

A Womanly Woman of Sheffield

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Berkshire History Spring 1984 Vol. IV No. 2

Published by the Berkshire County Historical Society
Pittsfield Massachusetts

In 1880 the issue of woman suffrage was a lively topic in the town of Sheffield as elsewhere. Eight years after Susan B. Anthony, a native of Adams, was tried and fined for voting in the 1872 election, Mary Elizabeth Dewey created a mild sensation when she led a delegation of eleven women to the polls in the Sheffield town hall.

Allowed to vote only for school committee, the women were escorted into the meeting by Deputy Sheriff John C. Smith. They quietly cast their votes and immediately left the hall. According to an editorial in the *Berkshire Courier* of March 3, 1880, headed "Sheffield's Womanly Woman," "As the ladies retired, a few ill-mannered fellows, not over-stocked with brains, had the rudeness to hiss; but the more gallant majority quickly drowned the hisses in a vigorous round of applause."

The voting was not accomplished without a challenge, however. Andrew J. Rider protested that although Miss Dewey had paid a property tax she had not paid a poll tax. Judge James B. Bradford tactfully suggested that, since the law was ambiguous on that point, the ladies be allowed to vote and anyone who wished to contest the election might do so later. His suggestion was adopted by the gentlemen present.

The *Courier* editorial writer noted that the five minutes during which the ladies were in the town hall were more quiet and orderly than any other five minutes of the meeting and that "the ladies who voted that day were ladies in every sense of the word; quiet and dignified, with none of the look or manner of the traditional 'strong-minded woman.'" Without committing himself on the "much vexed

question of female suffrage,” the writer commended the above facts “to the candid consideration of those gentlemen who believe that the ballot will ‘unsex’ women and ruin the Commonwealth.”

Five years earlier Miss Dewey had written a letter to the *Christian Register* denying that she was a proponent of woman suffrage. She wrote: “Although I think suffrage the personal right of every intelligent adult in the community, I do not think it a right which would be well for women in general to exercise . . . This right should be acknowledged and respected in the case of the few who do wish it.”

Mary Dewey had proven herself an “intelligent adult” and a respected member of the community. While in her twenties she established a successful boarding and day school at the family homestead, St. David’s. She was one of the founders of the Sheffield Friendly Union, organized in 1871 “to increase good and kindly feelings and promote intelligence and cheerfulness.” The ambitious plan was to hire a room and to open it three evenings a week, one evening to be devoted to reading or a lecture on a subject of general interest, one evening for a school to be taught by volunteers, and one evening for music, games of various sorts and conversation.

It was Miss Dewey who wrote a song for the first meeting of the Friendly Union on October 13, 1871. Sung to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne,” the upbeat yet down-to-earth lyrics ended:

*We ask God’s blessing on our plant,
That it may thrive and grow;
But we must not forget we want
Some human help also –
The sunshine of encouragement,
The dew of sympathy;
Sometimes a shower of fifty cent
Subscriptions for the tree.*

Although interest in the evening school dwindled to the point where it was thought best to discontinue that feature, the evenings of lectures, music and games – dominoes, logomachy, draughts and chess – were well attended, thanks largely to the efforts of the Dewey family. During the first sessions, Mary's father, the renowned Unitarian minister Dr. Orville Dewey, gave five lectures, her brother Charles offered one, and Mary herself entertained on three occasions with essays or readings. The second season was discouraging; the winter was severe and the energetic Mary was spending a year abroad. She did not forget the fledgling organization during her sojourn in Europe, however, for she wrote long, interesting letters, which were read at the Union meetings. One hundred and twelve years after its founding the Sheffield Friendly Union is still promoting intelligence and cheerfulness at its monthly meetings, which are held in a hall, built in 1887 in Dr. Dewey's memory. It was Mary who chose the words for the dedicatory plaque, and it was Mary who made the presentation of the hall to the Union.

When, in 1884, the Pine Knoll Association was formed to purchase three acres of land for a public park, Mary Dewey was one of the principal contributors. When District No. 6 needed a new schoolhouse, the selectmen appointed Mary to the building committee. When the town appropriated \$150 to establish a town library, Mary was one of a committee of three to hire a room, procure a librarian and make rules and regulations for the library.

First woman to hold public office in Sheffield, Miss Dewey was elected to the school committee in 1876. The choice seems to have met with universal approbation. The *Connecticut Western* gallantly admitted that "we have formerly given the preference to a male committee for schools but we have changed our minds during the year past. Many matters of comfort and refinement to teachers and pupils that escape the masculine eye have been attended to with a zeal and courage worthy of all praise, so we shall hereafter vote for both sexes on School Committees."

Equally generous was the Berkshire Courier correspondent who wrote, "Our school committee, Miss Dewey, is very much liked by the children, as she always relates something that will both amuse and instruct them when she visits the

schools. We think Sheffield has honored herself by electing a lady committee, and certainly one who is so competent as Miss Dewey.”

While a member of the school committee Miss Dewey originated the idea of having a teachers institute in Sheffield. The sessions attracted 130 educators from the area. Her literary endeavors included editing the *Autobiography and Letters of Orville Dewey* and the *Life and Letters of Catherine M. Sedgwick*.

Mary’s interests extended far beyond her home town. She organized the Sheffield Indian Association, which met at her house, and she was for many years secretary of the Massachusetts Indian Association. Although she never lost touch with Sheffield, her later years were spent in Boston, where she died in 1910 at the age of 88. Educator, editor, philanthropist, public servant and friend of the Indians, Mary Dewey, leader of “Sheffield’s womanly women,” more than held her own during the male-dominated nineteenth century.

Lillian Preiss is the author of Sheffield, Frontier Town. She was the first President and is currently the curator of the Sheffield Historical Society.