

Charles M. Sheldon and the Uplift of Tennesseetown

by Timothy Miller

CHARLES M. SHELDON of Topeka was a prominent religious leader at the turn of the century, and arguably the most prominent Kansan of his era. Sheldon was a household name throughout—and beyond—the Protestant world. Although the generation which has grown up in the last half century is often not familiar with him—fame, alas, is transitory—many still remember him as a popular writer, a compassionate pastor, and a paragon of virtue in daily living.

While pastor of Central Congregational Church in Topeka, Sheldon wrote a spectacular best seller, an inspirational novel called *In His Steps* which sold tens of millions of copies—exactly how many we will never know because a defective copyright let the book be issued by over seventy publishers and no overall sales records have ever been kept. It may well still be the best selling novel of all time; at last report it was in print in some eight American editions in English and one in Spanish. The book was published in 1897, and sales reached their zenith in about 1900. Protestants, Catholics, and even many non-Christians were absorbed by the simple story of a band of midwestern Protestants who vowed to live lives in which they would do their best to act at all times as Jesus would, asking, when faced with a moral decision, “what would Jesus do?”¹

Sheldon also received a good deal of public attention when, in 1900, he decided to apply the question “What would Jesus do?” to the operation of a daily newspaper. He had long advocated the founding of a Christian daily newspaper as an alternative to the popular press, which he considered coarse and insufficiently uplifting. Frederick O. Popenoe, then the owner of the *Topeka Daily Capital*, offered him total editorial authority over that paper for a

week, and Sheldon diligently showed the world—circulation that week topped 360,000 per day—what clean journalism could look like.²

Most of what has been recorded of the life of Sheldon, however, quits at that point. Beyond the book and the newspaper, the record—at least in the sense of reliable scholarship—is nearly blank. This article seeks to fill one part of that gap, because Sheldon was far more than the author of a single best seller or the proprietor of a highly publicized journalistic experiment. He was a dedicated social reformer, a sometime critic of many features of organized religion, a champion of the rights of labor, minorities and women, a powerful spokesman for prohibition and pacifism, a prodigiously hardworking pastor, and a loving friend to the thousands of Topekans who adored him. Here we will examine the work of Charles M. Sheldon in his earliest major social-reform project, one in which he helped improve the living conditions of Topeka's destitute blacks.

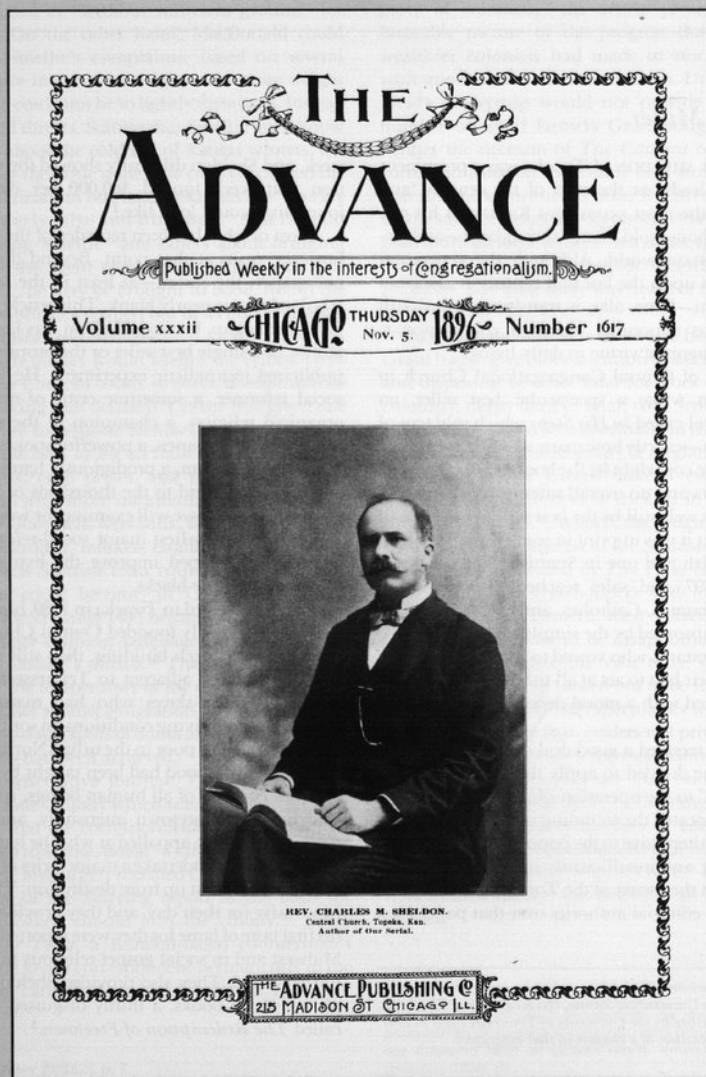
Sheldon arrived in Topeka in 1889, having been called to pastor the newly founded Central Church, and found that the new church building, then still under construction, was located adjacent to Tennesseetown, a squalid settlement of ex-slaves who had managed to escape wretchedly poor living conditions on southern farms only to end up equally poor in the urban North. Sheldon, who from early childhood had been taught by his parents the essential equality of all human beings, spent three weeks studying Tennesseetown intensively, and by the end of that period was so appalled at what he had seen there that he was ready to undertake a major series of projects to help lead the settlement up from destitution. The projects were innovative for their day, and they provided Sheldon with his first taste of fame for they were reported throughout the Midwest and in social gospel religious publications even further afield. They also provided Sheldon with the stuff of one of his books, a thinly disguised piece of fiction called *The Redemption of Freetown*.³

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1. The two best accounts of the phenomenal success of *In His Steps* were both written by John W. Ripley. See John W. Ripley, “Last Rites for a Few Myths,” *Shawnee County Historical Society Bulletin*, no. 44 (Winter 1967): 14-26, and John W. Ripley, “The Strange Story of Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps*,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (Autumn 1968): 241-65.

2. John W. Ripley is also the author of the most complete study of Sheldon's Christian daily newspaper project. See John W. Ripley, “Another Look at the Rev. Mr. Charles M. Sheldon's Christian Daily Newspaper,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 31 (Spring 1965): 1-40.

3. Charles M. Sheldon, *The Redemption of Freetown* (Boston: United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1898).



The Advance, a Congregational weekly based in Chicago, originally published Sheldon's *In His Steps* in serial form, and it was for this work that Sheldon became best known.

The Tennesseetown settlement emerged as a result of the Compromise of 1877, which ended Reconstruction and led to a massive emigration of ex-slaves out of the South. Stories circulated of cheap lands in the West, and thousands of these "exodusters," as they came to be called, left the Mississippi Valley for unknown destinations. Kansas was as logical a place to stop as any; the state had been admitted into the Union in 1861, at the beginning of the Civil War, and was widely known as a bastion of antislavery sentiment. There were already a few blacks living more or less comfortably, if not elegantly, in Topeka, and so about 1879 a pilot party showed up to survey eastern Kansas and found it acceptable. The exodusters begged passage as fourth-class freight from their Tennessee homeland to St. Louis. Because they were not wanted there, they received charitable assistance which sent them on up the Missouri River to the Kansas City area.⁴ Unwanted there, they were sent upriver to Topeka where some of them were taken in.⁵

By 1880 some forty thousand exodusters had passed through Topeka. About three thousand of them stayed, making their homes on the southwestern outskirts of town. A bankrupt real estate development had left some very cheap lots for sale; the exodusters congregated there in such numbers that the area has been called "Tennesseetown" ever since.⁶

Many people in Topeka were less than thrilled about the influx of large numbers of destitute and uneducated ex-slaves whose clothing was little more than rags and who had no money at all.⁷ Dr. Karl Menninger has noted that white racism was rampant then: "I wish I could recall and put into words the attitude of people toward blacks in those days. It was almost as if someone had imported a lot of people with leprosy or cancer or something terrible."⁸ Topeka's Republican mayor Michael C. Case and other public officials refused to spend public funds or use municipal facilities to help the strangers, stating that the time and money would be better spent sending the emigrants back to the South.

Some of the churches were not much more helpful than the government. The Board of Church Extension of the Kansas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church met in Topeka in April 1879 to address the situation of the exodusters and adjourned without providing any material

relief; they instead discussed "how they shall be educated and christianized and prepared for honorable citizenship."⁹ But gradually help began to emerge. First Congregational Church, true to its New England antislavery roots, provided some services and helped underwrite the construction of the Tennesseetown Congregational Church building, with the understanding that it would be a relief center as well as a religious edifice.¹⁰

Houses began to be built, mainly by the residents, although few of them were more than shacks hardly suitable for prairie winters. Gradually other urban conveniences—small businesses, schools, churches—came to dot the Tennesseetown landscape, and it was clear even to the hardliners that the exodusters were in Topeka to stay. In the 1880 census, blacks were found to constitute thirty-one percent of the city's population—a higher percentage of blacks than was found in New Orleans (thirty percent) that year.¹¹

Living and social conditions in Tennesseetown were abysmal from the beginning. Unemployment was rife, a fact which the local white press attributed to the incompetence of the settlers.¹² A more accurate analysis, which Sheldon was the first white Topekan to enunciate, at least in public, was that white racism kept blacks in menial, terribly underpaid jobs, when jobs were available at all, and Tennesseetown's problems stemmed mainly from the neighborhood's wrenching poverty. One history of black Topeka reports that although there was some minimal improvement in conditions through the 1880s and early 1890s (some residents began to garden and traded produce for clothing and other necessities, for example), the district had minimal, if any, medical or educational or other basic human services, and by the 1890s it had become the center of a fair amount of illegal activity with "dramshops" and "Popular Resorts for Sports" being advertised regularly in the black press.¹³ Frequent police patrols tried to contain rampant juvenile crime and gambling, and even such police duty was dangerous.¹⁴ Perhaps the biggest symbol of Tennesseetown's freewheeling nature was Jordan's Hall, a large one-story building built by one Andrew Jordan, a black, in the middle of the settlement for use

9. Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 52.

10. A. B. Whiting, "The Beginning of Central Congregational Church," manuscript, Sheldon Memorial Room, Central Congregational Church, Topeka. Early Topeka city directories refer to the church in Tennesseetown as the "Colored Congregational Church," but contemporary Central Church documents consistently use the name "Tennesseetown."

11. Giles, *Thirty Years*, 153.

12. *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 9, 1906.

13. Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 105-107.

14. *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 9, 1906.

4. F. W. Giles, *Thirty Years in Topeka: A Historical Sketch* (Topeka: Geo. W. Crane & Co., 1886; reprinted, Topeka: Copper Special Services, 1960), 152.

5. Interview with Lenore Stratton, August 19, 1981.

6. Giles, *Thirty Years*, 153.

7. Thomas C. Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas, 1865-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 48.

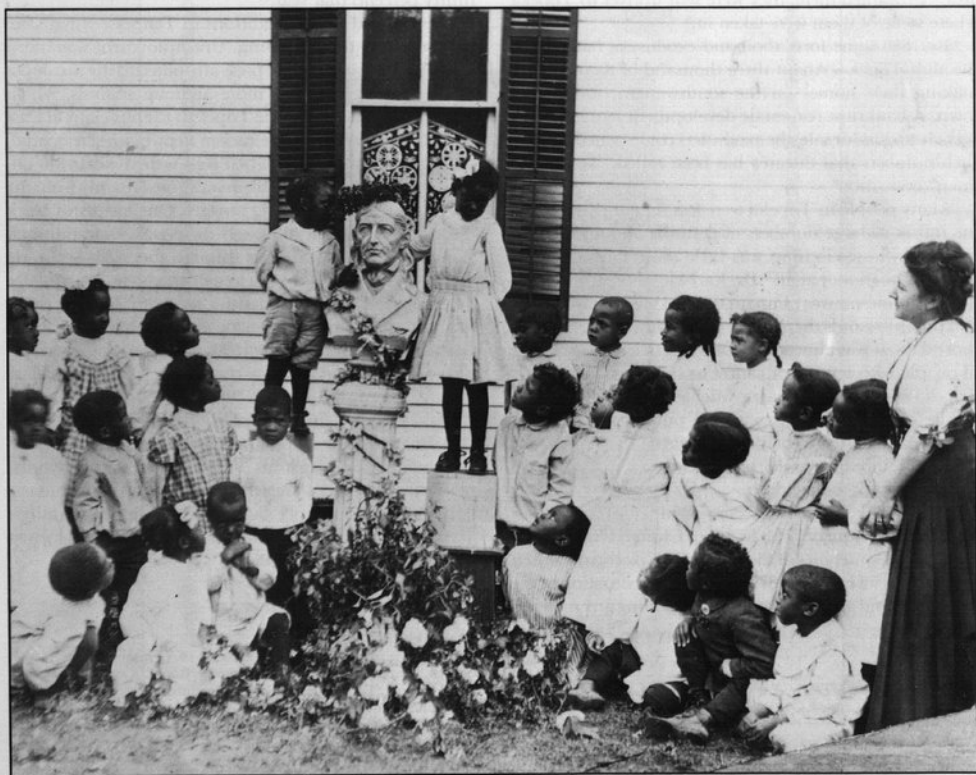
8. Interview with Dr. Karl Menninger, August 27, 1981.

as a dance hall. Fights usually accompanied the weekly dances, and liquor was always for sale.¹⁵

The Central Church site bordering Tennesseetown gave Sheldon a good vantage point. That the ghetto was a seamy place was well enough known in Topeka, but Sheldon surprised many of his fellow white citizens by plunging into the settlement for three weeks, not long after arriving in Topeka. What Sheldon did at that time was to conduct a simple sociological study, the results of which he published in the social gospel magazine *The Kingdom* a few years later. He found about eight hundred people in Tennesseetown, divided into three "distinct classes": those raised on plantations who had come to

Kansas during the Great Exodus; men and women who were children during the exodus and "have been raised under a definition of freedom which uses 'liberty' and 'lawlessness' as synonymous"; and children ten years old and under, including about one hundred between three and seven who might be considered of kindergarten age. Sheldon found four black churches which "were controlled by negro preachers, and exercising considerable influence, but not very much that could be called Christian influence." He noted seeing ignorance, poverty, vice, idleness, and rowdiness. During Sheldon's three weeks he ate, worked, and talked with the residents, spending quite a bit of time in their homes and seeing their sordid poverty up close. At the end of the period he published his conclusions, protesting the closing of decent jobs to blacks and the white prejudice which seemed so

15. Robert A. Swan, Jr., *The Ethnic Heritage of Topeka, Kansas: Immigrant Beginnings* (N.p.: Institute of Comparative Ethnic Studies, 1974), 72.



Tennesseetown kindergarteners pose with a bust of Friedrich Froebel, father of the kindergarten movement, during a school celebration of his birthday. Teacher June Chapman can be seen at right.

pervasive and finding that the biggest part of the solution lay in reforming the attitudes of whites: "I do not have much hope of Christianizing the negro until we have Christianized the Anglo-Saxon. It is a present question with me now, sometimes, which race needs it more."¹⁶ Tame stuff now, perhaps, but in the mid-nineties Sheldon was a lot more perceptive than most members of his race.

Congregational and other Protestant missionary activity was being pursued in Tennesseetown well prior to the foundation of Central Church. In Sheldon's first study of the settlement in 1891 he found four churches there, three of them with pastors.¹⁷ One of those churches was the Tennesseetown Congregational Church, a small missionary outpost. Tennesseetown as a whole was in any event largely unchurched, and the churches that existed were feeble, unable to combat the area's towering social problems.

Sheldon's first contacts with Tennesseetown were apparently hostile ones, as the self-described "rabid prohibitionist" urged raids on Jordan's speakeasy. But by 1891 Sheldon and a nearby Presbyterian minister, a Mr. Harris, began to give lectures every other Monday night to the men and boys of the settlement. The first one was an illustrated chemical and electrical lecture on "Light"; later ones in the series were on such topics as "One Dollar and What It Can Buy," "A Quart of Whiskey and What It Can Do," and "What Has Been Done for the Negro Since the War." The lectures were apparently popular, and Sheldon and Harris used them as a foot in Tennesseetown's door. They began to visit the homes of those who attended the lectures, as well as other homes where they might find interested persons. Thus, in fairly short order they were able to learn quite a bit about Tennesseetown.¹⁸

This informal survey, incidentally, was only the first of several serious efforts on the part of Central Church members to find out in detail about the needs of their black neighbors. The most important such effort was a probing house-to-house survey undertaken by Leroy Halbert and Mrs. M. L. Sherman in 1898. They visited 146 families, inquiring about religious preference (sixty-one families each for Baptist and Methodist Episcopal; six each for Catholic, Christian, and Congregational; one for Presbyterian; and five either had no preference or had not spoken to the survey takers); earnings (the average was \$6.15 per week for men, \$3.22 for women); average house size (3 1/2 rooms); health; marital status; birth situation (167 had

been born slaves); educational level achieved (generally quite low); and a host of other things. They discovered a very few fairly prosperous Tennesseetown residents, notably John Williams who lived in a five-room painted house with a piano, made twelve hundred dollars per year, subscribed to the newspaper, and owned two hundred books. The norm, however, was a household consisting of approximately six persons with few, if any, of those goods enjoyed by the Williams family, and on the opposite end of the spectrum was the Wallace family with twenty-three children all living at home, no assets, and virtually no income. The census document recording these findings makes for fascinating reading.¹⁹

But we are getting ahead of our story. Sheldon's early and less comprehensive survey led him to the conclusion that several important social services needed to be supplied to the settlement, and he determined that the first would be a kindergarten. Andrew Jordan, the dance hall and speakeasy proprietor, readily agreed to lease his building for two years for the project (one must presume that the price offered him was more lucrative than income from the dance-hall business), and in the summer of 1892 fund raising was undertaken in earnest. Some of the children who would be in the kindergarten helped raise money for it; Leroy Halbert's history of the Tennesseetown projects tells that a choir of "fifteen little darkey boys" sang a program of plantation songs at Central Church and made some money for the project.²⁰ More substantial amounts of money were raised from white charitable organizations and from individuals.

The renovation of Jordan Hall (which for the duration of the kindergarten's stay there was known as Union Hall) was a first step; the building had never been properly finished and was in poor repair. Many Central Church young people spent long evenings working on the structure and then plastering and painting.²¹ By spring the work had been finished, and the first black kindergarten west of the Mississippi opened its doors on April 3, 1893, in the hall on Lincoln Street between King (now Munson) and Twelfth. There were three teachers: Carrie R. Roberts, the principal, and assistants Jeanette Miller and Margaret Adams. By the time the lease with Andrew Jordan expired two years later, the kindergarten had become such a resounding success that more permanent quarters were established for it in the Tennesseetown

19. 1898 Tennesseetown Census, Kansas State Historical Society. See also, *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 3, 1973.

20. Leroy A. Halbert, *Across the Way: A History of the Work of Central Church, Topeka, Kansas*, in *Tennesseetown* (privately printed, 1900), 4.

21. Glenn Clark, *The Man Who Walked in His Steps* (St. Paul: Macalester Park Publishing Co., 1946), 8.

16. Charles M. Sheldon, "A Local Negro Problem," *The Kingdom* 8 (April 10, 1896): 828.

17. Charles M. Sheldon, "Sociology from the Preacher's Standpoint," *Seminary Notes* 14 (December 1891): 80.

18. *Ibid.*



"Game time" at the kindergarten brought the children out of doors.

Congregational Church building down the street to the north.

Many of the people of Tennesseetown had misgivings about the white intrusion into their community; some of them, quite naturally, saw it as an enemy invasion. But many Tennesseetown mothers had a desperate need for day care, and the kindergarten was a lifesaver for them. The children immediately liked the kindergarten, and their parents soon appreciated the colorful craft projects their children began to carry home. Soon the kindergarten's acceptance was total, and a foot was in Tennesseetown's door.²² Dozens of Tennesseetown children were enrolled from the first; by 1900, there had been 287 of them, including 57 enrolled at that time. The school stayed in business for eighteen years, until 1910, by which time the city of Topeka had decided to support kindergartens and this one was moved to nearby Buchanan School.²³ Some of the alumni became important leaders in the Topeka black community, using the kindergarten as a first step toward formal education which would help lift them out of poverty. Probably the most prominent alumnus was Elisha Scott, in whom Sheldon took a special interest and years later arranged financial support for Scott to attend law school at Washburn University. Scott became a leading Topeka attorney, as did his sons John Scott and Charles Sheldon Scott. The Scotts argued many early civil rights and school desegregation cases. Their most illustrious moment came in 1954 when Charles Scott argued

the winning side of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation case before the U.S. Supreme Court. The Scott family law firm continues to handle civil rights cases today.

Little information has been preserved about what actually was done on a daily basis in the kindergarten during its first five years. In February 1898, however, an assistant in training, Mrs. June Chapman, was promoted to the head teachership when her predecessor resigned, and she kept that job for twelve years—as long as the kindergarten lasted.²⁴ A good deal of information has been preserved from her era.

Chapman's first morning on the job, it appears, was chaotic with children running everywhere. As their first task, the teachers undertook to clean up their charges, washing them and putting clean aprons over their dirty clothes. Evidently Chapman's cleanliness program infiltrated the children's homes because by 1900 they were reported to be arriving in neat and clean fashion.²⁵ Making an impact on Tennesseetown home life, in fact, seemed to be a main point of Chapman's program. For example, she had the children eat lunch at the kindergarten every Friday in order to drill them in table manners, and once she made each child a set of cardboard keys, writing on them such things as "Good morning," "Good night," "If you please," and "Thank you."

But Chapman did not limit her interest in home life to instructing her pupils. She also made a regular practice of

22. *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 9, 1906.

23. *Ibid.*, November 17, 1963.

24. *Topeka State Journal*, November 17, 1928.

25. Halbert, *Across the Way*, 5.

visiting Tennesseetown homes in the afternoons, and soon became welcome in homes throughout the settlement. Several of the women of Tennesseetown joined her in the visits. Among them was "Aunty" Ransome, an elderly ex-slave who also visited the kindergarten from time to time to tell stories of slavery days.

The warm response Chapman received to her home visits led her to create an organization, a sort of PTA, for the mothers of the pupils. On one Wednesday afternoon a mothers' meeting was held at the kindergarten, and so many mothers attended and voiced their enthusiasm about the project that a permanent organization was formed.²⁶ A December 1900 count showed forty-three

26. "Kindergarten Notes," undated newspaper clipping, kindergarten scrapbook, Sheldon Memorial Room. See also *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 9, 1906.



Mrs. June R. Chapman is credited, primarily through her leadership at Sheldon's kindergarten, with pioneering early education in the Topeka school system.

Tennesseetown mothers in the Sheldon League of American Mothers.²⁷ By 1906, at least, the Sheldon Congress of Mothers, as it was then called, was planning its monthly meetings so carefully that an annual brochure listing meetings and topics was printed.²⁸ Meanwhile, Chapman organized yet another group, the Tennesseetown Kindergarten Auxiliary, from outside the settlement to provide volunteer help with the class and to help raise funds for equipment and supplies.²⁹

In the summer the kindergarteners got lessons in gardening. An undated clipping from the turn-of-the-century era described the young students as getting ready to harvest the produce of their garden at King and Lincoln streets: cotton, watermelons, and popcorn, "as well as a number of other garden and field products."³⁰ They also grew flowers, and at least once took advantage of a *Topeka Daily Capital* seed giveaway designed to promote flower gardening among children. Chapman marched her charges down to the newspaper office to pick up the seeds, and the paper reported that "They yelled with a vim, and the boys swung their caps in the air over their heads while straining in their lungs to the utmost. They brought with them some handsome tulips which they raised on the kindergarten grounds from bulbs planted last fall."³¹

Yet another Chapman project was a kindergarten band, an ensemble of twenty-five cornets, which specialized in marches.³² There were other outings as well, including one to the state capitol where the class visited Gov. Edward W. Hoch.³³ There were also frequent special observances at the kindergarten building. In 1898, for example, the kindergarten had a celebration of the birthday of Friedrich Froebel, founder of the kindergarten movement, with lots of colorful decorations, a new picture of Froebel, and a grand march around the classroom with the children carrying American and German flags.³⁴ Once a year there was a "crumb party" for feeding birds and animals in the winter.

The verdict on Chapman's leadership seems to be unanimous. She did marvelous work for the kindergarten,

27. *Topeka Daily Capital*, December 16, 1900.

28. *Sheldon Congress of Mothers, 1906-7: Parents Meeting at Sheldon Kindergarten*, pamphlet, Kansas State Historical Society.

29. Halbert, *Across the Way*, 6.

30. "Colored Children Grow Cotton Here," undated newspaper clipping from *Topeka Daily Journal*, kindergarten scrapbook, Sheldon Memorial Room.

31. "Organized the Last Juvenile Flower Club," undated newspaper clipping from *Topeka Daily Capital*, kindergarten scrapbook, Sheldon Memorial Room.

32. "Colored Children Have Cornet Band," undated newspaper clipping, kindergarten scrapbook, Sheldon Memorial Room.

33. "Governor Hoch and the Colored Kindergartners," undated newspaper clipping, kindergarten scrapbook, Sheldon Memorial Room.

34. *Topeka Daily Capital*, April 22, 1898.

and probably played no little part in convincing the citizens of Topeka to fund kindergartens in all the elementary schools of the city. Twice Chapman and her charges received recognition from other parts of the country for their work. In 1904 she packed up some of the children's arts and crafts and sent them to a kindergarten competition at the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exhibition, gaining second place in the nationwide contest. Another bundle of similar materials was sent to the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition in 1907, and another national second prize was awarded to the Topeka youngsters. Incidentally, the name of the school was changed at the time of the St. Louis competition; the proud Kansas sponsors of the entry feared that those attending the fair might confuse Tennesseetown with the state of Tennessee, and so the name of the kindergarten was changed from "Tennesseetown" to "Sheldon."³⁵

Sheldon himself was held in near-reverence by the children. His frequent visits were favorite occasions in the classroom, and at least once, in 1905, when Sheldon was ill, the students made a wicker basket, filled it with a pumpkin, popcorn, vegetables and flowers they had raised, and rolled it in a wagon over to his house. Sheldon repaid the compliment by writing a verse in honor of the pupils:

My brother of whatever tongue or race,
Whatever be the color of thy skin;
Thou' either white or black or brown thy face,
Thou art in God's great family—my kin.³⁶

In 1981 there was at least one surviving student from the Sheldon kindergarten, Minus Gentry, then eighty-five. His memories of Sheldon were all sweetness and light: "He was a fine man, he was. He'd come on down here to the kindergarten, to visit the kids, you know. He would talk to us and play with us, come shake hands with us. He was very generous, he was, a kind and generous man. Everybody loved him, everybody. If everybody in the world was like him, why, it would be a good world."³⁷

The Library

Once Union Hall had been rented and the kindergarten established, it occurred to someone that the classroom space could be used in the evening as a library. The young people, especially the college students, of Central Church were enthusiastic about the idea and agreed to volunteer to staff the library. About the only need was for books so Sheldon announced that a social would be held, the admission price to which would be a book. The social was

thronged, and the books thus collected, along with others donated by the city library, enabled the library to open soon after the kindergarten did in 1893.³⁸ The book social became an annual affair, and the library's holdings eventually numbered in the thousands of volumes.

At first B. C. Duke, a member of the Tennesseetown Congregational Church, was put in charge of the library; but from the outset he had trouble riding herd over the clientele, and the library quickly became a hangout for rowdies—of which Tennesseetown still had plenty. Finally one night he called the police and had six boys arrested for disturbing the peace. The publicity following that incident was disastrous, and, as Leroy Halbert reported, "the parents kept their children from the Library and it soon closed."³⁹

Sheldon, however, never said die. In October 1894, the library opened again, this time with volunteer attendants from Central Church. A small social, with apples and donuts, was held for the boys who were the library's main patrons, and Sheldon gave them a pep talk, explaining why libraries had to be orderly places. Halbert dryly reported that Sheldon's earnest pleading, plus the memory of the arrests, kept the boys "to an endurable standard of order for a while." However, at least on the nights when lenient caretakers were in charge, "sometimes the Hall resembled a circus about as much as a reading room."⁴⁰

When the lease from Andrew Jordan ran out in the fall of 1895, the library moved with the kindergarten to the Tennesseetown Congregational Church. Discipline problems continued. So far was the library from being a typical reading room that Minus Gentry remembered the library evenings as "game nights" where not-so-sedate activities, such as playing caroms, were the rule.⁴¹ Halbert said that one volunteer staffer "needed a bottle of Paine's Celery Compound to restore his nerves after each experience in the Library." Apparently the youngsters continued, throughout the history of the library, to expand their minds mainly by throwing paperwads, pieces of coal and books, and by blowing out the lights and rattling the blinds. Periodic Sheldon lectures on order may have helped, but the level of decorum was never high. Nevertheless, Halbert, like Sheldon, was optimistic about the library's usefulness: "It is the refractory boys who attract the most attention, but there has always been an element of well behaved and studious patrons of the Library," some of whom read many books. Moreover, if they had not been in the library, what mischief might they have

38. Halbert, *Across the Way*, 6, 9. See also, Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 147.

39. Halbert, *Across the Way*, 9.

40. Ibid.

41. Interview with Minus Gentry, July 22, 1981.

35. Ibid., September 9, 1906.

36. Ibid.

37. Interview with Minus Gentry, July 22, 1981.

been causing elsewhere?⁴² The library was, in fact, well patronized, and during two winters in the late nineties, Henry Burt, at that time the Washburn student hired to head the library, actually enticed a number of the young patrons to join a literary society featuring debates and recitations.⁴³ The library apparently lasted for many years; William H. Guild in 1981 recalled that he had surely worked in the library as late as 1909 and possibly as late as 1913, earning fifty cents a night for his efforts.⁴⁴

Other Educational and Cultural Projects

Yet another use made of Union Hall was that of sewing classes for the schoolgirls of Tennesseetown. Ten women from Central Church, and one from a nearby Presbyterian church, supervised the project and furnished materials for the Saturday afternoon classes. By the fall of 1896 the project had become a substantial one, and Mrs. F. E. Sherman was hired to take charge of it. By the fall of 1897 attendance was up to sixty, including virtually every girl in the neighborhood.⁴⁵

In the meantime, the boys were not neglected. Basket-weaving classes were instituted for them. The boys could buy the necessary materials for about five cents, and had no trouble selling the baskets they made for fifteen. The dime profit was a powerful motivator, and the basket-weaving classes led to the establishment of a manual training department at the public Buchanan School in Tennesseetown, with some of the classes conducted at the Tennesseetown church.⁴⁶ In November 1894, a "Boys' Brigade" was founded, featuring military marching and drilling, but discipline problems quickly did it in.⁴⁷

Vocational education did not triumph in Tennesseetown at the expense of culture. Special musical and other programs were regular parts of the program for the uplift of the ghetto. Some of the programs involved nationally known ensembles, as in 1913 when the Fisk University Jubilee Singers gave a series of concerts to integrated audiences.⁴⁸

Nor was the spiritual life of the settlement neglected. When Central Church was organized in 1888, some of the members were already helping with the Sunday school at the Tennesseetown church. Halbert wrote that "the first thing Mr. Sheldon ever did for Tennesseetown was to sing tenor in a quartet for the Sunday school." By the end of 1891, attendance was averaging fifty at the Sunday school;

by 1899, it had topped one hundred, helped in part by a series of interclass attendance competitions. Gradually some black leadership emerged, joining the white Central members in running the program. And members of the Sunday school began to raise part of their own support. Halbert told a touching story in that regard: "One poor boy may be seen from week to week going around picking up old iron, rubber, etc. These he sells to the junk dealer to get money for the Sunday school. Some times he spends considerable time in this way so as to get at least two pennies to bring to his class on Sunday. . . . An example of sacrifice like this furnishes inspiration enough to overbalance a great many discouragements." Meanwhile, services were held at the church itself, as distinct from the Sunday school, sometimes with the help of a black resident minister but more often with preaching supplied from Central or other churches. Also, a Christian Endeavor Society was started in August 1899, letting thirty or so Tennesseetown children become a part of that enormous nationwide youth movement.⁴⁹

Social Services for Tennesseetown

Even as the various educational and cultural programs were being instituted, Sheldon saw the necessity for direct social services to the destitute residents of the settlement. Many such services eventually emerged. Some of them were offered on an organized basis—for example, several physicians provided free medical care, a lawyer gave free legal help, and E. B. Merriam, Sheldon's father-in-law and a prominent banker, made small interest-free loans to individuals in need.⁵⁰ Sheldon and a group of Central Church men organized a successful effort to find jobs for the men of the settlement,⁵¹ and Sheldon's assistant pastor Leroy Halbert helped to found a Monday-morning nursery, freeing the mothers to do their laundry in peace.⁵²

But many examples of such assistance cannot be enumerated fully for it was given by individuals, acting privately. Many, for example, took to making regular Sunday afternoon calls on the elderly and ill of the settlement, sometimes staying for hours. Distribution of food and clothing took place frequently as well. Special efforts were made to check up on persons in need during the winter. A few reports of such home visitation have survived. One is Mrs. F. E. Sherman's account of her trip to

42. Halbert, *Across the Way*, 10-14.

43. *Ibid.*, 14-5.

44. Letter, William H. Guild to Timothy Miller, November 7, 1981.

45. Halbert, *Across the Way*, 15-6.

46. *Ibid.*, 19-20.

47. *Ibid.*, 36.

48. Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 151-52.

49. Halbert, *Across the Way*, 21-36.

50. Peggy Greene, "Dr. Sheldon and Tennesseetown," *Shawnee County Historical Society Bulletin*, no. 58 (November 1981): 119.

51. Entma Crabb, untitled manuscript notes, Sheldon Memorial Room.

52. Charles M. Sheldon, "My Most Unusual Layman," *Christian Herald* 64 (December 1941): 42.



This undated photograph shows a Tennesseetown mothers' meeting. First known as the Sheldon League of American Mothers and later as the Sheldon Congress of Mothers, this organization held monthly meetings and in 1900 had a membership of forty-three.

distribute Christmas presents which had been gathered by Central members:

One place I found a very old lady, nearly blind, to whom I carried a Thanksgiving dinner and read to her from the Bible. Another place I found a woman and two little children living in one small room without a window. The only light she had was from leaving the door open or lighting a lamp. I gave her clothing for the baby and food for herself and the other little one. She was doing the best she could with what she had. Another place I found an old lady nearly 100 years old, very destitute. I supplied her with warm underclothing and shoes. She was very cheerful; she showed me the only dress she had, a calico wrapper all worn to pieces. She said, 'Can you get me a dress?' I told her I would. She was grateful for all the help she had. Another place an old man was very sick, a woman also sick and two little children. They were lacking almost anything to make life happy. With money received from the Ladies' Society, the whole house was cleaned, washing done and they were made more comfortable. The Christmas presents from Central Church

made many hearts happy, filled many wants and were gratefully received.⁵³

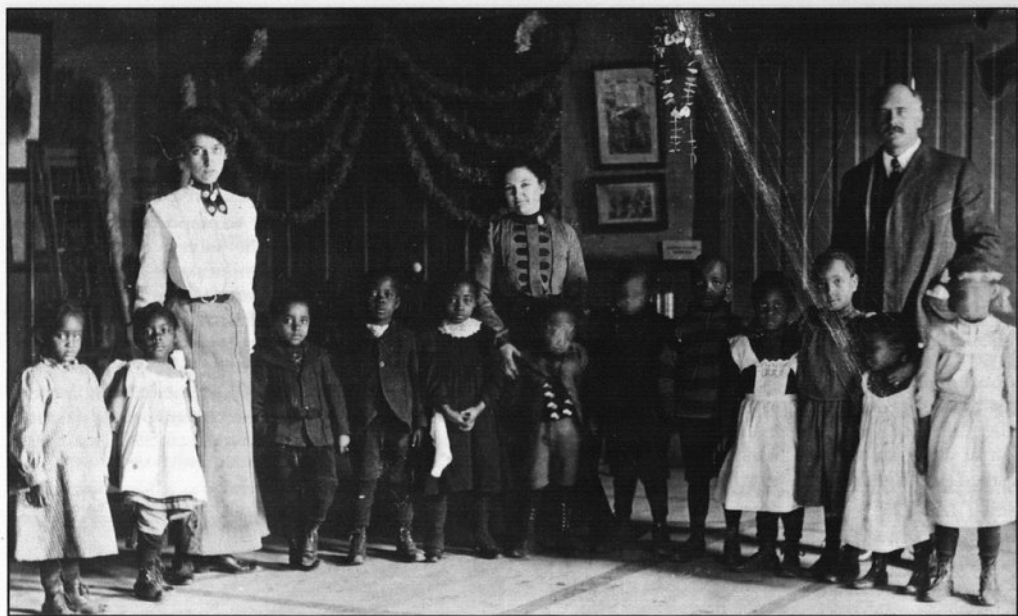
Sheldon personally, without fanfare, did as much as any member of his congregation to help where he could. His aversion to personal publicity undoubtedly caused many altruistic acts to go unnoticed, but sometimes word of them got out, as in the case of a Tennesseetown woman who was run down by a streetcar and had her leg amputated. Sheldon sent her a wooden prosthesis, one early biographical article reported.⁵⁴ The works of mercy were manifold, and they were gratefully received by people very much in need of help—and of concern.

The Village Improvement Society

One project which was relatively late in inception, but which had a major impact on the settlement, was the formation of the Village Improvement Society. Despite several years of a kindergarten, other educational projects, social services, and cultural and religious programs,

53. Halbert, *Across the Way*, 37.

54. "Rev. Charles M. Sheldon: His Life, Labors and Aims," in Charles M. Sheldon, et al., *The First Christian Daily Paper and Other Sketches* (New York: Street and Smith, 1900), 116.



Sheldon frequently visited the kindergarten, taking a special interest in the students and their classroom activities.

Tennesseetown remained physically quite unattractive with shabby houses and yards which were "for the most part, covered with tin cans, dead cats and rubbish."⁵⁵ A. B. Whiting, Sheldon's loyal energetic deacon, stepped into that breach in January 1898 with the suggestion to Sheldon that prizes be offered to Tennesseetown residents to encourage them to improve their property. Sheldon responded by calling a meeting at the Tennesseetown church the next month to discuss Whiting's ideas which had been refined into a fairly clear plan of action. The church was nearly full. Most of the ministers and other leaders of the settlement were there. Sheldon and Whiting described the physical problems of Tennesseetown and then suggested their plan to attack them.

At first the reaction was mixed, although it is difficult to imagine that by 1898 Tennesseetown would have rejected any Sheldon plan. Some rose to say that they were already working on problems relating to houses and yards and did not need any special program. There was some resentment, naturally, toward the idea of whites coming into the settlement once again, this time telling the

residents how to live. Halbert said that "one woman spoke saying that she was as clean and neat as anybody and she did not need to be told to improve her place." She also worried that the do-gooders would want the people to quit keeping hogs, an important part of their winter food supply. But many others argued for the plan, and on a vote it was adopted.⁵⁶

On March 7 another meeting was held, and prizes were set up in such categories as gardening, beautification of premises, building repair, and housekeeping. In all, twenty-seven different individuals entered the nine competitions, many entering more than one. Garden seeds were provided for contestants in the gardening divisions, as well as for other Tennesseetown gardeners. The contestants took to their work with real spirit, and on October 18 a meeting was held to award the prizes. Thirty-five dollars in cash and that much or more in merchandise had been raised from local merchants, and there was a general call for another competition in 1899, so successful had been the first one.⁵⁷ Houses had been painted; yards had been sodded; alleys had been cleaned of trash; and the spirit of the settlement was much improved.

55. Charles M. Sheldon, "Doctor Sheldon Says Victory Garden Movement Began in Tennesseetown Years Ago," Topeka newspaper clipping (n.d., early 1940s), Sheldon Memorial Room.

56. Halbert, *Across the Way*, 33.

57. *Ibid.*, 34.

The competition was indeed repeated in 1899, and for several years thereafter. Many new categories of improvements were added, including some for food preservation. Several categories were also created especially for children. The *Topeka Daily Capital*, reporting on the fall festival at which the 1899 awards were given, counted eighteen categories of competition, covering gardening, neat premises, improvement of buildings and fences, interior house cleaning, flower gardening, and fresh and preserved garden produce for adults, and gardening, sewing, baking, and oratory for children. The second awards ceremony played to an overflow crowd which sat amid exhibitions of embroidery, quilts, fresh garden produce, preserves, handicrafts, and other such things. The boys between twelve and eighteen gave their orations; the winner in that competition receiving one dollar. Typical first prizes ran from one to four dollars in cash or such other things as six silverplated forks, a rocking chair, a pair of shoes, an umbrella, and a one-year subscription to the *Daily Capital*.⁵⁸ Halbert, describing the evening, wrote:

the place looked like a county fair in miniature.... The whole exhibition was a credit to the community. In the evening a meeting was held at the church, where the declaimers competed and all the prizes were awarded. The church was packed with people and the enthusiasm ran high. About \$50 in money was given out and a considerable amount of merchandise. After the prizes were given out, the woman who had spoken against the project the first year came around and said, 'How is this? I entered for three things but I didn't get but two prizes.'... The results of the plan in the improvement of the town are plainly visible.⁵⁹

Two years later, in 1901, at the spring meeting of the Village Improvement Society, Sheldon delivered a speech in which he suggested that the leadership of the society, mainly whites from Central Church, be turned over to blacks living in Tennesseetown. The transfer of power was quickly completed, although Central members remained active in their support of society projects.⁶⁰

The End of the Projects

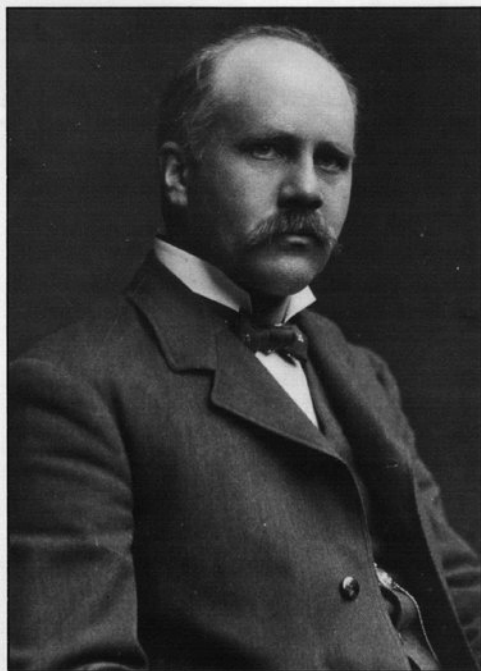
No single date marked the end of the Tennesseetown projects. Some of them faded away as local interests and needs changed. More of them never vanished at all, but were taken over by governmental bodies as permanent public responsibilities. The kindergarten and various vocational training projects serve as good examples for after the legislature, in 1907, authorized public kinder-

gartens, the Topeka Board of Education took over the Sheldon original. It thus may be said to be very much alive today, minus his name. Eventually the Tennesseetown Congregational Church, which had never been especially strong, came to be seen as less and less necessary in light of the development of several other strong churches, notably Shiloh Baptist, in the settlement. Finally the mission church building was sold in 1911.⁶¹

What the Work Accomplished

At the obvious level, the success of most of the Tennesseetown projects is the measure of the worth of the effort poured into the settlement. The kindergarten was a pioneering, triumphant success story in that it served hundreds of families and ushered kindergartens into the Kansas public schools. The Village Improvement Society certainly contributed to the physical beautification of the neighborhood. The library undoubtedly made a notice-

61. Untitled manuscript, Sheldon Memorial Room.



Charles M. Sheldon, at about the time his social reform programs were a major force in the Tennesseetown community, providing opportunities for "uplift" not previously available to its residents.

58. *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 14, 1899.

59. Halbert, *Across the Way*, 35.

60. *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 27, 1901.

able contribution to literacy and the appreciation of good books. The sewing and manual training classes helped young persons earn some money and trained them for jobs which were desperately needed. On that level alone one must conclude that it was all very much worthwhile.

Much of white Topeka was most impressed with the effects of the Village Improvement Society's clean-up program. In 1903 a Topeka newspaper beamed, "Tennesseetown has a prosperous look. Where formerly weeds grew in luxuriance, there are cane patches or cornfields or gardens. Where a few years ago there were a few old boards nailed together to represent a house, there is now a respectable little cottage. Where there was once a bare lawn of weeds, there is now often a lawn of blue-grass with park in front. There is a general look of enterprise instead of delapidation."⁶² Another booster a year later noted that even though Tennesseetown's streets were not paved and there was no sewer in the neighborhood (the taxes for such things would, after all, "be a virtual confiscation of the property assessed"), "the little district has more of a thriving look and is fast losing its tumbledown appearance."⁶³ A 1906 visitor took delight in the fact that an active interracial baseball game was in progress near Huntoon and Lincoln streets, where a dozen years earlier one could have expected to see only crap games on the sidewalk.⁶⁴

But there were other results as well, less obvious ones. Although statistics for the period are hard to come by, several sources report that the crime rate in Tennesseetown dropped substantially during the 1890s—a result in which

Sheldon took great pride.⁶⁵ And given that other white churches eventually came to see the merit of the projects and joined in working on them, it can be fairly said that Tennesseetown provided an early, practical demonstration of social reform through ecumenical outreach. Churches proved that they could work together on worthwhile projects, and the Topeka congregations involved—at one time or another representing most of the major Protestant denominations—did the social gospel at the grassroots level.

There was always a small undercurrent of resentment towards the whites who would enter a black neighborhood in a potentially condescending manner, but on the whole Tennesseetown welcomed its benefactors. Sheldon himself was nearly deified by those who were lifted up from destitution to mere poverty. One of them once paid Sheldon the ultimate compliment: "Brother Sheldon, your face may be white, but your heart is just as black as mine!"⁶⁶

To the twentieth-century historian, one who has the benefit of having observed a century of social change programs, Sheldon's uplift of Tennesseetown stands as a good, intelligent, balanced approach to community betterment. It did not just provide gifts, but took self-help seriously. It was not just a palliative program, but an integrated mix of relief and educational endeavors with a strong emphasis on helping people get jobs in a time and situation when they were hard to come by. The program certainly had its naive moments and some relative weaknesses, but on the whole it was more coherent and did much more good than a great many more costly and elaborate programs do today. [KH]

62. October 8, 1903, clipping from unspecified Topeka newspaper, Sheldon Memorial Room.

63. L. C. Hodge, "Problems of Self-Help," *Civic Pride* 1 (May 1904).

64. *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 9, 1906.

65. For example, see Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 147.

66. Clark, *The Man Who Walked in His Steps*, 9.