



## BELTON WOMAN'S COMMONWEALTH

**BELTON WOMAN'S COMMONWEALTH.** The Belton Woman's Commonwealth, a commune based on the doctrines of religious perfectionism, celibacy, and Wesleyan sanctificationism, grew out of a small group of middle-class Protestant women that began to form in the late 1860s under the leadership of [Martha McWhirter](#), a prominent figure in Belton's nonsectarian Union Sunday School, who organized a women's Bible study and prayer group that met weekly in the members' homes. After she professed to have been sanctified, she urged her followers to seek divine revelations and to share them with the group. At the same time, the women prayed about the trials in their everyday lives, especially for guidance to deal with authoritarian husbands sometimes given to unscrupulous business practices, intemperate drinking, and physical abuse. The wives increasingly sought personal, that is, religious and financial, autonomy.

Gradually an alternative communal life evolved, which replaced the unsatisfactory situations of these women. A number of developments took place concurrently in the 1870s. The religious separatism of the Sanctificationist women provided a sheltered environment for the development of idiosyncratic religious practices; the women believed themselves to be the recipients of prophetic dreams and direct revelations from God. Further, by a revelation for which McWhirter claimed Pauline scriptural authority, the sanctified were required to separate themselves from the undevout; sanctified wives were to live in their marital homes and perform their household duties, but with no sexual and as little social contact as possible with their un sanctified spouses.

Following McWhirter's example, the women began to make money by marketing eggs and dairy products and by taking in laundry, hauling wood, and working as domestic servants and home nurses. Much of the work was collective, and in 1879, having become financially independent, the women started a common treasury. Because some of the husbands reacted angrily or violently, McWhirter's home began to fill with sanctified sisters seeking refuge. Her husband moved into rooms over his store, and the women began to live communally by making use of their various homes and by building houses on properties owned or claimed by members. Job rotation reinforced communal values, allowed each member a variety of tasks and responsibilities, and provided leisure to pursue various other educational and financial enterprises. Thus, individual members were able to educate themselves in such useful trades as dentistry, blacksmithing, and shoemaking. Authority was shared by all members in principle, although in practice McWhirter exerted much influence.

At first the property owned and inherited by various women served only to provide them with shelter. Eventually it became the basis for more ambitious economic efforts; one home became a boardinghouse, and a commercial laundry was started. From these and their other work the women profited financially. In 1886 they bought one hotel and began building another by expanding the boardinghouse. Title to property was held in individual names for some time, but in 1891 the group incorporated as the Central Hotel Company. By this time they owned a large amount of property in

town as well as three farms.

Though Woman's Commonwealth had successfully established itself economically and administratively by the early 1880s, community hostility remained. Belton citizens blamed Martha McWhirter and the Sanctificationists for separations and divorces. When two immigrant Scottish brothers sought out the group for religious reasons they were kidnapped, whipped, warned to leave town, and briefly committed to the state asylum. No other males tried to join. The hotel had become successful by 1887, and hostility gradually dissipated. Throughout the decade the Belton Woman's Commonwealth became increasingly respected and accepted. The sisters' book collection, housed in a small room in their hotel, became so popular that it was moved to a larger facility outside the commune, and in 1903 it formally became the city's public library.

In 1898 or 1899 the women decided to retire from business and move to Washington, D.C., so that they might pursue their growing interest in cultural activities. Using their savings of perhaps as much as \$200,000, they bought a house in Mount Pleasant, Maryland. In Washington, where they incorporated in 1902 as the Woman's Commonwealth of Washington, D.C., they became more visible to the national press, and a number of articles were published describing their history and life. In both the Belton and Washington communities membership averaged about thirty, most of whom were women and their children.

After Martha McWhirter died in 1904, Fannie Holtzclaw took over as the commune's leader. By 1906 only eighteen adult women were left in the Commonwealth, but they continued to be successful in operating a farm in Maryland and a boardinghouse in Washington. The Woman's Commonwealth gradually expired as aging and death reduced its numbers. Martha Scheble, the last Commonwealth member, died on the Maryland farm in 1983.

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