

By Mrs. M. Kee

FRANCES A. WOOD SHIMER

Frances Ann Wood, whom we know better as Mrs. Shimer, was born in the little village of Milton, in Saratoga County, New York, in August, 1826. Her parents both belonged to families that dated their residence in America to pre-revolutionary days. Records do not say that they came in the Mayflower, but they were early settlers. She was given the name Frances because that had been a favorite name in her mother's family, one of whom, named Frances Slocum, had been stolen and carried away by Indians.

Frances was the youngest in a family of four children, all of whom were considerably older than she. She was a strong child, who seemed to have matured early, both in body and in mind. She started to school when she was two and one-half years old, and persisted in learning to read. This was not really as precocious as it sounds, but may be explained by the nearness of the school: it was just across the road from her father's house, and by the fact that the teacher was a great friend of her sister's and boarded in the home. However, Frances was from early childhood a lover of books and reading. When she was six years old she spent the savings of her life-time to buy a book called "Watts on the Mind" from a book peddler who came to the house. She eagerly read everything she could find. (Note that reading matter was scarce in those days.) Charming literature for children, with which we are familiar, did not exist a century ago. Otherwise she seemed to have been a very normal child. She was very fond of animals, and seems always to have had as a child, as she did in mature life, pet animals. She loved horses, and delighted in breaking and managing spirited ones. Her pet cats, "Snowball" and "Tony", and her favorite horses, "Gregg" and "Frank", were

names well known to the students of their generation. As a child one of her favorite winter pleasures was to harness calves to the sled, which illustrated a spirit of daring and adventure that characterized her. She had many hairbreadth escapes. From her childhood too she loved trees and flowers. A plot of the grounds made by her own pencil in 1854 and still in existence shows with what care and vision she planned all her work. She saw in her mind's eye more than seventy years ago the possibilities that existed in the rough field overgrown with hazel brush.

Before she was ten years old she had lost by death her mother and her favorite brother. These experiences saddened her and made her serious beyond her years. At this time she was faced with the necessity of leaving home for further education. There were but few public schools in that day. She entered Stillwater Academy, where she stayed two years, but never overcame the tendency to homesickness. She finally persuaded her father to let her remain at home as housekeeper. During the next three years she acquired a knowledge of everything connected with the care and management of a home, taking to those tasks the energy and interest and desire to succeed that was always characteristic of her.

When she was fifteen she had become so proficient in housekeeping that she felt equal to taking upon herself the work of teaching, and was engaged to teach the school in her home village. After a few years she decided to continue her education, and entered the Albany Normal School, from which she was graduated at the age of 23. Her desire then was to study medicine but was forced to abandon the idea because none of the medical schools of the time were open to women. This led her to a

general investigation of the status of women, and particularly to the lack of advantages for higher education, and to the determination to use her influence to improve these conditions.

In the meantime Judge Wilson, a friend of the family, had gone west, and in correspondence with Mr. Nash, her brother-in-law, referred to the lack of educational facilities in the New West and to the opportunity open in Mt. Carroll, where he had taken up his residence. Miss Wood, together with her class-mate, Miss Cinderella Gregory, decided that her opportunity was in this New West. They were not daunted by the hardships and inconvenience they must suffer as pioneers in a sparsely settled country. Hardships of the journey are told in her first letters written home. There were no autos at that time and no railroad nearer than Janesville, Wisconsin, from which point the journey had to be made in a spring wagon through the deep mud of early spring.

They reached Mt. Carroll in the spring of 1853 with \$25 in money, and opened their school on the 11th day of May in a room in the second story of a building which stood on the site now occupied by the Glen View Hotel. They closed the term with thirty. The principals, Miss Wood and Miss Gregory, had visions of a permanent school, so during the summer of 1853 a stock company was formed, money subscribed and five acres of ground, included in our present campus, were bought and a building was erected and occupied in the fall of 1854. Both boys and girls were admitted. The building operations proved expensive and the operating and maintenance expenses so high that before long the stockholders were faced with interest coupons instead of dividends. The trustees became discouraged, and after many negotiations, sold the property to the principals. They had no money, so gave their note bearing interest at 10%. This was eventually paid by money that

Mrs. Shimer inherited from her father.

The School met a real need. There were no educational opportunities in this part of Illinois beyond the training offered in the public elementary school. The course of study in Mt. Carroll Seminary was modelled after those in the Latin schools and academies in the East. It included in addition to the elementary work, courses in Greek, Latin, Mathematics, Natural Science, English Literature, Moral Science, Intellectual Philosophy, Butler's Analogy, Evidences of Christianity. There was an interesting system of examinations; they were conducted in public before a committee consisting (in 1862) of 16 men. (Here see catalog pages 30-31) Granted degree; Laureate of Art. The first class was graduated in 1862. The commencement address was delivered by Prof. Mixer of the University of Chicago. Principal commended. In addition to the literary courses, the School offered advantages in Music and Art (including making wax *and* hair ~~and~~ flowers)! Good teachers were brought from the New England Conservatory. The music department became well known throughout the West. Mrs. Shimer brought the first piano to Carroll County. She offered a Normal Course that trained efficient teachers for all this section of the country. The School providing a home for students and early gaining a reputation for thoroughness and high standards of work, drew a patronage over a wide area. The growth of the School called for additions to the building in 1857, 1866, 1867, and finally in 1876 East Hall was erected, which practically doubled the capacity. In 1866 the crowded condition led them to the decision to exclude boys and make the school a "seminary for young ladies."

Although without a doubt the external development of the School was due to the unusual business ability of Mrs. Shimer.

she had always had about her a group of loyal co-workers; Miss Gregory (afterwards Mrs. Lansing), a superior teacher and student counselor; later Mrs. Hazzen, in building up the music department; Professor Hazzen, for years the inspiring teacher of History; Miss Joy, who came in 1871 as Lady Principal and Dean of Women, proved a great help. At about this time Miss Gregory left to become Mrs. Lansing. Mrs. Shimer and Miss Joy continued to work together until Mrs. Shimer, after forty years of service, gave up the work of the School.

In 1893 failing health, following an attack of pneumonia, compelled Mrs. Shimer to spend her winters in Florida. She established a home in the university town of De Land. Always a lover of growing things, she saw the opportunities for both pleasure and financial returns in growing oranges. She invested rather heavily and developed great groves, until she was counted as one of the leading orange growers of the state. Her groves gave promise of large future endowment for the School. In 1895 a killing frost reaching the latitudes considered by tradition to be frost-proof, destroyed not only the crop but the trees. Mrs. Shimer, like many others, was a heavy loser. She was then seventy years old and could not, as a younger person, set out to regain what had been lost. In 1898 she transferred the School to a Board of Trustees consisting of men and women from the local community and others from the University of Chicago, who have since administered. The name of the School was then changed from Mt. Carroll Seminary to Frances Shimer School. Mrs. Shimer retired permanently from the School at that time and went to live in Florida, but her interest in it continued. The School was her child. It represented her life work. She died

in November, 1901, in the South, and was brought to Mt. Carroll and laid to rest in the scenes she loved, and where she had worked.

In 1857 Mrs. Shimer had married Dr. Henry Shimer, a young physician in Mt. Carroll. He had come here from Chester County, Pa.; he was of Pennsylvania Dutch stock. He was a naturalist as well as a physician; he taught science in the School for a time, and was always the School physician. The tastes of Dr. and Mrs. Shimer developed in opposite directions. Mrs. Shimer was altruistic and found her satisfaction in the work of the School where she served others. Dr. Shimer's ambitions found gratification in his own personal line of work, scientific investigations.

Mrs. Shimer was a woman of extraordinary personality and wonderful character. In appearance she was little above medium height, with a large frame. When I knew her she had a wealth of lovely white hair, deep-set searching gray eyes that looked quite through the hearts of the girls, a finely moulded mouth and a beautifully modulated, mellow voice. I shall always remember it. It indicated the quiet, dignified, reserved, resourceful woman she was. When with her, one felt herself in the presence of a woman of leadership and command. She always dressed in exceedingly good taste. She wore gray for every day, and on dress occasions, handsome black silks and lace gowns that so beautifully became her white hair.

Mrs. Shimer was frequently thought and spoken of as an active business manager, a money maker, and she was intense and successful in the planning and conducting of business affairs. She was such a many-sided character that it was diffi-

cult for the ordinary observer to know all about her.

She was the successful business woman, managing the the institution.

She was the educator with a broad vision.

She was the philanthropist, she was the loyal friend, she was the teacher and benefactor. She was a woman of great natural gifts, tremendous physical and mental vigor. She was capable of the most strenuous labor, reserving a scant four hours for sleep. She had wonderful perseverance, unbounded enthusiasm and optimism.

In the financial panic of 1857, in the midst of building operations, she herself did all kinds of work on the building in order that it might be ready in the fall for the opening.

She was tactful, she was skilled and versatile, she would turn her hand to anything; she was successful to an unusual degree in business enterprises, stern in her ideas of justice, absolutely honest in her dealings. She had a quick logical mind. She was most brief, direct and concise in speech. She was a great woman, absorbed in a large task, which she attempted to carry through in the face of many obstacles. In this work she was absolutely absorbed, with a constantly enlarging vision of what she would accomplish. This absorption gave the impression that she was cold and unapproachable to those who did not know her. In reality Mrs. Shimer was most kind and affable, a woman of the warmest sympathy and generous spirit. In those who knew her best she inspired loyalty to herself and the work to which she gave herself with complete and self-sacrificing devotion. She was a woman

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with a high and worthy ideal.

A fire in 1906 destroyed everything of Mrs. Shiner's work which was outward and visible except some of the fine old trees in our campus today.

An epitaph in Westminster reads: "The worker falls, but the work goes on." She lives today perhaps more actively than ever in the hearts of those she touched and inspired to higher and better things. Pioneer among those who made higher education possible for women, she did not seek to be ministered unto, but to minister. She did her work in silence, without noise or ostentation. She preferred of herself to overcome obstacles and to conquer difficulties.
