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Heaven on Earth

The Woman's Commonwealth, 1867–1983

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ON THE TEXAS FRONTIER during the late 1860s, a group of women formed an experimental community around their religious values. They later incorporated socialist ideas and ideals found in the contemporary woman's rights movement into their experiment. The one ideal to which they remained steadfast was the centrality and immediacy of a woman-centered community. The women, who became known as the Woman's Commonwealth or the Sanctified Sisters, used the religious and moral behavior often associated with their sex to challenge patriarchal power.

The Sanctified Sisters began as a group of religious and zealous women who challenged authority in the Protestant churches of Belton, Texas. They went on to use their religious beliefs and sisterly support to build an alternative living situation in which women had power and direction over their own lives. Martha McWhirter, the charismatic leader, and her co-communalists all came from an evangelical religious tradition that emphasized individual choice and gave the women a framework from which to propose an alternative path in their spiritual quest for perfection.

The women who joined the Sanctified Sisters created their community in several ways. They challenged traditional female roles and experimented with new ideas about women's sexuality, the power relationships between husbands and wives, marriage, child rearing, work roles, and communal ownership of property. The women also formed new emotional bonds with each other and replaced the nuclear families from which they had come with a successful communal family based on equitable relationships.

The Sisters began their questioning of women's roles by assuming that, as Christian women, they had a right to interpret the Scriptures and to

challenge the authority of the church on religious matters. The immediate and hostile response of the townspeople of Belton to the women's community was to remind the Sisters that women had neither the right, nor the duty, nor the power to challenge the male-controlled religious establishment.

In a society that dictated that women be directed by fathers, husbands, and strict social rules, establishing a community removed from male direction and control was viewed as either the action of crazy women or a direct challenge to male superiority and power. The men of Belton recognized the challenge the Sisters presented to traditional gender roles. They viewed the women as religious fanatics, crazy, and dangerous to social tradition. Not only did the women's husbands, as the men most directly affected by their actions, react violently to the women, but townsmen outside those families also responded with legal action, violence, and ridicule.

The Sisters made direct connections between their actions and the movement for woman's rights. They also voiced their connections with the woman's movement when they chose a social organization inspired by feminist literature and activities. They directly confronted the issues of women's roles in society in exactly the ways political and social feminists were doing in other arenas.

The history of the Woman's Commonwealth begins with the community leader, Martha McWhirter. After the Civil War, the McWhirters moved into Belton from a nearby farm. George McWhirter became a prosperous merchant, with interests in several stores, the Belton Flouring Mill, and a construction company (Sokolow and Lamanna 1984, 375; Tyler 1936, 270, 297). Contemporaries remembered Martha "as a moral, upright woman, and a natural leader" (Atkinson [1929] 1970, 81). In 1866 Martha McWhirter regarded the loss of two children and a brother as a chastisement from God and became determined to lead a better life.

In 1867 McWhirter attended many of the meetings of a Methodist revival held in Belton. While walking home alone one evening after a week of the meetings, McWhirter heard "a voice within [ask her] if she did not believe what she had seen in the meeting that week to be the work of the devil." The following morning McWhirter became convinced that the voice she had heard was from God. While preparing that morning's breakfast, McWhirter experienced "a kind of Pentecostal baptism" (Garrison 1893, 30). That McWhirter went through this baptism away from the church or camp meeting setting and away from the influence of her minister is significant. Even more significant is that McWhirter's baptism occurred in her own kingdom—the kitchen, while she was performing that most ordinary of female tasks—cooking for her family.

Ecstatic religious practices dominated the Texas frontier, particularly after the Civil War. Revival meetings, similar to the ones Charles Finney had held throughout the northeast several decades earlier, formed a large part of religious practice in such areas as Belton. The women who became the Sanctified Sisters all belonged to denominations that accepted an evangelical approach to religion. McWhirter soon communicated her beliefs and new interpretation of doctrine to the other women in her weekly prayer meeting (Atkinson [1929] 1970, 81). At first their churches welcomed these zealous women, but it soon became evident that the women from McWhirter's prayer group had minds of their own. They censured the churches' formalities and proclaimed their own doctrine of entire sanctification (Hinds [1908] 1975, 435).

The sanctification experiences were common phenomena among McWhirter's early adherents. The women received revelations that convinced them that McWhirter's new interpretations of their condition were correct. McWhirter and the other Sisters developed their religious doctrine through individual dreams and divine communications. Mystical guidance through these dreams and divine revelations continued to be important to the women throughout the whole life of the community and guided many beliefs and actions. While there is no evidence that in later years new members had to undergo sanctification to join the community, all members were expected to accept the community principles, which included divine guidance (*Constitution* 1902).

By 1874 the women of McWhirter's weekly prayer meetings began to recognize themselves as a separate group and held their meetings in the old Union Sunday school building, the original site of Martha's power in the religious community of Belton (James 1965, 68). It is likely that the religious zeal of these women and even their criticism of church authority would have been considered "the outpourings of silly females," but for the subversive quality of their dreams and pronouncements (Sokolow and Lamanna 1984, 378). While many husbands expected their wives to be especially interested in religious activity, they did not understand either the uproar in the churches or the adherence of their wives to the doctrines of the Sanctified Sisters. They also did not expect the rebellion of their wives to extend beyond the church and into their homes, which is exactly what happened after 1875.

The background of the women who joined the Sanctified Sisters is an important component of the history of the community and the subsequent philosophy they formed. The first generation of Anglo-American women on the Texas frontier often lived on isolated farms far from the towns that could provide them with manufactured goods. As farm wives they were re-

sponsible for producing food and clothing for their families, for many goods used in the household, and for helping with the raising of produce for market. Running a farm was often a partnership between husband and wife. Women on the frontier were faced with contradictory messages concerning their roles. Traditional nineteenth-century images of women's roles included passivity, emotionality, physical weakness, self-sacrifice, dependency, and submission to male authority. However, on the frontier, a different female stereotype appeared. The pioneer woman was still expected to submit to her husband's wishes, but she was also responsible for running the family farm when her husband was away, for bearing and raising her children in isolated areas, and for working many hours on the farm itself (Malone 1983, 23).

Although the almost mythological view of the pioneer woman continued to be admired, the image of the lady who aspired to embody the traits of true womanhood soon overtook that of the stalwart pioneer woman, who lost her place in the more settled areas of the frontier. Women were told that the feminine ideal was not the strong pioneer woman, but "A True Lady," the title of a Feb. 26, 1880, article in the *Belton Journal,* whose author explained: "Wildness is a thing which girls cannot afford. . . . It is the first duty of a woman to be a lady. . . . A man's ideal is not wounded when a woman fails in worthy wisdom; but if in grace, in fact, in sentiment, in delicacy, in kindness, she would be found wanting, he receives an inward hurt."

Many of the women who joined the Sanctificationists had arrived in Bell County, Texas, as settlers, and had begun their lives there on farms. These women found their lives disrupted, first by the Civil War, which placed more responsibility for family concerns on their shoulders while male relatives were away fighting, and second by the change from farm wives who contributed directly to the family economy to urban housekeepers who did not have as active or as visible a role in family production (Scott 1970, 45). Many frontier women must have been happy to trade the isolated and hard work of the farm for the relatively easier town life. The move could also have meant a rise in status. Some women were able to reassume the roles of true womanhood not easy to maintain on a frontier farm.

It is clear that the women who formed the Sanctificationist band were not satisfied with prescribed rules for their behavior. All the women but two came from households in which the family income had its source in a male relative's commercial or professional occupation (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1880). Martha McWhirter testified to her own dissatisfaction with her diminished role as housewife. Although most of the Sisters could expect substantial family incomes, their visible participation in the production of that income had diminished.

It was soon obvious that challenges to religious orthodoxy alone would not satisfy the group of women surrounding McWhirter. Increasingly, the women's dreams revealed their dissatisfaction with the lives they led. This dissatisfaction took the form of questioning the marriage bond and the role of sexuality in marriage. One of McWhirter's close friends, Josephine Rancier, reported that God told her in dreams that she should separate from her unsanctified husband (*Belton Journal,* Feb. 26, 1880). At first the Sisters publicly linked their stand on celibacy with their religious beliefs. For these women, sexuality was connected to carnality and therefore had no place in a spiritually perfected life. Sexuality was of the earth; spiritual passion was for those who had received God's divine call. It became obvious to the Sisters that their husbands did not view the issue in the same light. Sexuality became one of the first battlegrounds on which these women and men fought. The women demanded the right to determine the disposition of their own sexuality, and the men asserted the conjugal prerogatives of nineteenth-century husbands.

The Sisters soon realized that their stand on sexuality gained them some control over their own bodies, particularly in the area of reproduction, but not over other aspects of their lives. They attempted to replace disinterest in sexuality with celibacy in a radical attempt to gain self-determination. The fact that many of the husbands of Sisters were unwilling to stay within marriages that did not include sexual relationships only proved to the women that their unsanctified husbands equated sexuality with marriage. The husbands, without their traditional conjugal rights in the bedroom, felt a loss of control over the whole marriage.

The double standard of male and female sexuality and morality was familiar to all nineteenth-century women. The Sisters, particularly conscious about the issue of sexual control of women, challenged this male-defined concept of sexuality and selected alternative forms that gave them autonomous control of their own bodies. Rather than compromise their religious belief and secular independence, many of the Sisters took the difficult step of leaving or allowing their husbands to leave the marriage. In an era in which marriage was the main source of livelihood for many women, this was a precarious choice.

Although McWhirter stated that religious differences were the root cause of spousal desertion, in reality the differences in opinion between husbands and sanctified wives about individual sexual relationships were at least as important a factor. McWhirter also failed to mention the dissatisfaction many Sisters felt in their marriages, the physical and emotional abuse they endured, and the rebellion the women fomented against the traditional role of wife.

The physical and emotional abuse became evident in several divorce cases involving the Sanctified Sisters. Ada McWhirter Haymond, Martha's daughter, testified that her husband Ben "was always more or less disagreeable in the family," that they had disagreed over family finances, and that he had attempted to forcibly evict Ada from their home, finally deserting her and their children (Bell County 1887, 17; Kitch 1989, 105). Other wives recorded the mental and physical abuse they received before they joined the Sanctificationists. (Scheble, 110). Margaret Henry stated that her husband "treated her cruelly whether he was drunk or sober"; Agatha Pratt left her husband because he was chronically drunk and often abused her (James 1975, 184). Josephine Rancier legally separated from her husband because of his desertion of the family, his abuse, and his chronic indebtedness (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1880; Sokolow and Lamanna 1984, 379). McWhirter herself testified at her daughter's divorce trial that "there is no sense in a woman obeying a drunken husband" (*Belton Journal,* Feb. 26, 1880).

Many of the women who joined the community not only were dissatisfied with their own marriages but believed that the institution itself was disastrous for women. Some, concerned with the fate of their daughters or sisters, joined the community with their female relatives. The intergenerational aspect of the community is significant. From the available evidence, many of the second-generation daughters remained in the community and never married, or maintained ties with the community (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1900; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Washington, D.C.* 1910). Belton mothers and daughters may have seen joining the Sanctified Sisters as a way out of a cycle of abuse. For mothers, the community meant an end to abusive marriage and a way to protect their daughters from the same fate. For daughters, it meant having an option for their lives not originally available to their mothers. It also meant that daughters could view their mothers as dignified women who had the courage to save themselves and their children from the tyranny of family violence.

The Sisters rejected nurturing their husbands but were anxious to retain their maternal nurturing. Many of the women joined the community with their children. Mothers gave up their individual responsibilities for their children, but all the women believed child rearing was a special community task. The Sisters maintained their own school for community children. Sanctificationist children were considered full members of the community (*Constitution* 1902, 10).

Many in Belton viewed the community of women as a threat to traditional gender roles. The men most directly challenged by the women's activities, their husbands and male relatives, tried several forms of action: divorce, deprivation of sources of livelihood, desertion, and physical abuse.

However, men outside the families of the Sisters also felt threatened by the women's community. Two incidents in particular illustrate their perceptions of the threat and what kinds of actions the men believed themselves justified in taking. In 1880, two male residents of Belton, Matthew and David Dow, received permission from McWhirter to join the Sanctified Sisters. The Brothers agreed to the religious and sexual strictures of the Sanctified Sisters. Other Belton citizens were horrified at the acceptance of adult men into the group (*Belton Journal,* Feb. 19, 1880; James 1965, 70). A mob dragged the Dow brothers from their home and beat them. The brothers were threatened with further violence if they did not leave town. They refused to be intimidated and stated that their "religion was good enough to live by and good enough to die by" (*Belton Journal,* Feb. 26, 1880). The brothers' refusal to leave town led the judicial authorities in Belton to bring the Dows to trial on the charge of insanity.

A number of the male witnesses against the brothers were husbands of women who had joined the Sanctified Sisters. Judge and jury found that the brothers were insane and that "their restraint [was] a duty to society and themselves" (*Belton Journal,* Feb. 26, 1880). Matthew and David Dow were conveyed to the state insane asylum in Austin, where the authorities refused to admit them, as they were obviously sane.

The charge of insanity to quell the rebellious women was raised a second time. In 1883 Sister Mary C. Johnson was tried and also sent to the asylum in Austin. At the death of her husband, John G. Johnson, Mary was to receive his two-thousand-dollar life insurance policy from the Knights of Honor. Johnson refused to take the policy. John had been unsanctified, and as Mary had refused to take money from him when he was alive, she did not wish to do so after his death (Garrison 1893, 39). Mary Johnson's brother then petitioned that she be tried for lunacy solely on the grounds of her refusal of the insurance money. A Bell County jury found her insane, and she was sent to the same asylum in Austin as the Dow brothers.

Unlike the case of Matthew and David Dow, the asylum authorities did not immediately deny the insanity charges against Johnson. Even though the charges of religious fanaticism against Mary Johnson had been the same as those charged to the Dow brothers, the asylum authorities were more willing to believe that a woman was likely to be a danger if left free in her community. Johnson had acted in ways that did not conform to notions of ladylike behavior. Nineteenth-century doctors frequently confused female acts of independence with emotional illness (Ehrenreich and English 1973, 42). The citizens of Belton had been made aware of the conditions at the state asylum in Austin in 1880: "Escaped lunatics create much trouble [in Austin] . . . one had the appearance of being half starved and was

dangerous to women. . . . On approaching the cabin [he] saw a negro woman in the yard and immediately attacked her. . . . Neighbors conducted him to the asylum and turned him over to the attendants, who . . . appeared sublimely indifferent, and treated the whole matter as if . . . such acts by the inmates . . . were everyday occurrences" (*Belton Journal*, July 29, 1880). That the Belton jury was willing to send the widow of a prominent citizen to such an institution indicates the rancor they felt toward the Sanctified Sisters.

By the end of the 1870s the women realized that economic independence from their husbands was also necessary if they wished to control their own lives and to maintain their ties with other Sisters. In 1879 the Sisters began their first communal economic venture. Until this time the ties between them had been religious belief and emotional support for those women trapped in unhappy marriages.

The traditional nineteenth-century partriarchal family household was based on the economic ties between its members, with the male head providing and controlling the major portion of the income. For the urban families of Belton, money was more important than it had been on the farm, and the question of who controlled finances frequently became a source of contention between husbands and wives. In the late 1870s the Sisters demanded payment for the domestic work they provided as housekeepers, wives, and mothers (Mattox 1901, 167; Sokolow and Lamanna 1984, 380). They also wanted complete control over the funds they used in the household. Then Martha McWhirter refused to take money for household expenses from her husband when he threatened to withhold the money unless she accounted to him for its use.

The women began a communal fund with the twenty-dollar savings of a Sister who taught school in Belton. The women saved money from the sale of their own butter, milk, and eggs. It may be that because these were domestic sources of income, husbands had legal but not actual control over the production or sale. In some fashion the Sisters managed to save about fifteen dollars a week from the sale of these products. By the end of 1879 all the Sisters were able to be financially independent of their male relatives.

Sisters were not afraid of earning money in occupations that were traditionally male dominated. Margaret Henry directed the firewood business for the Sisters. The women bought wood at twenty-five cents a cord as it stood in the local cedar breaks, chopped it down, loaded the wood into wagons, and sold the firewood in town for three dollars per cord (James 1965, 73). Another Sister practiced dentistry, and still another repaired community shoes (*Temple Daily Telegram*, Sec. 2, Dec. 1, 1929).

By 1883 the Sisters entered a long period of great financial success. By that summer they were earning approximately six hundred dollars per month. The Sisters earned about six dollars a day from the sale of milk and butter, ten dollars a day from the sale of wood, and up to two hundred dollars a month from a communal laundry business they organized (Garrison 1893, 37). That same year Sister Margaret Henry gained control of her house through the death of her husband, John. The Sisters decided to live in the house and run it as a hotel. For the first year very few travelers stayed at the hotel. The women believed that the citizens of Belton worked against them and warned people away. After the first year, however, the hotel suddenly became popular. It is possible that the townsfolk were persuaded to change their tactics when McWhirter donated five hundred dollars in the Sisters' name toward bringing a railroad spur into Belton. Not only did this improve relationships between the Sisters and the rest of the town, but it was also good business sense on the Sisters' part, as the new railroad station was located across the street from their hotel (Wright 1974, 37).

By 1898 the Sanctified Sisters were not only a successful communal family but a financial success. McWhirter reported that the net income of the community was eight hundred dollars per month. The women owned the hotel, leased two more hotels in the nearby town of Waco, and collected rent from store houses, dwellings in Belton, and two farms outside the city (Fischer 1980, 174). The women of the Sanctified band realized that economic independence was an important component of the survival of their communal ideal. By earning and spending their own money, they relinquished the status they had as female dependents of prominent men but sought to gain an economic and social identity they had chosen and formed themselves. They were preeminently successful in their endeavor.

Once the Sisters began to live together in the same space after the mid-1880s, new features of the community began to appear. The women continued some of the patterns that they had practiced since the beginning of their band. They worked communally and managed to have large blocks of leisure time as well. By living together it became easier for the Sisters to live, act, and work communally.

From the beginning, the Sisters formed work patterns that supported their attempts to reorganize their lives. Much of their work, even before the opening of the Central Hotel, was communally organized. The laundry business, which they moved from house to house, provided the Sisters with a way to earn money with traditional female skills and created a time when the women could socialize as well. Most child rearing was done communally. The children also worked in the community hotel or on one of the farms. Like the adults, the children's lives combined work, learning, and play.

By 1891 the work patterns in the hotel and other property were all communal. There were thirty-two members then living in the community (Garrison 1893, 41). Ten members were required to run the hotel: four women did the cooking, three young girls waited on the tables in the dining room, one Sister and one young girl attended to the thirty-five bedrooms, and one of the male community members worked as the hotel clerk. Six of the Sisters worked in the laundry two days a week and at odd jobs for the rest of their work time. The Sisters also kept a farm; usually two women and four of the children lived there. The farm provided produce for the community and the hotel in the summer, and the inhabitants wove rag carpets in the winter. All jobs were changed around every month, and the cooks rotated every two weeks. The system worked so well that community members only worked about four hours a day and then were free to do as they chose.

Margarita Gerry reported that the Sisters she visited in 1902 were simple, unlettered country women. However, this was a romanticization on Gerry's part (Gerry 1902, 133). These were women who had reinterpreted theological doctrine for their own use, formed a women's literary club, begun Belton's first public library, and used parts of various contemporary communal, spiritual, and feminist philosophies they believed appropriate in the design of their own lives. The Sisters read the writings of Tolstoy, the works of single-tax advocate Henry George, the religious writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, the feminist *Woman's Journal,* and the utopian works of Edward Bellamy (Garrison 1893, 43).

The Sisters spent their leisure time in many different ways. They read a great deal; some of the Sisters played the piano, painted, and took music lessons from boarders. Like other women all over the United States during the 1890s, the Sisters formed a women's literary club. With the donation of 350 books the club created Belton's first public library in a small room of the hotel (Sokolow and Lamanna 1984, 390).

Some of the Sisters traveled, sometimes for pleasure but usually for the edification of the community. When the Sisters wished to improve their dairy farming techniques, two or three of them visited farms in Wisconsin (Wright 1974, 37). The Sisters also visited the Chicago Exposition in the mid-1890s (Sokolow and Lamanna 1984, 397). In the summer of 1890, the entire group of women traveled to New York City. While the primary reason for these trips was travel and to "see something of the world," the women were also searching for another location for their community. The Sisters were probably acting on dream directives in this search, as small groups also traveled to San Francisco and Mexico City to investigate sites (James 1965, 72).

While the group had increased its contact with the outside world, they were able to maintain community identity through private separate living quarters and a delicate sense of group dynamics. Although the Sisters spent their work hours and some leisure hours in the public space of the hotel, much of their time was spent in the more private atmosphere of the community's quarters. The Sisters had large buildings, separate from the hotel structure, that contained a sitting room, dining room, kitchen, work space, and bedrooms for each of the women (Wright 1974, 36).

Communal living space and communally organized work were not the only ways in which the Sisters maintained their group identity. Dreams, visions, and religious experiences, which had guided community members from the beginning, remained important. The Sisters discussed their experiences with each other and frequently obtained guidance for the entire group (Bell County 1887, 5). When interviewed, McWhirter often cited "revelations" as the reason for certain decisions on behalf of the community. However, beyond the mystical guidance of dreams and visions, McWhirter told historian George P. Garrison that the Sisters received "their greatest help from a delicate sense which belongs to the entire community rather than to any individual member" (Garrison 1893, 46). Religious mysticism remained a central aspect of guidance for community projects.

Without formally excluding men, the Belton community was formed by women as a female-centered organization. Any male members of the community were expected to conform to the new gender roles and forms the women had developed. Few men ever stayed for long with the Sisters; conflicts seemed to arise over traditional role expectations. The Sisters told a reporter that men were "'welcome if they are willing to live the life we do. But they never stay long. You see it is in the nature of men to want to boss–and–Well, they find they can't.' At which all the sisters nod their heads" (Gerry 1902, 139). On occasion the sense of community balance and harmony was disrupted. The community was disrupted when one Sister left to marry: "All felt a psychical disturbance due to her unfaithfulness," but this feeling disappeared after the woman left the community (Garrison 1893, 95).

The kin connections that most of these women had upon entering the community and the connections they went on to form with each other were an important aspect of the Woman's Commonwealth. The close emotional and often physical ties between women that Carroll Smith-Rosenberg found in her study of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women were usual forms of interaction. Female networks were frequently based on an "inner core of kin"–the relationships between mothers, daughters, sisters, sisters-in-law, cousins–and sustained by the everyday events of women's lives

(Smith-Rosenberg 1975, 11). The Sisters of the Belton community were able to live, work, and devote their lives to each other. The inner strength and durability of the community were formed by the kin and friendship networks already in place before the women began to live together. The women relied on the conventional bonds of female friendship to form the core of their community. The devotion that many of the Sisters felt for their leader, Martha McWhirter, was another factor in the balance of communal alliance. This devotion was demonstrated by the fact that at least four community members named their daughters after McWhirter. Gertrude Scheble, for example, named her youngest child Martha McWhirter Scheble.

Martha McWhirter and her family are a good example of multi-generational membership in the community. Two of McWhirter's children joined the community as adults, three of her grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. Margaret J. Henry, a close friend of McWhirter's and also a founding member, joined the group with her two daughters, Carrie and Ella. Other women joined with mothers or daughters.

Despite their eventual acceptance by the citizens of Belton and their success as a community, the Sisters decided to move their community to Washington, D.C., in 1898. It is not clear why the women moved away from their hometown. There were no new outbreaks of hostility against the Sisters. Rather their neighbors begged them not to leave Belton (Gerry 1902, 136). Some have speculated that dreams directed the Sisters to a new location. Others believed that the older Sisters wished to retire, and the younger Sisters wanted the more stimulating environment of a large city. The Sisters finally settled on a large house in the Mount Pleasant suburb of Washington.

The Sisters continued to live much as they had done in Belton. The house itself contained both private rooms and communal quarters. Occasionally, the Sisters opened the house to boarders, but mainly they lived on their savings (Hinds [1908] 1975, 441). The domestic work continued to be rotated every week among the members. All members of the community were required to perform some manual labor. The proceeds from this work were held for the common use of all the women (*Constitution* 1902, 3). As in the early days in Belton, the women sold garden produce, preserves, butter, eggs, and milk, and a homemade wine named Koumiss to their neighbors. Perhaps the number of orders increased beyond the household means of supply, because in 1903 the women purchased a 120-acre farm near the town of Colesville, in Montgomery County, Maryland (*Deeds*, 1903).

In 1902 the Sisters officially became known as the Woman's Commonwealth of Washington, D.C. They had always disliked the name Sanctified

3. Members of the Woman's Commonwealth, ca. 1904, in Washington, D.C. Martha McWhirter is seated in the center of the front row. *Courtesy of General Research Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.*

Sisters and had only grudgingly accepted the name. With the assumption of the new title, the Sisters for the first time wrote down the rules and regulations by which they lived. They still believed that "ecclesiastical connections, and . . . set forms and ceremonies cause sectarian divisions and much dissension and unhappiness." In the preamble to their constitution the Sisters stated their beliefs on communal living: "That the communistic life produces in the fullest measure honesty, sobriety, spirituality, happiness and a keen sense of justice" (*Constitution* 1902, 3).

The constitution required that all property was to be held by the trustees for the benefit of the Commonwealth. All members were to live in a "combined household, [where] the members shall be mutually guaranteed by the services of the members, and by the entire resources of the organization, food, clothing, care in sickness and misfortune, in infancy and old age." As the women still cared for young children, their care was also men-

tioned in the Commonwealth constitution: "All children of the Colony shall be regarded as wards of the organization and special objects of its care and love" (*Constitution* 1902, 9–10).

The women lived a comfortable life. When reporter Margarita Gerry visited the community in 1902, she found them tranquil and happy. "This is living," one of the younger Sisters told her emphatically (Gerry 1902, 136). In 1900 there were twenty-three people living in the community. The Sisters received application letters daily from women who wished to join. Only a few women were ever accepted, as the Sisters wished to maintain their delicate sense of community. A few of the younger Sisters left to marry or to try jobs outside of the Commonwealth.

Martha McWhirter died in April 1904. Many prophesied that the Commonwealth would break up once the dynamic leader was no longer able to direct the group herself. However, the remaining women continued to live as a communal family for many more years. Some of the Sisters remained in Washington and occasionally opened the house to boarders. Other Sisters lived on the Commonwealth farm in Maryland (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Maryland* 1910). By 1914 the house in Washington had been sold and community members moved to other Commonwealth property in Maryland and Florida.

In 1910, eighteen members remained in the community, evenly divided between the house in Washington and the Maryland farm (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Maryland* 1910). The farm in Montgomery County, Maryland, remained the home to the surviving members of the Commonwealth for several more decades. During the 1920s and 1930s, after the house in the District was sold and all community members resided on the farm, the Sisters served meals on weekends to customers from Washington. It is said that many dignitaries visited the community for the superb food and stayed to play croquet on the lawns after dinner. Martha Scheble, the last surviving Sister, kept up the community tradition of opening up the house to guests and having boarders until she died in 1983.

The Woman's Commonwealth was one of the few intentional communities designed, controlled, and populated by women. It was shaped by the women inhabitants according to their needs and their beliefs. The Sisters demanded independence and self-determination and soon learned that this aspiration threatened traditional patriarchal society. By banding together the women could survive economically and fight against the hostility of the outside world. Believing that the communal life provided the best social family and environment for individuals, the women found that this mode of living fulfilled many of their needs.

Piety, submission to male authority, domesticity, and purity were the

parameters that shaped most nineteenth-century women's lives. Like other utopian feminists and reformers, the Sisters found that they had to deal with the issues of marriage, sexuality, gender roles, and work that defined them as women. The women of the Commonwealth had the opportunity to reshape on a small scale, and for a small number, matters that concerned many women. By choosing to reorder their lives around the issues of women's independence and self-determination, and by establishing a community devoted to women, the Sisters of the Woman's Commonwealth placed themselves firmly within a tradition of feminism and feminist utopianism.

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