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Freedmen's Missions
OF THE
United Presbyterian Church,
1862-1904.



Printing Department Knoxville College,
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Early Missions to the Freedmen.

By MARGARET LORIMER McCLENAHAN.

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ON a late October day, 1863, the little sanitary boat, "Clara Belle," lay at the wharf at Cairo, Ill., with steam up for her departure for the lower Mississippi; aboard, a party of United Presbyterian missionaries to the Freedmen, consisting of Rev. Thomas Calahan, Mr. John Lackey, Mr. Daniel McFate, and Misses Henrietta Lee, Agnes D. Fraser, Margaret Smith, Lizzie Findley, Belle Brown and Jennie Ricketts, all of Pennsylvania. The synod of Iowa had sent Rev. and Mrs. S. F. Vanatta, Mr. and Mrs. Jos. McConnell, Misses Jennie Huddleson and Agnes Hammond. Dr. George C. Vincent was in charge of the entire party and met the incoming train bearing the representatives from Muskingum presbytery, consisting of Rev. and Mrs. Jos. Buchanan, with their three children; Dr. A. B. McCandless, Misses Jennie Milligan and Margaret Lorimer, who were quickly transferred to the boat. Although the vessel was in U. S. government employ, the sympathies of the officers were with the Confederate army, and when but a few miles down the river, a large gilded ball was hoisted above the pilot house as a signal to any on shore who were unfriendly to the Federal cause. During our journey down the river it was necessary to tie up the boat each night after it was fully dark. Early the next morning after leaving Cairo, we passed a boat still burning to the waters edge, which had been halted by the enemy and deserted, and all the way down the river we were never safe unless within the protecting sound of the gunboat.

After three days run we were anchored at Memphis, Tenn., on Saturday night for taking freight on Sabbath. As the Wheeling presbytery had undertaken work at Camp Holly Springs in the preceding April, the majority of the party went out for the Sabbath service and found, in that contraband camp of two thousand, Rev. and Mrs. Abijah Conner conducting the work, assisted by Misses Mary B. Johnson, Fannie Kiddoo and Agnes Henry. On the way out

to the camp, two miles below the city, much of the ravages of war were seen. Fort Pickering extended along the river almost from city to camp. Our path led through a soldiers' cemetery, each of the countless graves being marked by a small board bearing name, company and state regiment. Just beyond stood the Freedmen's hospital, with its many tents for sick and wounded, and in the midst of these a prayer-meeting was in progress. A withered and gray preacher led the meeting, and in that motley group were old and young, gay young soldiers, proud of their artillery uniform, and giggling girls of every shade from almost white up through yellow and brown to coal black. The impassioned songs, the intoned prayers, stirred our hearts for the ignorant and degraded people meted out and trodden down, and we rejoiced that God had called us as co-workers in bringing them to the light. Dr. McCandless led in prayer for their deliverance from the bondage of sin, and when they knew that friends and teachers had come to them, the shouts of blessing and thanksgiving were loud and long.

After leaving Memphis, our monotonous route was varied by stops at wood yards on the Arkansas and Tennessee shores, when some of our number practised donkey riding through the green woods, keeping close however to the protecting gunboat. One dark night a minstrel troupe, which had come aboard at Memphis, gave a concert to the natives who had come to the landing to sell wood. The long hair, broad brimmed hats, butternut clothes, the glare of the huge bonfires, with the back-ground of monster trees draped with long, solemn Spanish moss, mingled with the lurid music, was thrilling in sight and sound. The lower Mississippi is serpentine, and in its many bends often seems to confuse itself in its folds. The close hugging of the vessel to the deep wooded shore, the apparently boundless waters on the other side of the channel, an occasional passing up-bound steamer, gave a varied scene to our unaccustomed vision. One evening we were called on deck by Mr. Calahan to look upon a sunset in the verdure of an island just before us. The scene was beautiful quite beyond description. A quarter-master, Captain Clubb, of

Wisconsin, was returning to his post at Vicksburg with his family. One of his little twin children was ill on the way and died not long before reaching the end of our journey. Some of the teachers were able to care for the little form in life and in death.

On our arrival at Vicksburg Col. John Eaton, commissioner of Freedmen, assigned Mr. Calahan's corps to Goodrich's Landing, and at once they were on their way to that part. The others were taken to Masonic hall, where we were guests of Capt. Clubb for a few days. In the Assembly room, on the third floor of the building, a shell hole had been made during the bombardment of not less than fifteen feet square. In this and adjoining rooms eighteen of our party, with Capt. Clubb's family, his clerks and orderly, were sheltered. Hospital cots, with bed clothing and a toilet set, consisting of one dingy, dented wash pan, were provided for us all. The first and second stories of the building were filled with commissary stores, and in the basement our meals were served in relays. Our pupils were gathered into churches and dwellings, and soon with wall cards our work was commenced. Exercises in reading, writing and numbers were given in concert. So crude and traditionary were their ideas that constant teaching of commandments, the Lord's prayer, sermon on the mount and Bible stories were interspersed with mental drill.

Owing to the eye never having been trained to close vision a case of spectacles was appreciated in using book or needle. In recruiting pupils, visiting the sick and needy, the teachers were found in cellars, tents, dugouts and open barracks, and sometimes small-pox and fevers were developing in the close rooms filled with wood smoke from the fires on the ground floor. In our home life we had the services of a maid, who called in an aunt, two cousins and a fellow servant as aid. One of these was married to a soldier in our home, Mr. Buchanan giving them, in earnest, simple language, a lesson of obligation. The military authorities had only commenced requiring marriage certificates looking toward a permanent relation, but it was no uncommon occurrence to have the soldiers steal the certificate from their wives on

their visits so that they might not be hindered in new relations. Soon after the issue of this law, Rev. Conner married twenty eight couples with one ceremony. One bridegroom, however, was missing when they were counted. After a few weeks of experimental work in the mission it was decided by the authorities that a group should be sent to Natchez. Mr. and Mrs. Vanatta, with Dr. McCandless, Misses Huddleson and Hammond, were chosen. Mr. and Mrs. Vanatta had left a comfortable pastorate, Second Washington, a new and pleasant home, at the call of duty, and here again they as promptly responded.

Their steamer, Prairie, left Vicksburg December 11, 1863, and on the way down the river was fired into by a guerilla band. The boat had been allowed to pass the first battery planted on the shore, firing a slant shell so as to avoid the protection of the iron clad wheel house. Mrs. Vanatta, with Willie and Ella, her children, had sought this protection on the first alarm. A six pound shell entering severed the head of the colored stewardess, and passing through the body of Mrs. Vanatta was lodged in the state room wall. A shower of shot from the infantry between the two batteries fell among the helpless travelers, a minnie ball entering the back of Mr. Vanatta.

In this mysterious way the little children of the devoted missionaries were early orphaned, Mr. Vanatta lingering in weakness and suffering until May, '64, when God called him home. On the day this occurred Pressley Clark, the beautiful, bright boy of Mr. and Mrs. Buchanan, sickened and suddenly died. On Christmas eve an old minister, Dr. Baker, of Piqua; O., also died in the mission home, and on New Year's eve Eva, the sweet, eight year old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Buchanan. Miss Elizabeth Findley, daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Findley, of Westminster college, was in the early summer of '65 laid low by a fever peculiar to the South, and her pure, sweet spirit went home. Thus these early days of work among the Freedmen had the Baptism of sacrifice. In February General Sherman swept across the state with an army of twenty thousand men, burning bridges, destroying railroads and wholly closing communication between threatening strongholds of the

Confederate army. Returning they brought two thousand refugees in the rear of the ragged, dirty army, and four thousand contrabands. The three decked wagons of picaninnies, the worn out, lame old mules, the robust mammies all clothed in the coarse negro cloth, and almost every one bearing on head or in hand something from the old home—a huge bundle of cotton, a ham, or skillet, or dish; the warm, loud embrace in meeting friends, all proved a scene long to be remembered.

The distribution of these helpless ones, their shelter, food and clothing, required the time of many days and brought to our schools a new element.

Before learning to know their faces, the pupils were allowed weekly choosing for themselves family or fancy names, and all we could learn was that they "had done changed their names." The work was thus a shifting foundation work, "seed by the way-side," and the hope that a church might be organized was long in its fulfillment.

Vicksburg mission acquired property and was successful for several years; but the reconstruction period showed the advisability of a change to other points, and in Nashville, and now in Knoxville, the work goes on. The loyal, affectionate dispositions of the people, their desire to rise, their natural religious bent, with little self reliance; their ignorance and vice, all still appeal to us for help, sympathy and obligation toward them.

