Chapter 5: The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union

The Founding of the WCTU: Educate, Agitate, Organize

The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union was founded in mid-1874 by a small group of women (including Crusaders and several Evanstonians) to educate Americans about the ill effects of liquor, to agitate for legislation prohibiting the sale of alcohol, and to organize women across the nation to work toward these goals. The organization would consist of an ever-growing number of local branch Unions which reported to the National WCTU. Willard joined the WCTU immediately and was appointed Corresponding Secretary to the National WCTU; she was later President of the Illinois WCTU. She gained enough visibility in these roles to be elected President of the National WCTU in 1879. Her organizational skills and broad vision transformed the young organization.

Figure 1, The Woman’s Crusade, Hillsboro, Ohio, December 1873
Willard found her life-work when she became involved in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1874, the year it was founded as the first temperance organization run solely by women. In 1879 she became the second president of the National WCTU, defeating the organization’s first leader, who opposed including woman suffrage in the WCTU’s mission. Willard was reelected to the presidency of the WCTU every year until her death in 1898. She also served as president of the World’s WCTU, founded in 1883. Under her leadership, the WCTU developed from a small, one-goal organization into a network of two hundred thousand women pursuing wide-ranging social reform (with the motto “Do Everything”) while they themselves learned to step into the public sphere. Willard’s own talent for leadership enabled her to elicit the loyalty and solidarity of a diverse group of women who admired and, to an extent, worshipped her.
Radical Woman in a Classic Town: Frances Willard of Evanston

Chapter 5

Figure 4

Figure 5
Petitions had been an important and recurring weapon in the WCTU’s arsenal since the beginning. Even without the right to vote, women could express their views by signing resolutions which were then presented to governing bodies. In 1879 Willard had presented a petition with over 170,000 names on it to the Illinois House to convince legislators to permit the Home Protection Ballot, which would allow women to vote on such issues as local restrictions on the sale of alcohol.

Even when they didn’t result in legislation, petitions made a statement. In the mid-1880s, with the revival of the World’s WCTU, Willard launched the Polyglot petition. WCTU missionaries obtained signatures from men and women around the world who wanted their governments to prohibit the sale of alcohol and opium. Over 7,500,000 signatures were gathered on petition forms, which were sent back to the National WCTU headquarters and pasted by country, province, or state onto rolls of canvas.
Figure 7, Rolls of Polyglot Petition, 1895

Figure 8, Notice of the Polyglot Petition

Figure 9, WCTU Publicity Photo, 1920s
One of the WCTU’s most innovative, and controversial, ideas came from an innovative and controversial member of the organization, Matilda Carse. Carse suggested that the WCTU construct its own building in downtown Chicago to serve as its headquarters, while the rental from the rest of the office space (rented to suitable tenants) would help finance the WCTU’s many projects. With Willard’s full support, Carse formed the Woman’s Temple Building Association (William Deering was a member), and sold bonds to finance the project. The 13-story building, designed by Burnham & Root, opened at the corner of LaSalle and Monroe in 1892. Unfortunately Carse’s plan suffered from the recession of 1893 and from the opposition of some WCTU members. After Willard’s death in 1898 (her body lay in state in the Temple’s Willard Hall on February 23), Carse could not retain WCTU support, and by that fall the WCTU had ended its connection with the Temple. Carse continued to try to recoup her losses and maintain the Temple as a memorial to Willard, but was not able to do so. She died in 1916, and the Woman’s Temple was torn down in 1926.
Radical Woman in a Classic Town: Frances Willard of Evanston

Chapter 5

Membership in the WCTU

Figure 12, WCTU Life Membership Certificate

Figure 13, Charter Certificate for a Sojourner Truth WCTU
WCTU Symbols: Pledge Cards and White Ribbons

Figure 14, Pledge Card
I do hereby Pledge myself in integrity and honor, before
God, to abstain from the use of, and traffic in, all intoxicating liquors as
a beverage; and that I will not in any way offer the same to others to be
so used; and I further covenant before God, henceforth to work and pray
for the suppression of intemperance as a sin against God and man, and
that in this work, I will use such means and forward such measures as
God shall direct through the Holy Spirit in answer to prayer.

Member’s Name, ____________________________________________

Figure 15, Pledge Card

Figure 16, Advertizing Placard with Pull-Off Pledge Cards
Figure 17 and 18, The White Ribbon; White Ribboners: Right to left: Frances Willard, her mother, and Anna Gordon (Willard’s secretary), wearing their WCTU white ribbons
Willard's role in the planning for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago reflected how well known she was outside temperance circles. She was a member of the Board of Lady Managers, the group of women who built the Woman's Building, and organized other woman-related facilities (childcare, dormitories) at the Fair, and helped plan the Congress of Representative Women (May 15-21, with invited speakers from the US and around the world). In addition, she was scheduled to deliver the presidential address at the combined World's WCTU/National WCTU convention in Chicago in October. As a Lady Manager, Willard was invited to inaugural and special events, and received free passes for every day of the Fair. Unfortunately, by the time of the Fair, her poor health prevented her from leaving England, where she had gone early in the year to work with Lady Henry Somerset. Somerset traveled to Chicago to deliver Willard's speech to the WCTU.
Making Fun of the WCTU

This undated, unsigned china flask (the bonnet is the cork) shows the way the anti-prohibition public made fun of the WCTU. The identification of the woman with the bottle in her hands as Frances Willard reflects how well known she was—even though her name is spelled wrong—and how much she represented the WCTU. Cartoons and other propaganda distributed by the liquor interest often depicted a drunken Willard.
Sources of Items and Photographs

Figure 1
Inspired by a powerful temperance speaker, women in one small town took to the streets, praying outside (and inside) local saloons to shame the owners and customers into giving up alcohol. The idea spread to other towns, where groups of middle-class women forced saloonkeepers to close down and their customers to sign the temperance pledge.
Scan of clipping in the Willard Memorial Library and Archives

Figure 2
Written while Willard was the National Corresponding Secretary, the handbook told women how to organize and administer a Union, establish departments of work, hold meetings, publicize the WCTU’s mission, and learn the fine art of lobbying. The principles in the book were repeated or expanded on in numerous pamphlets and guides, ensuring a shared structure for Unions while helping women become leaders.
Copy presented by Willard to her mother. On loan from the Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives

Figure 3
The index page of the Meeting Minutes, with the list of reports from many departments within the WCTU, demonstrates how wide-ranging the national organization’s mission had become under Willard’s leadership. Departments changed over the years, but always reflected Willard’s “Do Everything” approach to eliminating the causes and consequences of alcoholism, as well as advocating prohibition of the sale of liquor.
On loan from the Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives

Figure 4 and 5
Two examples of pamphlets for WCTU members to distribute in their communities. [one on why women should vote; one with the Industrial Creed] The publishing department of the National WCTU churned out educational pamphlets, flyers, and books to address every issue and reach every audience.
On loan from the Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives

Figure 6
Portions of the petition vary in size based on the size of the area petitioned. This is a very small roll of the petition. All of the hundred or so existing rolls are in fragile condition and cannot be unrolled.
On loan from the Frances Willard House Museum

Figure 7
During 1895, Frances Willard presented the voluminous Polyglot Petition to President Grover Cleveland, and her counterpart in the British Woman’s Temperance Association, Lady Henry Somerset, presented them to Queen Victoria. Photos such as this one, depicting the vast size of the Petition, were widely circulated by the WCTU.
Photograph on loan from the Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives

Figure 8
This form letter, duplicating the style and language of the actual paper petition, was sent to government officials to advise them that petitions to prohibit the sale of alcohol and opium had been signed in 50 countries and (at this point) by no fewer than 4 million petitioners.
On loan from the Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives
Figure 9
The WCTU never missed a marketing opportunity. This 1920s photo of WCTU members holding rolls of petitions in front of the Willard House shows how the Polyglot Petition continued to be a symbol of the WCTU's methods and success. Petition rolls were displayed at state fairs, on lecture tours, and in parades. Photograph on loan from the Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives

Figure 10
This brochure, published by Matilda Carse, described the many modern features of the building and made a strong case for keeping the Temple as a fitting memorial to Willard.
On loan from the Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives

Figure 11
The bank was used to hold contributions during one of Carse’s many fund-raising efforts.
On loan from the Frances Willard House Museum

Figure 12 and 13
The WCTU’s “Department of Colored Work” began in the 1880s, with Lucy Thurman, an African American woman from Michigan, as National Superintendent. In some parts of the country African American women joined the local WCTU; in many areas they either chose to form their own Union, or were not allowed to join the white Union. Sometimes these “auxiliary unions” took names such as Sojourner Truth WCTU.
On loan from the Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives

Figure 14-16
Convincing someone to “Take the pledge” to abstain from alcohol was the basic goal of every WCTU member. Signing a written agreement to abstain from alcohol had been a practice of temperance advocates for many years before the WCTU (Willard herself had signed the pledge in 1856). The WCTU—national and local—produced pledge cards in many formats, suited to every age group from children to young people to adults. Featured here are a pledge card from the Iowa WCTU, a pledge card with a familiar motto across the top (“Whatsoever things are true….”), and a colorful advertising placard with pull-off pledge cards.
On loan from the Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives

Figure 17
In 1877, the WCTU adopted a bow of white ribbon as its symbol. WCTU members call themselves “White Ribboners,” and have produced the emblem in cloth, metal, enamel, and, later, plastic. Ribbons are also given out as prizes in essay and speech contests held for children each year.
Pins and bows on loan from the Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives

Figure 18
On loan from the Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives

Figure 19
The building where special conventions--such as the Congress of Representative Women—were held is now the Art Institute of Chicago.

Figure 20 and 21:
On loan from the Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives