In the late 1800’s a group of women from Bell County left their husbands to set up a communal house in Belton.

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Texas Monthly
December 2005

The Bell County Museum proudly displays information about one of the county’s most famous citizens, Ma Ferguson, who in 1924 became the first woman governor of Texas. But not nearly as much is said about some other legendary women from Bell County, a group of women who in the late 1800’s defied normal gender roles and left their husbands to set up a communal house in Belton.

The group, which became known as the Belton Woman’s Commonwealth, was organized around Martha White McWhirter. In 1866, while she was preparing breakfast, McWhirter received a vision that called her to be “sanctified.” That same year two of her children along with a brother died (McWhirter had twelve children in all, six of which died at a young age), and she felt God was punishing her. In repentance, she followed her vision and became celibate, removing herself from the “undevout.” McWhirter shared her experience with other women who in turn followed in her path.

Many of the women’s husbands became angry when their wives refused to have any contact—personal or sexual—with them. The women and their children began moving into McWhirter’s house to escape their violent husbands, which in turn prompted more aggression. There are still bullet holes in McWhirter’s door from one angry man. One man even went so far as to try to have his sister committed to an asylum.

Once away from their husbands, the women needed a way to support themselves and their children. But in the late 1800’s, life afforded little comfort for single women. As the group grew (it averaged around thirty members including women and children), the members began doing odd jobs such as selling eggs and dairy products, taking in laundry, and hauling firewood to pay the bills.

As the women acquired property from husbands who had passed away, they began using their old empty homes (by this time, all members of the Commonwealth lived together) as boarding houses. Business went so well that eventually the group purchased a hotel and in 1891 officially incorporated as
the Central Hotel Company.

All the while, their ideology changed and developed from a heavy emphasis on Wesleyan doctrine to a more eccentric form of Christianity that included dream interpretations. Above all, the women wanted to keep men from controlling their lives. Two Scottish men did join the Commonwealth for a brief period of time, but they were only accepted under the condition that they could not try to be in control of the group. Some of the residents of Belton didn’t like the arrangement and kidnapped the men and tried to place them in an asylum, effectively ending their involvement with the Commonwealth.

But slowly, through the Commonwealth’s financial gains, scrutiny against the women eventually died down, and McWhirter became the first woman elected to the city’s Board of Trade. And because of its financial success, the group was able to add to the cultural society of Belton by contributing to the construction of the Belton Opera House, providing the core collection for the first public library, and helping to attract the railroad to the small town.

Life within the Commonwealth reflected the women’s passion for culture and education. Each woman worked only four hours a day at the various enterprises the Commonwealth operated, and the rest of the day was dedicated to prayer and to educating themselves and their children.

During the summers, the group expanded their knowledge of the world by taking vacations to various places like Mexico, New York, and Washington, D.C. After a trip to Washington, D.C., the Commonwealth decided to move up north to retire and have greater access to more cultural activities. The group used its savings—reported to be as much as $200,000—and bought a house in Mount Pleasant, Maryland, and one in Washington, D.C. The Commonwealth continued on, but eventually the children moved off and the remaining members passed away. McWhirter died in 1904, and the last member, Martha Scheble, died in the Maryland home in 1983, marking the end of the Belton Woman’s Commonwealth.