The Sanctificationists of Belton, Texas

Jennifer R. Bosk

Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

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Recommended Citation

Leaving abusive marriages, fighting for women's rights, and pooling women's talents to build a business and amass a fortune may not seem that unusual today. But back then it was post-Civil War times. One group of women in Belton, Texas, the Sanctificationists, did all that and more. They were pioneers of the women's liberation movement. This research project is their story.

The return to everyday living following the Civil War was a big change for women. Most had been self-sufficient during the war, having to care for farms, children, and finances while their husbands were fighting battles. When their husbands returned, the men reclaimed their role as the head of household, while the women were returned to housekeeper status.

This group of women in Belton, Texas, led by Martha McWhirter, left intolerable home situations, moved in together, and became financially independent of their "men folk." Some left abusive marriages, others sought relief from continual childbirth, still others were widowed. Some could not accept their "demotion" to housewife, having had a taste of power, control, and freedom during the war years.

Not only was separation from their husbands unique for the times, but the women were able to develop entrepreneurial skills—unheard of then. With just four hours of work a day, these women built an empire of property and businesses, amassing a million dollars. Their funds allowed them to live comfortably until the group's last member died in 1983.

The journey of the Sanctificationist women who built an enterprise known as the Woman's Commonwealth is a fascinating one. This research paper explores post-Civil War societal changes, women's changing roles, the impact of religion on the Sanctificationists, and the societal changes that caused the death of the Woman's Commonwealth.