

Mary Cornelia Kelly Upham Nominated by North Wood County Historical Society

The life of Mary Cornelia Upham is closely interwoven with the early history of Marshfield and its continued success.

Mary and her husband, one-time Wisconsin governor William H. Upham, arrived in Marshfield in 1878 and were true pioneers of the community.

Before any doctor had set up a shingle in the town, Mary acted as a doctor and nurse offering her home remedies to families in need. She was a founding member of the First Presbyterian church in 1879 which ran its first meetings in her home. She also organized a Sunday school in the first school building before any churches were established.

A prominent Marshfield group Mary founded was the Band of Hope, a club for boys ages 12-16 who met socially every week in a building across the street from the Upham home and at one point in the home's basement. Her purpose was to cultivate the good character of these youth and provide wholesome activities such as shows and plays. To both young and old she was affectionately known as "Aunt Mary."

According to newspaper accounts, this club appears to have at some point expanded its outreach to all youth ages 10-18, or even as young as 8 per a 1905 article. These youth made a pledge to abstain from liquor, since temperance was an important value and cause for Mary during a period "when whiskey-swilling pioneers were a frequent sight around town." (Marshfield News-Herald, Feb. 8, 1996).

Concerned citizens would write into the Marshfield Times complaining about saloon brawls on Sundays and the lack of enforcement of saloon closing times, which in the early days of Marshfield was 11 p.m. Mary served as state president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union from 1898 to 1906.

But the Union's function wasn't just about promoting abstinence from alcohol. The local unit of WCTU, formed in Upham's parlor, took on the responsibility of the city's first public library after John J. Marsh donated 500 books to get it started.

Mary always had an active interest in library work. She would collect books, papers, and magazines for her husband's logging camps and roped in others to expand her efforts to all logging camps in Northern Wisconsin. The materials were circulated between the camps, making it an early version of a circulating library in Wisconsin.

Mary served on the first public library committee in 1881, and later the first library board from 1901-09. Additionally, she was active in maintaining her church's library.

Following the Great Marshfield Fire of June 27, 1887 that nearly wiped out the city and left 300 families homeless, Mary immediately took an active part in the relief committee which operated out of the Roller Rink on the corner of East Second and Maple Street. Donations that came in from around the state of



food, clothing, and money were dispensed over the next few months to those in need after the fire destroyed their homes and livelihoods.

Besides her great contributions to the city of Marshfield, Mary had an interest in writing poetry and was an avid birdwatcher. Mary passed away at the age of 69 on Nov. 29, 1912.