

PROHIBITION AND REFORM



The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) arose from the "Women's Crusade" against the heavy drinking of alcoholic beverages in the early 1870s. Founded in Cincinnati in 1874, the WCTU at first advocated temperance—moderate drinking—but with the election of Frances Willard as president in 1879 shifted to a demand for outright prohibition. Although membership waxed and waned, in the late 1880s the organization had 150,000 members, making it the largest women's organization in the world. There were affiliates in the states and specialized "departments" that urged, for example, "scientific temperance instruction" in the schools (very successful for a time) and women's suffrage, which Willard and other leaders felt was essential if women were to be taken seriously and make their influence felt.

WCTU leaders saw the crusade against alcohol as a fight on behalf of the American family. They therefore quickly came to advocate much broader social goals than simply persuading people to quit drinking. In the 1880s, under Willard, these goals, included support for the eight-hour work day (good for families) and equal wages for men and women (good for women). Much of this reflected a sense that women were different from men and had special responsibilities for the health and well-being of the family. By the turn of the century, the more narrowly focused Anti-Saloon League, run by male ministers, was starting to displace the WCTU in the prohibition crusade, and the National American Woman Suffrage Association, working exclusively to gain the right to vote for women, was supplanting it in the suffrage movement. But the WCTU was the early driving force behind these causes, and in the run-up to the passage after World War I of the prohibition and suffrage amendments, the organization, with membership of nearly 300,000, contributed mightily to both causes.

Frances Willard was born in upstate New York in 1839 and grew up on a Wisconsin farm. She attended college, taught school, and was president of Evanston College for Women and a dean of women, early evidence of her leadership qualities. She became a convert to the anti-alcohol cause while assisting Dwight L. Moody, a famous Chicago evangelist, and she maintained close ties to the Protestant churches

throughout her life. She served as president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union for almost 20 years, proving to be a powerful public speaker, a brilliant organizer and a role model for women reformers. She was keenly aware of the importance of politics, which led her to attend conventions of the male-only Prohibition party and meet with Republican stalwarts in rooms suffused (she wrote) with the "loathsome" stench of tobacco smoke and whiskey. An effort to unite the WCTU with the Knights of Labor and the Populist party came to naught, but at the time of her death in 1898, Willard was probably late nineteenth-century America's best-known woman. The document below is a passage from her 1889 autobiography.

Questions to Consider. What, according to Willard, were the main differences between men and women, and how did those differences show themselves in politics and reform? Are her arguments about the innate character of men and women still persuasive? To what did she attribute the growth and influence of the WCTU? How important to her was individual leadership—what she called "personality"? How significant for Willard was the "Christian" part of the organization's name? How did Christianity influence her goals?



The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (1889)

FRANCES WILLARD

Nothing is more suggestive in all the national gatherings of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union . . . than the wide difference between these meetings and any held by men. The beauty of decoration is specially noticeable; banners of silk, satin and velvet, usually made by the women themselves, adorn the wall; the handsome shields of states; the great vases bearing aloft grains, fruits and flowers; the moss-covered well with its old bucket; or the setting of a platform to present an interior as cozy and delightful as a parlor could afford, are features of the pleasant scene. The rapidity of movement with which business is conducted, the spontaneity of manner, the originality of plan, the perpetual freshness and ingenuity of the convention, its thousand unexpectednesses, its quips and turns, its wit and pathos, its impromptu eloquence and its perpetual good nature—all these

elements, brought into condensed view in the National Conventions, are an object-lesson of the new force and unique method that womanhood has contributed to the consideration of the greatest reform in Christendom. It is really . . . the home going forth into the world. Its manner is not that of the street, the court, the mart, or office; it is the manner of the home. Men take one line, and travel onward to success; with them discursiveness is at a discount. But women in the home must be mistresses, as well as maids of all work; they have learned well the lesson of unity in diversity; hence by inheritance and by environment, women are varied in their methods; they are born to be "branchers-out." Men have been in the organized temperance work not less than eighty years—women not quite fifteen. Men pursued it at first along the line of temperance, then total abstinence; license, then prohibition; while women have already over forty distinct departments of work, classified under the heads of preventive, educational, evangelistic, social, and legal. Women think in the concrete. The crusade showed them the drinking man, and they began upon him directly, to get him to sign the pledge and seek "the Lord behind the pledge." The crusade showed them the selling man, and they prayed over him and persuaded him to give up his bad business, often buying him out, and setting him up in the better occupation of baker, grocer, or keeper of the reading-room into which they converted his saloon after converting him from the error of his ways.

But oftentimes the drinking man went back to his cups, and the selling man fell from his grace; the first one declaring, "I can't break the habit I formed when a boy," and the last averring, "Somebody's bound to sell, and I might as well make the profit." Upon this the women, still with their concrete ways of thinking, said, "To be sure, we must train our boys, and not ours only, but everybody's; what institution reaches all?—the Public Schools." . . .

To the inane excuse of the seller that he might as well do it since somebody would, the quick and practical reply was, "To be sure; but suppose the people could be persuaded not to let anybody sell? why, then that would be God's answer to our crusade prayers." So they began with petitions to municipalities, to Legislatures and to Congress, laboriously gathering up, doubtless, not fewer than ten million names in the great aggregate, and through the fourteen years. Thus the Woman's Christian Temperance Union stands as the strongest bulwark of prohibition, state and national, by constitutional amendment and by statute. Meanwhile, it was inevitable that their motherly hearts should devise other methods for the protection of their homes. Knowing the terrors and the blessings of inheritance, they set about the systematic study of heredity, founding a journal for that purpose. Learning the relation of diet to the drink habit, they arranged to study hygiene also; desiring children to know that the Bible is on the side of total abstinence, they induced the International Sunday-school Convention to prepare a plan for lessons on this subject; perceiving the limitless power of the Press, they did their best to subsidize it by sending out their bulletins

of temperance facts and news items, thick as the leaves of Vallambrosa, and incorporated a publishing company of women. . . .

They have become an army, drilled and disciplined. They have a method of organization, the simplest yet the most substantial known to temperance annals. It is the same for the smallest local union as for the national society with its ten thousand auxiliaries. Committees have been abolished, except the executive, made up of the general officers, and "superintendencies" substituted, making each woman responsible for a single line of work in the local, state and national society. This puts a premium upon personality, develops a negative into a positive with the least loss of time, and increases beyond all computation the aggregate of work accomplished. Women with specialties have thus been multiplied by tens of thousands, and the temperance reform introduced into strongholds of power hitherto neglected or unthought of. Is an exposition to be held, or a state or county fair? there is a woman in the locality who knows it is her business to see that the W. C. T. U. has an attractive booth with temperance literature and temperance drinks; and that, besides all this, it is her duty to secure laws and by-laws requiring the teetotal absence of intoxicants from grounds and buildings. Is there an institution for the dependent or delinquent classes? there is a woman in the locality who knows it is her duty to see that temperance literature is circulated, temperance talking and singing done, and that flowers with appropriate sentiments attached are sent the inmates by young ladies banded for that purpose. Is there a convocation of ministers, doctors, teachers, editors, voters, or any other class of opinion-manufacturers announced to meet in any town or city? there is a woman thereabouts who knows it is her business to secure, through some one of the delegates to these influential gatherings, a resolution favoring the temperance movement, and pledging it support along the line of work then and there represented. Is there a Legislature anywhere about to meet, or is Congress in session? there is a woman near at hand who knows it is her business to make the air heavy with the white, hovering wings of petitions gathered up from everywhere asking for prohibition, for the better protection of women and girls, for the preventing of the sale of tobacco to minors, for the enforcement of the Sabbath, or for the enfranchisement of women. . . .

"No sectarianism in religion," "no sectionalism in politics," "no sex in citizenship"—these are the battle-cries of this relentless but peaceful warfare. We believe that woman will bless and brighten every place she enters, and that she will enter every place on the round earth. We believe in prohibition by law, prohibition by politics, and prohibition by woman's ballot. After ten years' experience, the women of the crusade became convinced that until the people of this country divide at the ballot-box on the foregoing issue, America can never be nationally delivered from the dram-shop. . . .

While their enemy has brewed beer, they have brewed public opinion; while he distilled whisky, they distilled sentiment; while he rectified spirits, they rectified the spirit that is in man. They have had good words of cheer alike for North and South, for Catholic and Protestant, for home and foreign

born, for white and black, but gave words of criticism for the liquor traffic and the parties that it dominates as its servants and allies.

While the specific aims of . . . women everywhere are directed against the manufacture, sale and use of alcoholic beverages, it is sufficiently apparent that the indirect line of their progress is, perhaps, equally rapid, and involves social, governmental, and ecclesiastical equality between women and men. By this is meant such financial independence on the part of women as will enable them to hold men to the same high standards of personal purity in the habitudes of life as they have required of women, such a participation in the affairs of government as shall renovate politics and make home questions the paramount issue of the state, and such equality in all church relations as shall fulfill the gospel declaration, "There is neither male nor female, but ye are all one in Christ Jesus."