

#6 Telling the Nativity Story: 19th and 21st century women embodying their spiritual gifts

In the early years of Nativity, women played their societal roles and also found their prophetic voices in the church and in the society as a whole. While bearing a child every two years was the norm, Nativity women embodied their spiritual gifts, critiqued the system and engaged in changing the wider community.

Today we lift up our pioneering women and their spiritual gifts: Meet Sarah Vollmer with one of her spiritual gifts—administration. The spiritual gift of administration is defined by Episcopal sources as helping a body function smoothly, choosing goals. Dear reader, you have already met Sarah Vollmer, mother of Evangeline Vollmer and wife of John Vollmer. The story goes that when the territorial legislature chartered Lewiston's school district, the bill called for an elected board of five school commissioners. (As early as 1870 women could run for and vote in school elections nationally.) Sarah Vollmer filed for one of the seats, but lost in the May 18, 1881 election. More men than women supported the female candidates. "The Lewiston Teller reported, " A goodly number of our people could not be made to see the propriety of placing women upon the ticket as candidates to decide questions...in relation to finances. Women were acceptable for 'their softening and healthy influence' on children, but they were not fit, so many thought to be judges of how public money should be spent." Further, "... people were aroused at some degree at least to the importance of having good schools, even if the women question did rouse them." ¹ Sarah Vollmer had long been identified with the education of Lewiston's children and, among other things, had raised money for a new schoolhouse. ²

As we have been celebrating the history of our church windows, you may recognize Lillie Kester, a mother who, with her husband J.D. Kester, lost children to the raging childhood diseases of the time. Women were eligible to serve on juries in Idaho in 1896, when they were granted the right to vote. Lillie Kester served in 1897 on the first all-female jury. "In the 1920's, prosecutors preferred having female jurors on cases involving prohibition violations. However, when an all-female jury convicted a man for unlawful possession of alcohol, he appealed his case on grounds that women were ineligible to serve. The Idaho Supreme Court upheld his appeal...It was not legal for women to serve on juries in Idaho until 1943. ³ Lilly and the women on the jury critiqued the system and it eventually was changed.

We would be remiss if we didn't mention Anna Joslin McConkey, you will recall, wife of John Douglas McConkey. One of her spiritual gifts was teaching and, no doubt, hospitality. Anna had enjoyed a good education and received this handwritten recommendation from her school superintendent in Massachusetts: "Miss Anna M. Joslin under my supervision, has taught in one of our public schools...and has met with a commendable degree of success...she adds firmness and self-reliance, and I think would be likely to succeed in any school which, she would be willing to undertake." ⁴ Reading, writing, and arithmetic?

After Anna married John McConkey in 1877. John received the call to Washington Territory and left for the west on February 1878. Anna, heavy with child, endured all the hardships of their more than 16,000 mile voyage "around the Horn" with her husband. Writing in his book about the ocean voyage around the Horn, he has only one passing mention of Anna. ⁵ It is not hard to imagine the spiritual gifts embodied in these pioneering women of the church, even when they are scarcely acknowledged.

In the 19th century, Nativity had a solid start feeding mind, body and spirit. Our heritage began with those early women and men and continues on into the 21st Century with our beloved, Rev. Gretchen Rehberg, priest, teacher, mentor. This year, we celebrate **150 years of Nativity life**, and we celebrate **50 years of Reverend Doctor, Doctor Rehberg's life**. She leads us on to question and critique our mission as a parish, practicing her many spiritual gifts at Nativity.

So Happy Birthday Nativity through the 19th, 20th and into the 21st Century. And Happy Birthday to our gifted priest.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia, alleluia.

End notes:

- 1 Branting, Steven *Historic Firsts of Lewiston Idaho* pp 72, 75-6,
- 2 *Ibid* pp 76
- 3 *Ibid* pp 95-96
- 4 Branting, Steven *Lost Lewiston* pp 70-71
- 5 McConkey, J. D. *New York to Portland* p 39

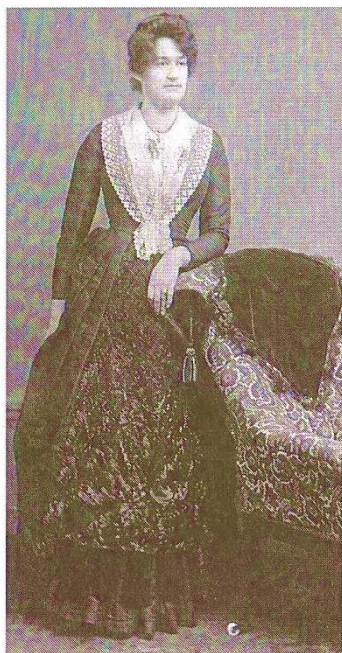
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Branting, Steven *Historic Firsts of Lewiston Idaho* History Press Charleston, SC 2013

Branting, Steven *Lost Lewiston Idaho* History Press Charleston, SC 2014

McConkey, J. D. *New York to Portland Oregon with a History of the Voyage, Scene, Places, Incidents and Notes of the Journey* "Statesman" Book and Job Printing Office, Walla Walla, W.T. 1879

---Deloris Jungert Davisson and Margaret Cole March 2016



Sarah Vollmer, circa 1885. *Courtesy of the John P. Vollmer Family Archives.*



Rev. Dr. Dr. Gretchen Rehberg 2015