered at, and asked what she could do with that broom. She replied, 'I can show which side I'm on!'"

Lectures gain popularity

"This meeting of the women suffragettes was during the popular lecture period. This period, which lasted for several years after the close of the war, was a most delightful and inspiring influence after the death and horror of four years. Lecture courses were a prominent feature in every town, and the most intellectual and eloquent speakers were to be had in cities, the largest halls were filled to the very doors with eager listeners, and the conversation everywhere was of the latest lecture.

"When a town was not large enough, or rich enough, to arrange for an independent course of lectures, several towns would unite, a part of the lectures being given in one town and a part in other towns. The audience then was composed of subscribers from all the places.

"The sleigh rides over the snow to the jingling of many bells was not the least of the pleasures. My memory fails me to name all

those we heard. Julia Ward Howe, Wendell Phillips, Henry Ward Beecher, John B. Gough, are but a few of them.

"Although far from the excitement of city life, and knowing comparatively little of the questions and movements of the world at large — save that gleaned from the newspapers — news of what was passing elsewhere, occasionally, reached the quiet of the town."

Cult of afterlife

"About the time of the Civil War, a new religious sect arose, and aroused in the minds of many a substantial hope — a hope that the world beyond the gates of death had been brought in touch with this world. Some young women, sisters, in New York, claimed to be able, by means of furniture movements and peculiar rappings which they believed came from departed spirits, to communicate freely with their friends still on earth.

"The new cult soon had many followers, and not a few were among the citizens of our little town. It was not strange. Loved ones had crossed what had, heretofore, seemed an insurmountable Great Divide. If means had been revealed by which it could be proved, beyond doubt, that those loved ones were still near and could help and advise, the pain and sorrow, because of their departure from this world, would be replaced by a new hope, and the present dread of death would be forever banished.

"Many placed implicit trust in the new doctrine, but others, of practical or scientific turn of mind studied the manifestations with more or less doubt. The fact cannot be denied that many lives have been happier because of this faith. So, perhaps, it is well."

Lured by the West

"The news of the discovery of gold in California soon reached Westford as it spread over the entire country. A few years after the discovery some young men from the town — three of whom I have a faint remembrance as they had worked for my father — caught the gold fever and determined to seek their fortunes in the far West. These men were Alonzo Sweetzer, Oscar Wheeler and Jonas Hutchins. They were all residents of the south part of town.

"Of three routes to California — that across the plains, that around Cape Horn, or that by the Isthmus — they chose the Isthmus, believing that the quickest and least expensive route, expense being a major consideration. They little realized the enormous sums it was necessary to have, and their capital must have been limited.

"Whether they had planned to cross the Isthmus on foot, I do not know. Perhaps they had. Before they were able to reach the Pacific coast, that dread disease, yellow fever seized them and they like hundreds of others, died without ever reaching their El Dorado.

"A few years after the excitement caused by the discovery of gold, the Mormons, who had settled in Utah and were desirous of increasing the members of their faith, sent missionaries and literature over the world, promising comfort and wealth to all who would join them.

"In foreign countries, as well as in our own, many hundred accepted the promises as gospel, and turned their eyes and steps toward the promised land.

"A family, father, mother, two sons and daughter living in the north part of Westford tired of the struggle on a small, unproductive farm, became filled with enthusiasm, sold their property and pledged themselves to join the new sect in Utah. Going as far as they could by train, they continued their journey across the plains by the usual covered wagon.

"Their hardships were many. Saddest of all, the daughter died and was buried on the lonely, endless prairie. Finally, they reached Utah.

"Soon, however, the bubble of enthusiasm burst. After much secret management and with the courage far beyond their age, the sons secured release from the Mormons and succeeded in persuading their father and mother to return to their former home.

"Some months after they left Westford so full of joyful hope and high expectations, they returned, minus their old home and the money they had received from it. In place of that, a sad and bitter experience, the husband came to help my father, and the wife to be a helpmate in the house."

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos.