

UNTOLD TEXAS

Written by Katie Bender

Last week, the writing group I'm a part of got together for our first in-person meeting. We've been meeting on Zoom twice a month since last August, one of the few consistencies of this last strange year. We've struggled through finding or pivoting work, checked in with each other during the ice storm—when half our group lost power and water for a week, and compared notes on voting sites and vaccine sign-ups. The night we got together, the 87th legislative session had just wrapped up with the usual bills protecting gun rights and limiting women's access to medical care. But this time, there was a new emphasis on restricting voters' access and censoring how race and history are taught in Texas. Most of the writers in the group have decided to move out of state in the next year. One of them couldn't make it because he's already moved to New Mexico. These are writers who are also event coordinators, teachers, massage therapists, and graphic designers; essential workers who live month-to-month. They're sick of feeling like their vote doesn't matter, as though the state will never change for the better, and that their quality of life here will never get better.

I'm a Texan. From Houston's no-zoning densely packed shopping centers brimming with the finest, widest array of international food anywhere and the ever-present smell of crude and mimosa flowers hanging in the humidity, to the one-stoplight-town of Fort Davis with its dark night skies and enough horizon to see a storm coming two hundred miles away, I love this state. Love even its walloping contradiction—well, okay, freedom to open carry without a permit while drastically restricting women's access to medical care is one contradiction I could live without—but I love that Texas is still very much a border state, with all the liminality that implies. Most of my neighbors speak Spanish; black cowboys ride their horses to our local rec center. I can bike to a small farm for the week's produce or to a performance space to catch a show. I don't want to move. I also don't want to feel helpless in my home. My admittedly Pollyannaish antidote to this

feeling is to read about my Texas heroes: Barbara Jordan, Emma Tenayuca, Ann Richards, and Dana DeBeauvoir, mostly under-appreciated heroes, whose intelligence and grit was, and is, in service to their community. Their stories reorient me in the Texas I love and give me hope for change. History is messy and chaotic, and how we tell it shapes who we are in the present. With this next series of articles, I want to highlight moments of big change in Texas communities led by disenfranchised citizens who stuck it out and worked to make the change they wanted to see in their state.



Martha McWhirter (1827-1904) , founder of Sanctified Sisters, wearing black dress and veil, posed on street; ca. 1900. Courtesy of the Bell County Museum.

MARTHA MCWHIRTER AND THE SANCTIFIED SISTERS

We'll start in Belton, Texas, with the Sanctified Sisters, whose utopian community was built on the very Texas pillars of God and Money. Self-named the Women's Commonwealth, these women, led by Martha McWhirter, began receiving instructions and dreams from God, calling on them to leave their husbands and take up whatever work they could to become financially independent. The women sold eggs, took in laundry, rented out rooms, and even practiced dentistry.

Eventually, in the late 1800s, they owned the largest hotel in downtown Belton and enough property in the surrounding area to become some of the wealthiest landowners in the county. Fifty years before Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own", the women in Belton knew that money paid for a room of one's own and that made all the difference. Who were these women? How were they able to make such a drastic change in their circumstances? (1)

Belton is a classic square-around-the-courthouse Texas town. The land has been inhabited since at least 6,000 B.C. when early neolithic people left evidence of camps and burial mounds. The Tonkawa, Lipan Apache, Wacos, Nadaco, Kiowas, and Comanche also made homes there, eventually forced out by settlers in the 1840s. The Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad set up a depot in Belton in 1882, creating a population explosion. The University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, the first female Christian university in Texas, moved to Belton in 1886. These days the local coffee shop advertises "Tea and Tacos", and you can get good barbeque on any street downtown. When my daughter and I first visited in early June, July 4th flags and bunting had already been hung from every lamppost and crossing. Martha McWhirter's house is still standing on Pearl Street, just as it was in her heyday. We noticed some construction outside—a new front door being put in. In the summertime heat, standing before the Victorian facade, time seemed to melt and bend. Were they finally replacing the door that was shot through when a mob of angry husbands attacked the house?

Martha White McWhirter was born on May 17th, 1827, in Gainesboro, Tennessee. She joined the Methodist church when she was sixteen, joining seventy million faithful, who, responding to the Second Great Awakening, broke from the Calvinist beliefs that all souls were born damned. Martha's sense of having and depending on an individual relationship with God would shape much of her life. In 1845 she married George M. McWhirter, an attorney and farmer. In 1855 they moved their new family to Texas, finally settling in Belton in 1865. The McWhirters were well-to-do; George ran a general store and was invested in the local flour mill. The family had twelve children, six of whom survived. Together they helped establish an interdenominational Union Sunday school and church, to which they remained loyal even after the town started a Methodist congregation in 1870. Martha ran a women's prayer group that brought together

women from Baptist, Methodist, Evangelical, and Disciples of Christ backgrounds. These weekly meetings would quickly form the basis of a social organization that became the bedrock of the women's belief system and communal utopia. (2)

THE VISION

In 1866, a year after moving to town, Martha was deeply troubled; her brother had died, she'd lost two of her children, and she felt strongly that she was being punished by God. She prayed for guidance and experienced what she would later describe as a baptism into sanctification, a vision that was the turning point of her life. She was returning from a meeting at the Methodist church when she heard a voice ask her if the meeting had been the work of God or of the devil. She immediately responded "the devil". The voice stayed with her late into the night. (3) The next morning she stepped outside and her humble backyard was transformed by the presence of God. She described the experience in the following way:

every drop of dew...every atom, was permeated with the spirit of God, and she, his creature, was as the smallest particle floating the air...As she built her fire and prepared to get breakfast she was glad to be alone with this new sense of God's presence and peace—glad that her daughters had not awakened and come to assist as usual. As she sifted the flour and was kneading the biscuits with her hands in the dough, she felt an inward baptism such as can never be forgotten. It was as if a pint of clear water had been poured upon and through her body by unseen hands...she stopped her work, and raising her hands, with the biscuit dough clinging to them...spoke aloud, 'this is the spirit of God. (4)

From that moment on she believed herself to be sanctified and her actions and decisions justified by God.

When I excitedly bring up Martha McWhirter and the Women's Commonwealth to unsuspecting strangers at the library, I can hear myself pushing the more outlandish elements of the story "Oh yeah, well, God started telling her not to sleep with her husband so she stopped, and then God

started telling a whole bunch of Martha's friends not to sleep with their husbands, so they stopped" and if the person I'm talking to doesn't just walk away, the questions they ask make it clear that neither of us really take Martha's vision seriously, but assume the vision was invented to get her out of an unhappy marriage. A means to an end, nothing more. But, when I imagine that time can bend, when I try to stand in her shoes on the edge of the frontier in the late 1800s, with faith as my guiding principle, I begin to appreciate that separating herself from her husband was not the most obvious path forward, but rather a genuine response to genuine communication with the Other; call it God, or the subconscious, or the uber conscience. I'm guessing this is often true of people who dramatically change their lives: it doesn't happen the way they expected and it isn't the easiest path forward, but rather the only path forward.

Put in context, Martha's genuine prayer for guidance and the surprising response becomes part and parcel of the religious and cultural changes that swept through the United States in the 1800s. Calvinism, with its angry God and eternal damnation, no longer suited the quickly growing, westward expanding population in the United States. People who had lost loved ones, particularly children, needed to believe their deceased were in heaven. The notion of the faithful trembling before an angry taskmaster god, who only let in a few special people to heaven, did not jive with the individualistic, make-your-own-rules people of the United States, whom James Madison famously dubbed "useful in proving things before held impossible." (5) Methodism, a new denomination that came to popularity amidst the Second Great Awakening, was based on the notion that all people had access to Christian conversion and salvation. Concurrent with this change in religious beliefs, women's roles began to shift too; women became associated with the moral and religious center of their household. No longer the fallen Eve, women were compared to the Virgin Mary, pure, chaste, and nurturing. While still deeply restricting, women now had moral authority within the household. More radical still, but certainly known to the McWhirter family and the citizens of Belton, the Spiritualist movement took off in the 1830s and pushed further against religious and social norms; often women were the very mouthpiece of God and loved ones who had passed. They offered direct proof of salvation and the afterlife. Several hundred mediums, mostly women, made their living touring the country, offering lectures and seances. Spiritualists believed that all individuals were equal; they were abolitionists, feminists, vegetarians, and environmentalists. Their claims at spirit communication, however outlandish

they seem today, were not so far off from discoveries being made in science. Just as Samuel F.B. Morse had gone to Congress asking for money for his telegraph line promising to make communication over vast distances possible, so too Spiritualists promised to reach beyond the grave to directly communicate with loved ones. (5) The world was transforming so rapidly in the late 1800s that both claims must have seemed incomprehensible, but possible. I like to imagine Martha standing in her kitchen, troubling through her thoughts; it isn't that God's words surprise her, but rather she sees immediately that what is asked of her is a huge change. But like the prophets she knows so well from her Bible studies, she trusts God and, without knowing where it will take her, begins to change her life.

Celibacy was central to her belief in herself as sanctified. She stopped sharing a bed with her husband and, anticipating the rift this would cause, began selling basic household goods she could make, to gain some financial independence. Martha found solace from the women in her prayer group. These were women brought together by faith who also shared similar domestic situations; they were white, middle-aged, with large families, and from mostly well-to-do backgrounds, but many of them chafed against the restrictions of marriage. Margaret C. Henry's husband was abusive, once breaking her arm when she complained that he had sold an unsuspecting neighbor a sick mule. Josephine Rancier's husband was abusive, chronically debt-ridden, and abandoned her before they could be legally separated. Martha accused her husband of acting improperly toward one of their servants. Ada, Martha's daughter, discovered after only a few years of marriage that her husband was abusive, and left the marriage to return to the McWhirters household. Martha claimed that she always advised women to stay with and obey their husbands if at all possible, but that there was no point in obeying or staying with an abusive or alcoholic husband. To do so would be to "surrender her belief in sanctification as we teach it, I should say to her do no such thing. For wouldn't that be giving up all our religion." (6) These women did not directly record their dreams but they discussed them at length, engaging in sophisticated analysis and recognizing both conscious and subconscious forces at play. Central to the group's philosophy was the belief that they had to relieve their domestic and psychological distress through dream analysis and direct action. Direct action meant separation from their unsanctified husbands and, through Martha's encouragement, financial independence.



Carrie and Ella Henry, members of the Belton Woman's Commonwealth; date unknown. Courtesy of the Bell County Museum.

TROUBLE

The women, after much prayer, approached their husbands, requesting that they be paid for their domestic work. When their husbands refused, the women began selling eggs, butter, preserves, cakes, and taking in laundry. By 1879 the women had transformed their prayer group into a formal communal venture, pooling funds into a Common Bond controlled by Martha. Through the Common Bond, they purchased a loom and began to make and sell rugs. Four of the women in the group, including Martha's daughter Ada, took work at the local hotel in Temple, learning crucial skills they would put to use in their most ambitious business venture.

It is hard to know how well known Martha and the Sanctified Sisters were outside of Belton at this time. We do know that Martha was actively engaged in communication with other utopian communities and that, in 1880, three Irish brothers, The Dows, moved to Belton specifically to join the women. This proved too much for the husbands and townspeople, causing a riot in front of Martha's house in which the brothers were forcibly removed and held in the insane asylum. The Dows were enraged and wrote to the British ambassador, who had them released. One returned to Belton and the other two moved on, but all three stayed in touch, and on good terms, with Martha. In 1882 the Sanctified Sisters began to operate a very successful laundry business, providing the women with a rich social life as well as more funds for the bond. John C. Henry, enraged at the women gathering on his property, attacked them, inflicting a severe gash on his wife's head. The group returned the next day to chastise Henry, who responded by having them arrested for "occupying the Henry property and raising funds therein for the lord". Each woman was fined twenty dollars. Shortly thereafter Margaret Henry left her husband and took up residence with Martha. In the early 1880s, the women were making upwards of eight hundred dollars a month. While they were living on the McWhirter property they were certainly making enough to be financially independent. In 1883, sister Johnson, one of the members of the group, was committed into the insane asylum in Austin by her brother after she refused to accept a two thousand dollar insurance policy from her unsanctified, recently deceased, husband. The women prayed on the matter and after several years of not being able to reach her, finally wrote a persuasive letter to the governor, and sister Johnson was released. The ninety dollars she made with her embroidery in the asylum she gifted to the Women's Commonwealth while releasing the life insurance policy to the brother who had committed her. Such persecution actually strengthened the women's resolve. Unlike other utopic communities, the Women's Commonwealth did not grow from ideology but rather developed over many years in pragmatic response to everyday problems these women faced.

In 1883, John Henry died, leaving his property in downtown Belton to his wife Margaret. There the women began to operate a boarding house. Initially, townspeople discouraged visitors from staying there, and the women used the space to shelter women in need. But by 1887, the boarding house had grown into a full-blown hotel and was known throughout the region for clean rooms and excellent food. By 1891, the boarding house was so successful that the women incorporated

as the Central Hotel Company and built a large three-story building across the street, turning the Henry residence into permanent housing for the sisters.



Sandborn Map Company. 1992. Belton, Texas. Lot 4 in green belongs to the Central Hotel.

<http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/txu-sanborn-belton-1902-1.jpg>

SUCCESS

Today, the lot where the hotel once stood right in the center of downtown, contains a parking lot, a large old oak tree, and a medical supply store. It's hard to imagine that Belton, in 1891, was a bustling town where lawyers flocked to the county seat's courthouse, and drummers selling merchandise came from St. Louis, Galveston, and New Orleans to sell their wares. With an opera house, library, and train depot, Belton was considered a cultural center in central Texas. The Women's Commonwealth was one of the wealthiest landowners in the region, boasting two properties downtown and three properties out of town where they farmed fresh produce for the

hotel and rented out to tenant farmers. That year in 1891, George Garrison, a historian from the University of Texas at Austin, came to visit, making a detailed account of the women and their work. He wrote:

The management of the hotel, together with that of the farm...is very systematic. Usually, two of the women and four of the children are kept at the farm, which is about two miles from the hotel. During the winter the weaving of rag-carpets is carried on at the former. In the hotel the work is apportioned as follows: there is one cook for meat, one for breakfast and pastry, and one general assistant. One of the younger girls washes glass and silverware, and two wash the remaining dishes, while one of the little boys is kept about the kitchen to attend to odds and ends.....Whenever work is pressing at any particular point, help is given according to the necessity. There is a change all round, including the farm every month, and the cooks are now changed every two weeks. The average day's work is only about four hours, and, when that is done, each is free to amuse herself as she chooses.

Sounds pretty great, right? While McWhirter was the financial wizard behind the group's economic success, all decisions, no matter how big or small, were made with input from the whole group. As so often happens in Texas, economic success paved the way for social acceptance and in 1896 McWhirter was elected to and served as the first woman on the Board of Trade.



Central Hotel, Belton, Texas; date unknown. Courtesy of the Bell County Museum.

MOVING ON

Not content to rest on their laurels, the women continued to spread their beliefs and investments out into the wider world. Martha wrote legislation demanding that women retain equal status and property rights once married, legislation that would not be passed in Texas until 1967. The women visited other utopic communities in Chicago and New York, urging them to include gender parity into their communal system. These ideas were too radical for the Shakers or Oneideians, communities run by charismatic men who were not prepared to include freedom for women in the ideologies they lived by. The women's most successful ventures were economic; they invested in a hotel in New York, run by one of Martha's sons, that remained in operation through the 1920s. Finally, in 1898, the women decided to retire from the Central Hotel in Belton, to further pursue cultural and national interests. They moved to Washington D.C. where they bought a house in Mount Pleasant and several rural properties in the surrounding area which they rented out. In 1902, they formally incorporated as the Women's Commonwealth, and gained a national audience, with articles written about their life and history. Martha McWhirter died in 1904, at the age of seventy-seven. She is buried in the Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington

D.C.. The group continued to operate, with Fannie Holtzclaw as their appointed leader. Though after Martha's death, the group's membership was reduced from thirty to eighteen. The group's membership continued to dwindle, due mostly to aging and death. Finally, the last member, Martha Scheble, died in 1983. She was still living on their farm in Maryland when she passed away.

There is no historical marker where the Central Hotel once stood in downtown Belton. There is a plaque outside Martha's house, and in the archives of the Bell County Museum, you can find artifacts, letters, newspaper clippings, and books on the Women's Commonwealth. I hadn't heard about them until a friend, who was passing through Belton stumbled across their story and passed it along to me. Women's stories are so often scrubbed from the myths we make of who we are. And the history of the women's movement in America has avoided emphasizing its ties to religious or spiritual beginnings. But the story immediately intrigued me, mostly because after the year of isolation we've had, of trying to parent, home-school, and work from home, communal living and a reliance on a homemade economy makes lots of sense. The Women's Commonwealth reminds us that change takes time. That it is not singular but communal, built on pragmatism and strong social bonds. Though it took generations for the rest of Texas to catch up, the women lived uncompromisingly by their standards, light years ahead of their time.

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