

# Harriet Bishop, Frontier Teacher

*Zylpha S. Morton*

EXACTLY A CENTURY has passed since Harriet Bishop left the comforts of her home in Vermont to enter the rough wilderness of the Northwest and inaugurate the earliest program of organized education in Minnesota. In the spring of 1847 she was one of a small group of New England women who had attended high school and received preparation for teaching. Since men in large numbers were available in the East, these women had few opportunities to practice their profession there. But as the West was settled, the need for teachers in that region became more acute, and plans were made to send women there, where they were most needed. To further such plans and give them impetus, the Board of National Popular Education was organized in Cleveland on April 7, 1847. It was made up of educators, lawyers, bankers, doctors, and clergymen, with William Slade, a former governor of Vermont, as its corresponding secretary and general agent.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of the board was to "advance the cause of Popular, Christian Education in our country" by encouraging well-qualified "Female teachers" to take positions in the remote West. For the benefit of prospective teachers, a short preparatory course would be offered, demonstrating how teaching methods could be applied in regions that previously lacked schools.<sup>2</sup> To supervise its first training school the board chose Catherine Beecher, a member of a famous Boston family. She was the author of a number of educational tracts and was well-known for her teaching ability and for her stirring appeals on behalf of education for women. In June, 1847, twenty-six young women from New England assembled at the New York State Normal School at Albany for a preparatory course under Miss Beecher.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Board of National Popular Education, *First Annual Report*, 6, 7 (Hartford, 1848).

<sup>2</sup> Board of National Popular Education, *First Report*, 7, 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Daily Evening Transcript* (Boston), May 25, 1847. A file of the *Transcript* is in the Boston Public Library, which furnished the present reference.

The women who went to Albany for training were to defray their own expenses at the normal school from the time they left home until the end of the course. Their transportation to the West and their reception at their destination were arranged by Slade, who traveled extensively in the East and West in the months following October, 1846, for the purpose of forming associations and raising funds to support the board's work.<sup>4</sup> As corresponding secretary for the board, Slade received a letter from a Dr. Thomas S. Williamson, who as both doctor and minister had been working in the West since 1835. In the Sioux village of Kaposia, near the present site of South St. Paul, he had organized a mission for the Indians in 1846, and it was from this remote place in the wilderness that he wrote an appeal for a female teacher to work in the Northwest.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually Dr. Williamson's letter reached the normal school at Albany and was put into the hands of Harriet Bishop, one of the young women in Miss Beecher's class. The writer said he was living on the verge of civilization in the northwestern part of the United States in a territory he supposed would bear the name of Minnesota. He told of the need for a teacher in a settlement known as St. Paul, four miles from his mission at Kaposia. There were five stores, a dozen or more families, and probably thirty-six children of school age at St. Paul, he said. Room and board would be furnished by a family having four children, in return for the latter's tuition. Dr. Williamson said that the teacher would have to forego the elegances and niceties of life in New England, and be willing to teach children of varied races and colors without prejudice, and he suggested that she bring her own school books, as there was no bookstore within three hundred miles. The effect of this letter on Harriet Bishop was decisive. When members of the class in Albany were asked who would go to far-off St. Paul, the young woman from Vermont answered unhesitatingly, "I will go."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Board of National Popular Education, *First Report*, 9, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice D. Edwards, *History of the Synod of Minnesota, Presbyterian Church*, 26 (1927); Harriet E. Bishop, *Floral Home; or, First Years of Minnesota*, 52 (New York, 1857).

<sup>6</sup> Bishop, *Floral Home*, 52-54; Board of National Popular Education, *Seventh Report*, 35 (1854); transcript from *New York Evangelist*, October 13, 1853. The items from the *Evangelist* cited in this article are in a collection of transcripts made for the Minnesota Historical Society.

Harriet Bishop's preparation for her new post included a review of the common school subjects, in addition to lectures on domestic economy, health of children, punctuality, truth and honesty in the schoolroom, diet, how to avoid sectarian jealousy, how to deal with party politics, and how to meet petty gossip. The last item in the training course was considered necessary because it was said that as soon as a young woman set foot in the new West, some man would promptly woo her from her profession and make her his wife. This argument was answered in the *New York Evangelist* in an item which reads, "In regard to forsaking the teacher's office for domestic alliances, which is predicted as a serious embarrassment, no evil or disappointment is anticipated; for it is believed, that in all cases, the school-room is the truest avenue to domestic happiness. Every such departure can be made good by new recruits, who will find their best friends and firmest supporters in their predecessors, settled around them as the wives and mothers of the most influential members of society."<sup>7</sup>

As soon as Harriet announced her decision to go west, she was besieged by friends who begged her to change her mind. They described the hazards of the journey, the savageness of the Indians she might encounter, her own ignorance of the world. "Every possible obstacle was presented," she wrote later, but, she explained, they "were to me as so many incentives to persist in my decision." She went to St. Paul, she said, "because I was more needed here than at any other spot on earth, and because there was no other one of my class who felt it a duty to come."<sup>8</sup>

Harriet was born in Panton, Addison County, Vermont, on January 1, 1818, the third daughter of Putnam and Miranda Bishop. Her common schooling was in Vergennes, Vermont; her later training in the Fort Edward Institute, New York; and most of her teaching was done in Essex, New York, under David P. Holton, superintendent of education there.<sup>9</sup> Harriet's was an adventurous spirit. As a

<sup>7</sup> Transcript from *New York Evangelist*, September 17, 1846.

<sup>8</sup> Bishop, *Floral Home*, 54.

<sup>9</sup> James A. Briggs, "The First Teacher of Minnesota," in *Magazine of Western History*, 7:251-253 (January, 1888); transcript from *New York Evangelist*, October 13,

child she was familiar with the memoirs of Harriet Newell and Ann Judson, wives of missionaries sent to Burma by the Baptist Home Missionary Society. The thrilling story of their lives awoke a missionary spirit in Harriet that never faltered.<sup>10</sup> The adventures of these daring women became Harriet's adventures and no doubt inspired her with the hope that someday she would escape from the stern religious tradition and set form of her life in Vermont.

In the summer of 1847, just a hundred years ago, she embarked on her own adventure, which took her to the Minnesota frontier. She said good-by to her parents and her sisters and left the beautiful green hills of her New England home. From the first incident connected with her journey to the West, Harriet was led to believe that a special providence watched over her. Since she did not wish to travel on the Sabbath, she spent Sunday with friends in Palmyra, New York. She had hoped to sail from Buffalo on the "Chesapeake," but because of the delay, passage could not be obtained. It was fortunate that such was the case, for the "Chesapeake" went down in Lake Erie with all its passengers. On a later boat she sailed for Cleveland, where she went to the home of her brother Jesse, a local lawyer. He and his family moved in a circle of cultured people who supported the Board of National Popular Education. While in Cleveland, Harriet purchased some schoolbooks for which she was later reimbursed.<sup>11</sup>

From Cleveland Miss Bishop traveled down the Ohio to the Mississippi and St. Louis. On the way upstream from that place she shared a cabin with a doctor's wife, a Mrs. Jones of Galena, who had twice been to St. Paul. She "was the first to define its locality" for Harriet Bishop. Upon arriving in Galena, the teacher arranged for passage on the "Lynx." Friends who had accompanied her thus far instructed the captain of the Mississippi River boat to take her safely to Kaposia.<sup>12</sup> From the deck of the "Lynx" the pioneering

1853; letters to the writer from Mrs. M. F. Barnes, October 7, 1944, and Earle W. Newton, director of the Vermont Historical Society, July 10, 1944.

<sup>10</sup> William Cathcart, ed., *The Baptist Enclopaedia*, 101 (Philadelphia, 1881).

<sup>11</sup> Briggs, in *Magazine of Western History*, 7:252; Board of National Popular Education, *First Report*, 17; Bishop, *Floral Home*, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop, *Floral Home*, 57, 59.

teacher looked at the wild beauty of the country along the Mississippi. As the boat moved up the river, she saw the woodsmen's shacks in the cleared space in the heavy woods, the Indians in their fragile canoes hugging the shore as the steamer went by. The grandeur of the country that lined the banks for nearly three hundred miles proved to be but a foretaste of the beauty of Minnesota.

On the morning of July 10 the "Lynx" docked at Kaposia. As the boat approached the village the captain remarked to Harriet that Dr. Williamson "was doing it up in fine style—he had got the whole village out for an escort!" And there on the river bank Harriet saw the company that had gathered to meet the boat. She saw a few white people in a crowd of brightly blanketed Indians with painted faces, and she noticed excited native children with their long black hair streaming in the breeze as they ran toward the landing. Before she could reach the lower deck, the crowd began to push toward the gangplank between the boat and the shore. She remembered that the captain had told her to kiss the papooses if she wanted to secure the friendship of the Indians. After Dr. Williamson had been presented to Harriet by the captain, she began her round of the Indian babies and kissed them all as he had suggested. Some of the Indians followed her into the mission house, where Harriet spent her first Minnesota Sunday with Dr. Williamson and his family. "Towards evening we strolled through their village," Harriet wrote later. "At the lodge of the chief, a skin was placed without the door for my benefit. . . . This the mission lady urged me to accept."<sup>18</sup>

Harriet naturally was anxious to see St. Paul, and a few days after her arrival at Kaposia she went upstream in a canoe paddled by two Indian girls. When they were in midstream, a river steamboat, the "Argo," passed and left the light canoe "rocking in her wake." At St. Paul Harriet walked about the new settlement, and called at the J. R. Irvine home, where she was to live. She found the town crowded, since a few days earlier a Red River caravan of

<sup>18</sup> Transcript from *New York Evangelist*, October 13, 1853; Bishop, *Floral Home*, 61, 62.

a hundred and twenty-one carts had arrived. According to her own report, "Such was the crowd in St. Paul, it was thought best that I should return to the Mission, to remain until it had dispersed, and proper arrangements could be made for the commencement of the school." On the following Friday, July 16, she boarded the "Argo" for a short voyage upstream to St. Paul, where everything was ready for her. Upon arriving, she "received the spontaneous greetings of the youthful crowd."<sup>14</sup>

Miss Bishop opened her school in a "mud-walled log hovel" once used as a blacksmith's shop. It was "covered with bark, and chinked with mud," quite unlike the little white schoolhouses that nestled in the green hills of Vermont, with their well-scrubbed floors, painted benches, and desks for the teachers. Harriet was not tall, but she had to stoop to enter the door of her St. Paul school. Inside it was as dark as a pocket, in spite of the sun that came weakly through the small panes of the dirty windows. Loose boards had been laid on the dirt floor, and some attempt at furnishing had been made by placing rough boards on heavy pegs driven into the log walls to serve as seats. In the center of the room was a crude "cross-legged table," and there was the "luxury of a chair" for the teacher.<sup>15</sup> A less determined person might have turned back when confronted with the hopeless appearance of the schoolroom, but New England fortitude triumphed, and the courageous school-teacher made her preparations to open classes on July 19, a Monday morning.

Among the first seven pupils in Miss Bishop's class, only two were white. Instruction was given in English and interpreted for the Indian children by a half-breed girl who could speak English, French, and Sioux. Remembering Miss Beecher's lectures on neatness and cleanliness, the teacher placed a basin of water in the schoolroom where faces and hands could be washed before lessons began. The schoolhouse became a center of interest to visitors, and frequently Indian women, and sometimes men, would come to sit

<sup>14</sup> Bishop, *Floral Home*, 67-70, 82, 98.

<sup>15</sup> Bishop, *Floral Home*, 82, 83, 87.

in the doorway or slide shyly onto a bench to listen. A native who was known as "Indian John" often went to the school to join in the singing, and he eventually became one of Miss Bishop's pupils.<sup>16</sup>

In her first report to the agent of the Board of National Popular Education, Harriet wrote that she felt she had made progress in her school, even though she had to work through an interpreter. "A more needful field could not be found," she wrote, adding that "probably, \$100 per annum, with what assistance I get here," would suffice for her wants, providing she was in good health and was prudent in her living. She did not tell of the extreme cold that prevailed in St. Paul during the first winter after her arrival, when the temperature dropped far below zero and the schoolhouse was damp and bitterly cold for many months. Miss Bishop, who loved beauty, had the pupils drag in great branches of fir and pine with which to cover the drafty holes in the log walls and the ceiling. She thus made the room more attractive, as well as somewhat more comfortable. She did not write to the board of the terror she felt when the Indians went on a rampage. After one of their numerous skirmishes with the Chippewa, some fifty excited Sioux gathered outside the schoolhouse. Miss Bishop was terrified as they fired their guns, but she pacified the children, who looked to her for protection and even hid their faces in her voluminous skirt. "Though myself much frightened, I finally feigned unusual courage, and even laughed at their boldness and presumption," Miss Bishop wrote in telling of the Indians. She "finally persuaded them to leave by telling them that children's hearts were *not strong like ours!*"<sup>17</sup>

The agent of the Board of National Popular Education, after visiting St. Paul in 1849, reported on the progress he saw there in education. By that time the school had been removed to a "small frame building on the bluff, near the lower landing," at what is now the foot of Jackson Street. The number of pupils had increased to about forty and new interest was shown in education. Slade wrote in his report that he "had the pleasure of addressing the people who filled

<sup>16</sup> Bishop, *Floral Home*, 83, 87, 268.

<sup>17</sup> Board of National Popular Education, *First Report*, 15; Bishop, *Floral Home*, 83, 275, 276.

the house and stood round the door and windows." To meet the need for more teachers, Amanda Hosford went to Stillwater in 1848 and Mary Scofield joined Miss Bishop in St. Paul in 1849.<sup>18</sup>

Miss Bishop taught in her little school until the fall of 1850, when a district school was organized in St. Paul. With the help of a friend in Ohio, she then established in St. Paul a seminary and boarding school, in a brick building erected for the purpose. In opening this "Female Seminary," she realized a desire she had had from the first — to prepare teachers for work in the Northwest.

By 1858 the Board of National Popular Education had sent 481 teachers to the West. Of them all, only 75 had married, and the board's agent considered it a "source of no little satisfaction, that we have been instrumental in furnishing seventy-five good wives to as many gentlemen of the West." Miss Bishop found that "instead of Hymen's playing the mischief with the teachers . . . it is rather with the pupils." She recalled that "it was at one time proverbial, 'if one wants to get married, attend Miss B's school.' Several of my pupils from thirteen years and upwards, have entered the state of matrimony, and from being trained in a schoolroom, have begun themselves the training of a household."<sup>19</sup>

The Vermont schoolteacher was not, however, immune to romance. Shortly after her arrival in St. Paul, she had a proposal of marriage from an Indian named Oseola. He asked an interpreter to tell Miss Bishop that "She shall have the best corner of the lodge, and the dark squaw shall pack the wood and water, plant and hoe the corn; white squaw may ride by my side in the hunt, and the other shall carry the game, set the 'teepee,' and cook the food and hush the pappoose, while *white squaw eats with me.*" When Miss Bishop refused his offer, he "begged a dollar to buy a new shirt" and left.<sup>20</sup> Later Harriet fell in love with a St. Paul lawyer who was younger than herself. Preparations had been made for their marriage, but the sister of her fiancé forbade the marriage because of the

<sup>18</sup> Board of National Popular Education, *Seventh Report*, 36; Bishop, *Floral Home*, 88, 103, 104.

<sup>19</sup> Bishop, *Floral Home*, 104, 329; Board of National Popular Education, *Sixth Report*, 11 (1853); *Seventh Report*, 36; *Eleventh Report*, 5 (1858).

<sup>20</sup> Bishop, *Floral Home*, 94-96.

discrepancy in their ages. For Harriet the breaking of the engagement was a serious blow. "We all sympathized with her," wrote a friend, "but thought that she would realize after a time that he had not been worthy of her love. Nevertheless, the result was that her life was wrecked and she seemed to lose her fine mental balance." In 1858 she married John McConkey, but they were later divorced and Harriet legally resumed her maiden name.<sup>21</sup> Following the breaking of her engagement, Miss Bishop turned to writing, publishing her volume of Minnesota experiences, *Floral Home*, and other works between 1857 and 1883.

The Board of National Popular Education repeatedly referred to the pioneer teacher in its reports. When presiding at the annual meeting of the board in Cleveland in 1850, Dr. Samuel C. Aiken mentioned the teachers who had been sent to the West, noting that some "had displayed extraordinary qualifications." He then went on to say that "he might mention many of them, but he would only refer to one, the Pioneer teacher in Minnesota . . . a woman of excellent mind and heart, as her works showed, and [one who] had deservedly acquired great influence in the Territory." At a meeting in 1854, another speaker noted that Miss Bishop's "school has been the properous mother of several others."<sup>22</sup>

There are still people in St. Paul and Minneapolis who recall Miss Bishop's graciousness, her hospitality, and her home, where beautiful furniture upholstered in her own needlepoint was admired. As late as 1880 Miss Bishop still wore her hair in curls that framed her face. Her pictures show a beautiful woman with an appealing expression. Though a daughter of Vermont, she readily adopted Minnesota as her home. "I have known Minnesota from its infancy, and have loved it as a parent does a child," she said once. But her love extended over the whole western country, of which she wrote, "I have never so felt my soul glow with enthusiasm, with the fact that I am an American woman, as in scanning the vast field which

<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Rebecca M. Cathcart, "A Sheaf of Remembrances," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:531; Minnesota, *Special Laws*, 1867, p. 387.

<sup>22</sup> Board of National Popular Education, *Third Report*, 31 (1850); *Seventh Report*, 35.

the West presents for the exercise of our best faculties, for effort and expansion."<sup>23</sup>

Miss Bishop's work and influence were not confined to education. She herself noted that many teachers of her day were "unostentatiously performing the labor of the Home Missionary, the Sabbath-school Agent, Superintendent and Teacher, besides searching out the cause of the poor, devoting nights to the sick, and attending to many other duties in the community."<sup>24</sup> Harriet Bishop was such a teacher. A hundred years after she opened her school in the little settlement of St. Paul, she remains a symbol of the westward spread of culture and of the role of education in the lives of Minnesota's pioneers.

<sup>23</sup> Bishop, *Floral Home*, 297, 322. Some of Miss Bishop's former possessions were inherited by her granddaughter, Mrs. A. B. Wells of Minneapolis, who was interviewed by the writer in December, 1944.

<sup>24</sup> Bishop, *Floral Home*, 331.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).