May Preston Slosson, 1852 - 1943

By Julia Sieger, retired college professor and historian at Wyoming Territorial Prison State Historic Site

“Enter every open door”, Mary Gorslin Preston told her daughter, May. Heeding her mother’s advice, May Preston Slosson accomplished many “firsts” in her life while pursuing her passion for social justice and women’s rights.

May Genevieve Preston was born September 10, 1858 in New York. Her father, a preacher, worked tirelessly for temperance, equal suffrage, and higher education for women. Her mother excelled in languages and was open to new ideas in philosophy and science. May was influenced by her parents’ enlightened views of service to others.

May Preston excelled in academics, and became the first woman to earn a Doctorate in Philosophy from Cornell University. She enjoyed a career as an educator teaching philosophy and Greek at Hastings College, Nebraska. She would have gladly remained in education; however, another door opened.

May Preston and Edwin Slosson married on August 12, 1891, and moved to Laramie, Wyoming. The University of Wyoming hired Edwin as the new Assistant Chemistry Professor.

In Laramie, May Slosson became an integral part of the community. In 1898 as chair of the Prison Committee of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, she organized events and began a lecture series for the prisoners at the State Penitentiary in Laramie. Slosson began to visit the prison regularly and met with prisoners individually to council them on the evils of alcohol.

In 1899 another door opened for Slosson. Prison Warden McDonald submitted her name for chaplain. On July 9, 1899, Dr. May Preston Slosson was appointed Prison Chaplain, the first woman prison chaplain in the United States.

Her concern with the human condition inspired her to work for reform and the fair treatment of all. Slosson aimed to build up the prisoners’ sense of self-respect and to develop a positive spiritual reality. Beyond leading religious services, she continued the lecture series; created a literacy program and a lending library. She continued counseling prisoners and preparing them for transition from prison life to civilian life. Warden McDonald supported her work because under her guidance as Chaplain, the prison punishment rate dropped by fifty percent.
The Penitentiary in Laramie closed in 1903 and the prisoners were transferred to the new prison in Rawlins, WY. Slosson resigned her post and her family moved to New York where she continued to pursue her interest in reform work and women’s rights. Doors continued to open, and she was often asked to speak on her experience as a female prison chaplain. Slosson marched with Carrie Chapman Catt, was a presenter at the 1910 Suffrage Convention, and spoke on women’s suffrage as she had experienced it in Wyoming (where women were granted the right to vote in 1869).

Throughout her life May Preston Slosson entered many open doors, acting on her beliefs that women had a right to equality with men in education, financial independence, and social and political opportunities.

May Preston Slosson died in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1943 at the age of 87, and she is buried in Laramie next to her youngest son.

Sources:
