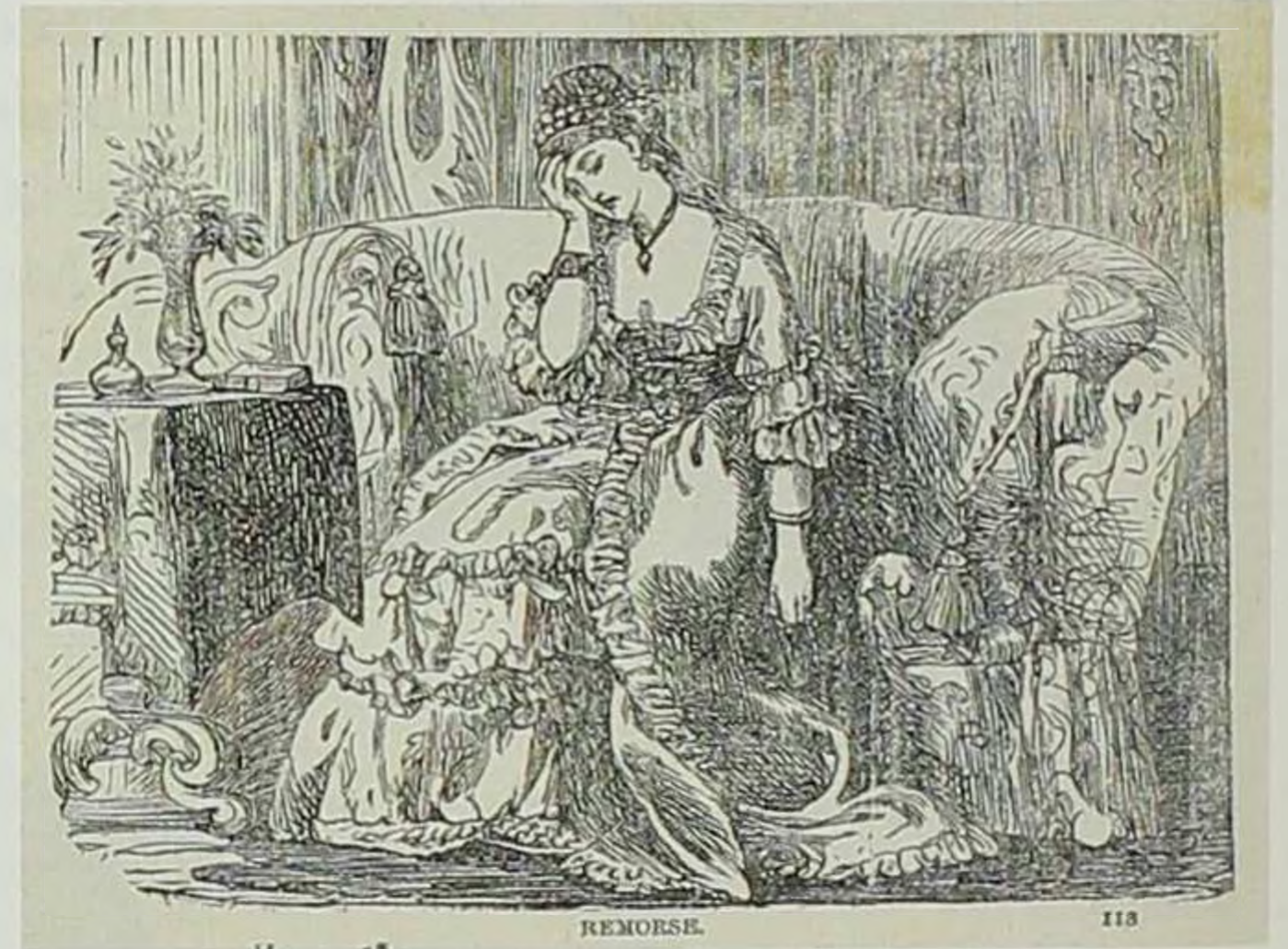


“Save Them Before

Cordelia Throop Cole and the WCTU’s Social Purity Movement

by Megan Hailey-Dunsheath



Keokuk, Iowa, March 1853
“I gave a lecture on physiology to about 100 persons, . . . an august assembly of faculty and students from the collegiate institute. . . . Formerly the institute has employed a professor in the medical college here to give these lectures. Today I had the overwhelming compliment that my lectures were better than his. By the way, do you recollect the woman who lectured in New York State last summer and that I would not deign to listen to her and about how much I said about the impropriety even the absurdity of a woman lecturing? Well—what do you think now when I tell you that I have become a public lecturer?”

Cordelia

Cordelia Throop was joking when she wrote in this letter to her brother, James, that she had become a public lecturer. The 20-year-old teacher had no idea that by the end of her life she would have lectured to, as well as written for, numerous audiences across and beyond Iowa. Her speeches and writings would not be science lessons, as her first lecture had been, but would urge her listeners to protect the purity of their children and sanctity of their homes.

Cordelia Throop Cole would participate in many efforts to improve society, from working for a public library, to championing the prohibition of alcohol, to organizing the dissemination of religious materials. At the center of her beliefs and activities was the idea that

the family was the core of society and should remain so. This belief led her to work for social purity, a movement that sought to cleanse society of sexual practices considered deviant, such as masturbation, premarital sex, and prostitution, which she believed threatened the strength of the family.

As the Iowa Superintendent of the Department of Social Purity of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in the 1880s and 1890s, Cole strove to replace the perceived licentiousness and unwholesome sexual behavior of society with a code of sexual morals that would be equally binding on men and women. While many social purity reformers attempted to “rescue” women, and occasionally men, involved in prostitution or promiscuous behavior, Cole chose to focus on what she thought was the root of the problem—poor child rearing. Cole believed that for girls and boys to properly defend themselves against the sexual temptations of the world, parents had to

A vigorous campaigner for social purity, Cordelia Throop Cole (top right) wrote numerous newspaper columns, speeches, and tracts (such as “Our Girls”) on the importance of family-centered sex education. Without this, she believed, young women would fall into the hands of panderers and end up as prostitutes. The drawing titled “Remorse” (above) illustrated *Save the Girls* by Mason Long, an 1883 book that sounded a similar alarm.

"They Fall"



No. 15.

OUR GIRLS.

BY MRS. C. T. COLE.

It is obvious to all who, through reading or travel, are familiar with social conditions in other lands, that our American girls have a degree of freedom unknown elsewhere. This freedom results largely from the unique history and growth of our country. We do not propose, at this time, to deal with its causes, however interesting, but with the fact itself, and the duties it imposes upon parents and guardians, upon the professed followers of Christ, and upon society at large.

The peculiar lack of restriction, or *espionage* of our young girls which so strikes our foreign visitors has been greatly intensified during the last two decades by the new conditions which co-education involves, and the steadily increasing list of employments now open to young women. The American girl of to-day literally steps into a new world, with conditions, possibilities and ambitions entirely unknown a generation ago. She finds herself with an entire change of front to life and society.

We are proud of the way our girls, as a whole, have met this change, and adapted themselves to these new conditions. But we must not let this pride blind us to the new dangers that cluster about these maiden feet, or to the fact that there is an awful aggregate of thousands of untaught, unguarded girls who yearly stumble in dark places, and are lost in the deepest, darkest sense of the word. The conviction is forced upon us that the cry of these lost ones is steadily increasing in volume and pathos—that especially in this Columbian year it has been allowed to increase to a shocking extent. We must not forget that just below the glistening grandeur of the White City with its beautiful chime and triumphant music, there is an awful undertone of pathos and despair that makes the angels weep.

With our dull senses that do not penetrate beneath the surface

ALL ITEMS FROM THE COLE THROOP COLLECTION (SASHICWA CITY) UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

prepare their children for the sexual situations they might face.

Cole's concerns with morality and society's apparent disregard for it were present early on, but it would take her some time to find her role in the fight against vice. As a young mother in the 1860s, she expressed her anxieties about the effects of poor child rearing, but she would not begin writing and speaking on social purity and children until the 1880s, after her own children had grown up. This stemmed largely from an absence of opportunity; the social purity movement did not exist as a cohesive force with an actual name until the early 1880s. Cole's personal reservations about speaking in public also played a part. Though she readily wrote about her opinions on reform and community matters, she was quite hesitant about voicing them to an audience. One of the most remarkable things about this notable woman is her development from the embarrassed, reluctant speaker on physiology in 1853 to the determined field worker of the WCTU's Department of Social Purity in 1890.

Cordelia Throop (pronounced *troop*) was born in 1833 to Deborah Goldsmith Throop and George Addison Throop of Hamilton, New York. Before her marriage, Deborah had been an itinerant painter, an unusual occupation for a woman, and had met George while painting his portrait. When Cordelia was two years and James four months old, their mother died, leaving the two children in the care



A constant correspondent, Cordelia Throop reminded her brother, James, "Morally let us aim high."

of their father. He could not care for two small children and soon sent them to live with different sets of grandparents; he died when Cordelia was 15. Although he had not lived with his children, they had maintained a close relationship and later in life Cordelia spoke of him very fondly.

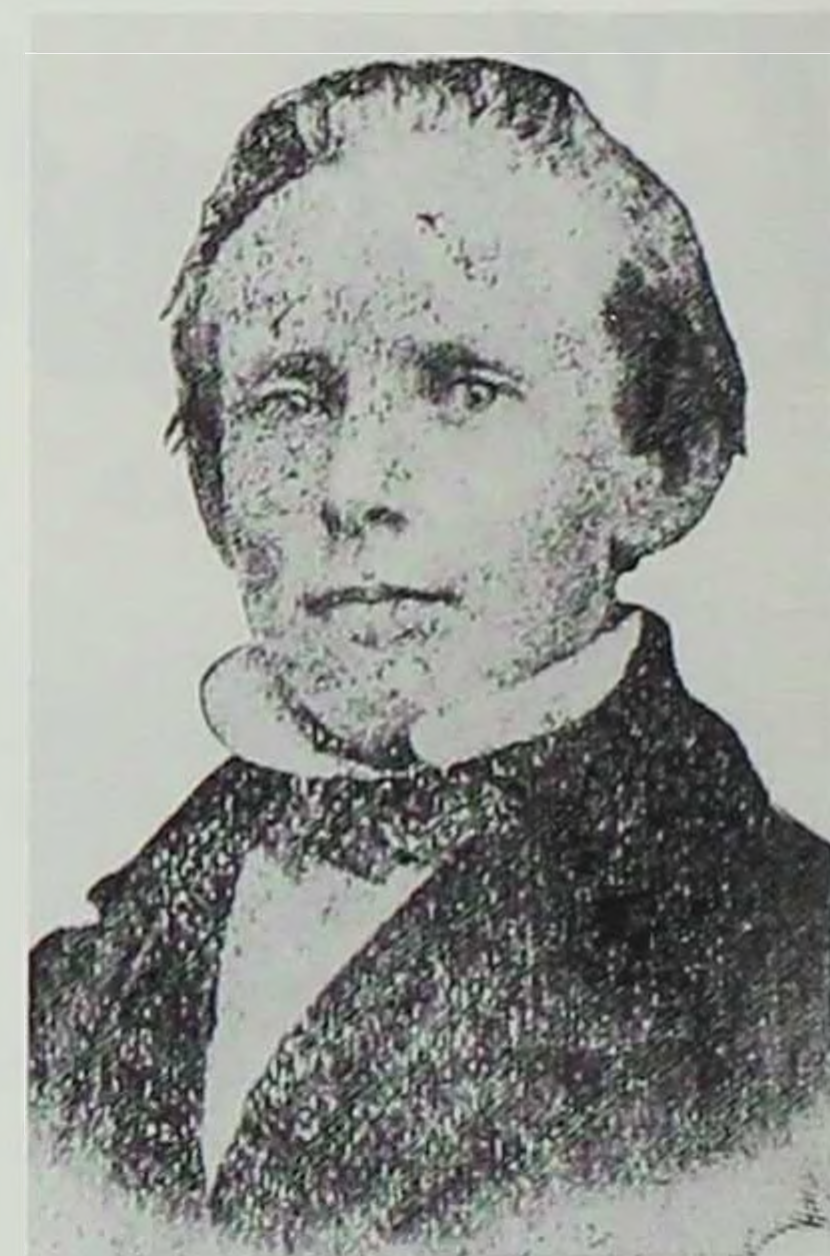
As children, Cordelia and her brother James formed a close bond, one that lasted through their adult lives. They kept up a regular, intimate corre-

spondence, and the many letters James received from Cordelia while she was at school in New York and then as a teacher in Iowa, reveal her innermost thoughts. She was an extremely energetic, optimistic young woman with an independent spirit. After their father's death, Cordelia wrote to James, "We are now thrown upon our own resources. Morally let us aim high. Let no foul stain ever spot the purity of our character. I know not your taste as regards education, but for my own part I regard it as one of the highest earthly objects we can attain."

In keeping with this sentiment, Throop entered Hamilton Academy, an all-female boarding school in her hometown; she swept rooms and sewed to pay her way. She loved school and wrote to James that she did not "intend to complete my education here or even in this short life," as she wanted to learn so many things. While at the academy, Throop also discovered that she had a definite gift for writing. In addition to her compositions for school, she wrote creative essays and poems on beauty, nature, and home. She also began writing poetry, prose, and "funny articles" for the school newspaper. Throop noted with surprise that "the girls . . . seem to think I am adept in such articles."

When Throop finished school in 1852, though she wanted to go as a missionary to India, she moved to Galesburg, Illinois, at the invitation of an aunt to earn money to pay off her remaining school bills. Soon after the move, she accepted a teaching position at the co-educational Collegiate Institute in Keokuk, Iowa. The only female teacher at the school, Throop taught all subjects, including advanced math and sciences, to both "young ladies and gentlemen," as well as leading Sunday school classes for six dollars a week.

Her wages were by no means excessive, as she estimated with dismay that she would spend at least four dollars a week for rent and food. Her money problems increased when she came down with a severe case of typhoid fever and incurred expensive medical bills. Within the next few years, however, Throop began to make more money and in 1854 took a



Raised apart from Cordelia, James Throop would eventually join her in Mt. Pleasant.

more prestigious position at a new school in Henry, Illinois. Despite the hard work and relatively modest pay, she loved teaching, as she believed that "the Great Guide" had pointed her in that direction (though she still did not give up her missionary dreams). For Throop, teaching was a way to help others; she enjoyed the companionship of her pupils and the feeling that she was doing something useful.

Her letters during this period also reflect her growing interest in political issues like slavery and temperance. Led by her strong sense of morality, she reacted to these problems with intense emotions. In 1853, she refused a position as lady preceptress at a girls' school in Kentucky, even though the salary was \$700 a year. She felt that her antislavery ideas made it impossible for her to teach effectively in the South. Throop also became outraged at the conflict over slavery in Kansas, calling the fighting "the seeming triumph of the wicked," and joined the Women's Kansas Aid Society to assist the cause of "the noblest representatives the north ever produced" against "the hell hounds of the South." Excited by a visiting lecturer during the campaign for state-wide prohibition in Illinois

in 1855, Throop also became aware of the numerous saloons in Henry and their harmful influences. Accordingly, she decided to join a temperance group named Templar of Honor and work for prohibition.

In 1856, Cordelia met and married William Cole, a friend of her brother's and a student at Lombard University in Galesburg, who shared her views on temperance and slavery. The couple soon moved to Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, where William's



William Cole shared Cordelia's liberal beliefs. Wed in 1856, they soon moved to Iowa.

family lived. There, William operated a rather unsuccessful sawmill and began substitute preaching for Universalist ministers, even though he had not been ordained.

Cordelia shared William's strong liberal religious beliefs and encouraged his involvement with the church; she wrote to James in 1857 that she even longed to preach herself. Instead, she kept the books

for the sawmill and devoted her energies to house-keeping. She and William started a family; Ernest was born in 1858, Ralph in 1860, and Hugh in 1863. In her spare time Cole, signing herself "Pilgrim," wrote letters to the local newspapers suggesting community improvements and detailing the proceedings of the local literary society. William became more serious about preaching and realized he needed to further his theology studies; in 1863 the couple and their three children moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where William attended Harvard Divinity School.

While in Massachusetts, Cordelia Throop Cole was exposed to a wealth of new political and religious ideas, and she mingled with the literary community of Boston. The family lived down the road from Longfellow, and she wrote of hearing such noted speakers as abolitionists Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison, temperance reformer J.B. Gough, and Anna Dickinson, who lectured on politics and women's rights. Dickinson's talks on women's issues especially inspired Cole; she wrote that "it was splendid to see a woman so appreciated" and resolved to work for equality of the sexes. (William also wanted to explore as many religious ideas as possible, and their letters describe a very fake seance the couple attended while he was researching spiritualism.) Cordelia took advantage of the various entertainments offered, frequently attending the theater and opera. According to one of the Coles' children, William later said that Cordelia had benefited more from the intellectual life in Boston than he had from his studies at Harvard.

Perhaps Cordelia's time in Boston did inspire her, because, when William was about to graduate in 1865, she wrote her brother, "I have reached a point where I must work. I have been hibernating for years spiritually and intellectually. There is something stirring within me through my whole being. I must do something." William also recognized that she was tired of housekeeping and needed to focus on some other activity. Her most fervent wish, she confided to James, was for the family to move to the western frontier where she and William would work as a team of Unitarian missionaries. Her desire to spread the faith in the West was not realized, however, and the Coles moved back to Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. Though the couple did not travel far westward, Cole would find plenty to occupy her time in Mt. Pleasant, where she and William lived for the rest of their lives.

During the 1860s and 1870s, Mt. Pleasant was a growing intellectual and cultural center, earning in



Mt. Pleasant, the home of Iowa Wesleyan College, prided itself on its intellectual and cultural activities in the 19th century.

1870 the nickname "Athens of Iowa." The town of 4,500 attracted quite prominent people as lecturers, such as Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as well as numerous ministers, reformers, and minor literary figures. Cole greatly enjoyed these cultural activities, and was a member of the Ladies' Reading Circle, which organized in 1872 to sponsor a lecture series. One speaker the group brought was Bronson Alcott, the New England thinker and reformer who held "Conversations" on religion, literature, and morality. During his visit in 1873 he stayed, and lectured, at the Coles' home, where he inspired Cordelia and several other women to work for the establishment of a public library. A few years later the Ladies' Reading Circle changed its name to the Ladies' Library Association, with its mission to institute a public library for the town of Mt. Pleasant.

As a founder of the Ladies' Library Association and its president from 1879 to 1886, Cole was able to use her writing skills to benefit the group. She scripted plays such as "The Last Days of Pompeii" for fundraisers and put together petitions to the city council for a tax to support the library. Though the library did not gain city funding or establish a permanent home until years later, its failure was not due to a lack of effort on her part. She wrote numerous letters to the lo-

cal newspapers urging people to support the tax increase, touching on a theme that would later become her primary goal—the protection of children and the home. In one letter she warned parents that "human beings are what society makes them," and that good literature was essential in providing children with appropriate role models. In another letter, Cole reminded the town that not all families could afford to pay for a membership to a private library, so a tax was necessary to give poor children access to books. Clearly, she saw the importance of education to child raising and believed that every child had a right to the benefits of literature.

During this same period, she was also pursuing her interests in religion through the Iowa Unitarian Association (I.U.A.). In 1877, a group of six Iowa Unitarians, including Cordelia and William, met in Burlington and formed the I.U.A. for the purpose of establishing a network of ministers and concerned citizens to promote "liberal religion," especially Unitarianism. After helping organize the group, Cordelia was elected secretary and served in that capacity until 1884. As secretary, she recruited ministers to serve in Iowa churches, helped involve established churches in the association, and took part in planning local and state conferences. She also took charge of the Iowa

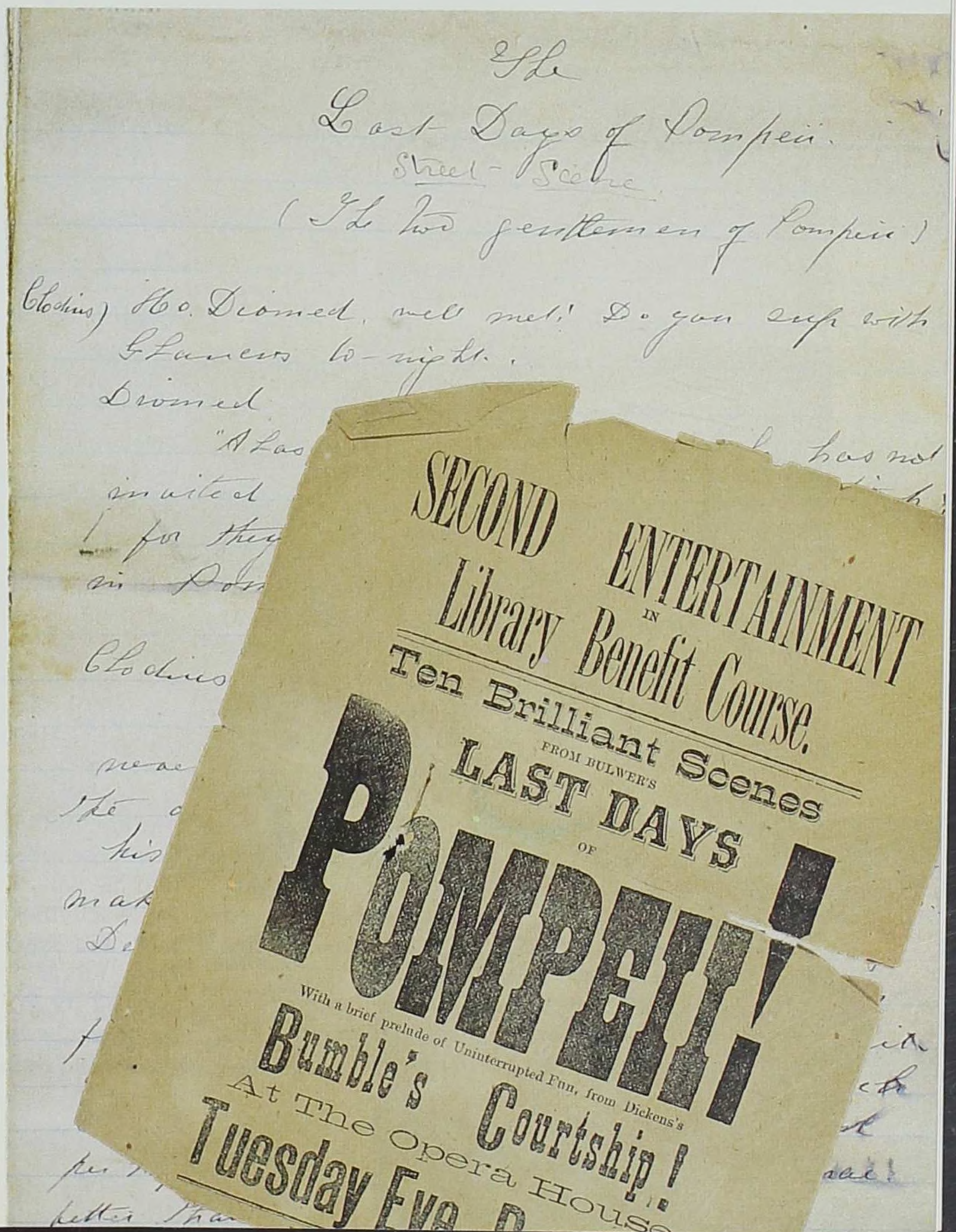
branch of the "post-office mission," a program to distribute liberal religious literature and information on Unitarianism. Cole contacted new preachers to inform them of the books and periodicals available, and she managed a lending library with materials available to anyone interested. All her duties as secretary, particularly her work with the post-office mission, allowed her to develop the organizational skills that would later prove useful when she took charge of the Department of Social Purity of Iowa's WCTU.

In addition to carrying out her duties as I.U.A. secretary, Cole began to explore the possibility of public lecturing. At the first annual meeting of the I.U.A. in 1878 she gave a speech titled "The Sympathy of Religions," in which she theorized that all religions could come together under the broad roof of Christianity. Speaking at the conference did not come easily for Cole, and she worried that her ideas and comments were not deserving of an audience. However, her friends John and Lucretia Effinger, also members of the I.U.A., encouraged her to give her speech, and she overcame her reservations sufficiently to present her paper. The experience must have been somewhat positive; though she did not jump into the lecture circuit, Cole gradually began to speak at other Unitarian conferences. She also spoke to a women's group in Des Moines on women's work in religion and was invited to speak at a national Unitarian conference on the same subject.

Enthusiastic about women's participation in the church, Cole also assisted with the ordination of two women, Mary Augusta Safford and Sarah Whitney, as Unitarian ministers. Most denominations did not allow women to serve as

Passionate about the importance of public libraries and children's access to good literature, Cordelia Throop Cole helped raise money and distribute petitions for a Mt. Pleasant library. She scripted the "The Last Days of Pompeii" as a library fund raiser.

preachers, but the Unitarians reluctantly accepted them. In many western states, like Iowa, where ministers were scarce, Unitarian congregations even welcomed women preachers. At both the ordinations of Safford, who was already preaching in Humboldt, Iowa, and Whitney, Cole presented the "charge," a speech directed at the new minister, welcoming her to the church and advising her on her new responsibilities. In her address to Safford, Cordelia expressed her delight that Iowa was to have a woman minister, partially because she believed women had special characteristics that fitted them to the ministry. She told Safford to make use of her inherent feminine sensitivity and capacity for mothering to build a strong com-





As owner and editor of the Mt. Pleasant Free Press, James Throop frequently published the Coles' essays on reform topics. In this 1894 photo of the Free Press office, Throop is the bearded man on the steps; his son, Addison, is in the striped apron.

munity within her church. Throughout her life, Cordelia would continue to encourage women to use what she believed to be their special qualities, such as their strong morals and unique understanding of children, to improve society.

When the Coles had returned to Iowa from Boston in 1865, William expected to begin preaching full time, but Mt. Pleasant was not able to support a Unitarian church. Instead of ministering to his own congregation, he became a guest preacher, speaking at different churches in the area. To support his growing family, William, with two of his brothers, started Cole Brothers, a business that manufactured and sold pumps and lightning rods around the Midwest. Head of the Iowa branch, William discovered he had a talent for business and managed several other business ventures. Cole Brothers proved quite profitable and the Coles eventually became one of the wealthier families in Mt. Pleasant.

One place in which they invested their money was their home, which Cordelia called "Cedarcroft." The family had purchased the 13-acre property in 1860 but

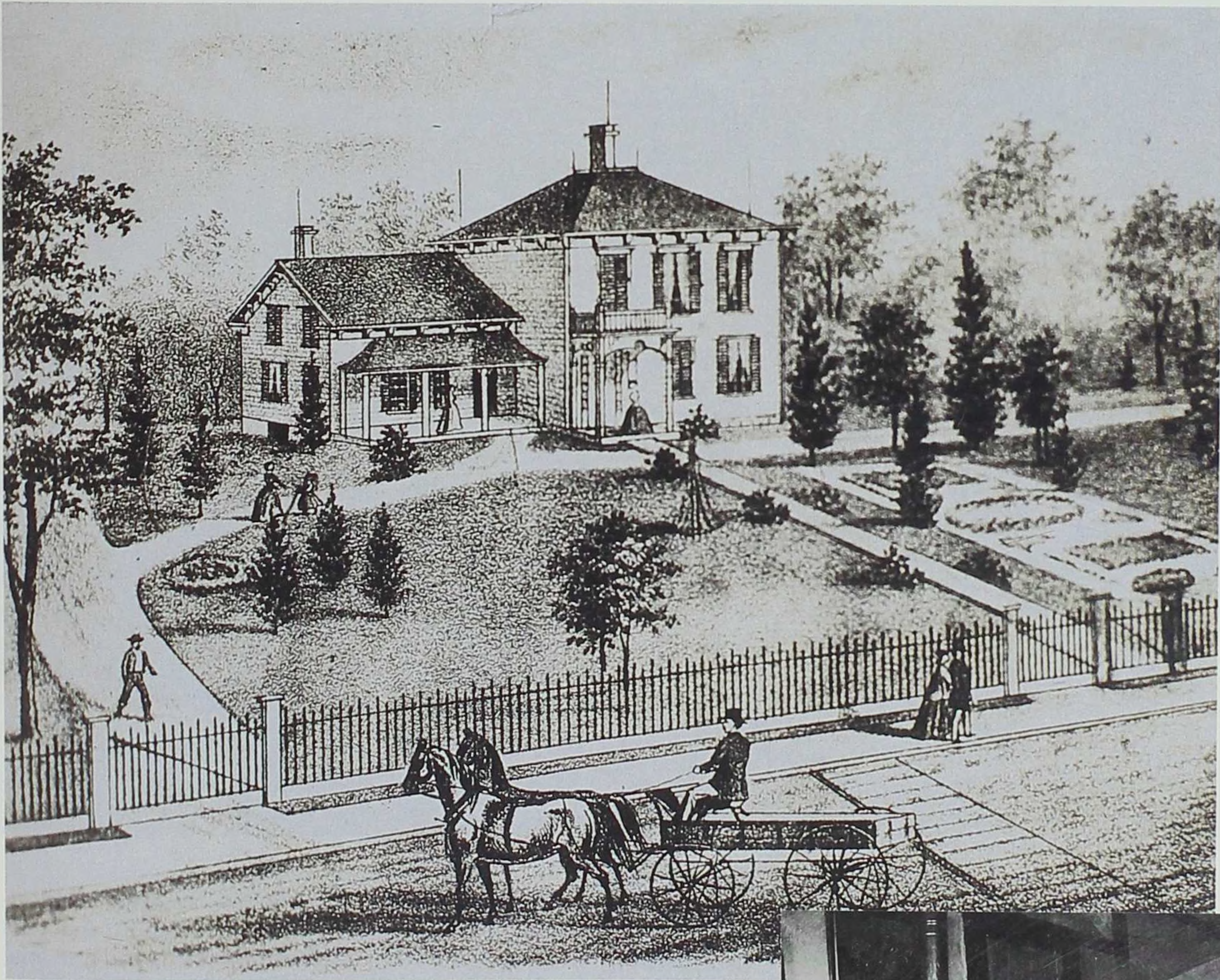
could only afford to build a small house. As their family soon needed more space, they built on a large addition in 1870. Cordelia and William tried to make Cedarcroft a true home, not only for their children, but for every child in town. They welcomed guests and cheerfully permitted any child to play in their pond, though it is rumored that before William let them swim, he made them promise to abstain from alcohol and tobacco until they turned 21. Known for generosity and hospitality, the couple also hosted several benefits and parties for the Ladies' Library Association. Perhaps because Cordelia had never had a very stable home as a child, she wanted to provide a place where everyone was welcome.

Her close relationship with her brother, James Throop, continued, as he followed Cordelia and William to Mt. Pleasant. He married in 1858 and both he and his wife, Rowena, were involved in many of the same activities as the Coles; they were active Unitarians, and Rowena Throop was a member of the Ladies' Library Association and the WCTU. James worked for William's business and then became the owner and editor of the *Free Press* in 1872. In this capacity he published many of Cordelia's essays on re-

form topics and William's writings on politics and prohibition.

The Cole family continued to grow; in addition to the three older boys, William and Cordelia had four more children. Clara was born in 1866, Olive in 1869, Arthur in 1872, and Lucretia ("Lulu") in 1874. Unfortunately, Lulu became ill and died in 1878, when she was only three. This blow was followed by Ralph's death two years later at the age of 21. In public, Cordelia maintained her composure; one month after

Ralph's death she traveled as planned to a Unitarian conference in Chicago. Nevertheless, the loss of two children drained Cole of her natural energy and left her feeling empty. Her friends persuaded her to take a long vacation alone to visit family in Illinois and New York. In letters home, she frequently mentioned her overwhelming exhaustion and need for rest, which she eventually found with her relatives in New York. The trip was beneficial, and Cordelia wrote William that she felt Ralph's "calm, steady" presence helping



Cedarcroft, the Coles' home in Mt. Pleasant, was situated on 13 acres and in front of a large pond. The pond was a popular spot for the town's children, and the home was a gathering spot for local cultural and reform leaders. The Coles (here shown in their parlor) hosted many events, including "Conversations" with Bronson Alcott, New England transcendentalist and father of Louisa May Alcott. For more on his visit, see page 116.





her find peace. She also resolved "to begin to talk about *my work* for it will henceforth be the centre of my life."

One area of Cole's "work" was temperance, and both she and William labored in this area. Temperance had always been a concern for the couple, and Iowa was the site of a long struggle between those for and those against prohibition. Both

Cordelia and William supported the state constitutional amendment strategy for prohibition, and both also favored a non-partisan approach to the problem. In their view, temperance was a clear-cut issue: only saloonkeepers and immoral drunkards would oppose prohibition; any honest, moral person would favor it. This view was common to many native-born Americans who did not understand the important role social drinking played in certain communities, particularly those of German-American immigrants.



SHSI, HARPER'S WEEKLY, AUG. 18, 1883, PAGE 521

The Coles' concerns about drinking were based on reality, however, because Americans' use of alcohol had greatly increased after the Civil War. In the 1880s, working-class districts all over the country had about one saloon for every 50 adult males; in Chicago there were more taverns than grocery stores, meat markets, and dry goods stores put together. Women did not frequent saloons, but men's drinking affected them as well; many men drank away their own and their wives' wages and physically abused their families.

The toll of alcohol on the family is dramatized in this 1883 *Harper's Weekly* drawing, "The Mill and the Still." Both William and Cordelia championed temperance—William from the pulpit and press, Cordelia through the WCTU.

Women did not have the legal rights to protect themselves against abusive, irresponsible husbands and so were forced to make the best of the situation. Saloons were also often associated with gambling, prostitution, and crime. In addition, the liquor industry was able to buy votes and influence politics. It is easy to see how temperance reformers reached the conclusion that saloons needed to be eliminated.

William was extremely active in temperance reform; he delivered sermons on the immorality of drinking and wrote numerous newspaper columns on the political aspects of prohibition. Though William was known for his zealous work, Cordelia was uncomfortable in the political arena and preferred involvement in local temperance societies like the White Ribbon Club. Because of her varied interests and her view of temperance as a social problem, she was becoming more attracted to a national temperance organization that was expanding its labors beyond the narrow goal of prohibition—the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).

A female-run society, the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union had been organized in 1874 to promote temperance through churches, lectures, and newspapers. The organization defined temperance as total abstinence from alcohol and even discouraged the use of alcohol for medicinal purposes, although some temperance groups believed the occasional drink was permissible. As time went on, the organization became more political and began advocating local and state prohibition legislation. The WCTU also greatly broadened its sphere of work to include any type of charity or reform remotely associated with temperance issues. With the motto of "Do Everything," the WCTU established departments to work for social reforms such as female suffrage, public kindergartens, and the employment of women police officers and prison wardens, issues not closely linked to temperance. The broad outlook paid off, and the organization became extremely popular, especially among native-born, middle-class women in the East and Midwest. Membership rose from 135 women in 1874 to 150,000 dues-paying members in 1890. The WCTU provided women with a socially acceptable forum in which to voice their opinions and become active reformers; temperance was a respectable issue and the



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WCTU a respectable organization. By the time Cole joined in the mid-1880s, every state and territory had an auxiliary WCTU.

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Iowa had been organized right after the National WCTU, and grew steadily through the 1870s. Iowa's chapter gained many members in the early 1880s, around the time of the passage and subsequent invalidation of the state prohibition constitutional amendment. At this time Mt. Pleasant started a local union of 40 members, which met weekly and sent delegates to the state conferences; in 1883 Cole's sister-in-law, Rowena Throop, became the local president.

Although the WCTU of Iowa did not pursue every reform the national organization did, its realm of work was still varied enough to interest Cole. The Iowa union operated a well-organized Legislation and Petitions Department, the Benedict Home for "fallen women," and the newspaper *The Iowa Messenger*, as well as other departments like Sabbath School Temperance Work, Young Women's Work, and Scientific Temperance Instruction, which worked to include temperance education in public schools. Like many women, Cole first joined the WCTU because of her interest in temperance work, and, like many, she eventually became involved in a totally different area of reform. Though she was not even present at the 1886 state convention where she was elected the first state

Like this 1866 petition from the "ladies of Hampton," Iowa, local and national temperance work was often fueled by women's concerns for families and community morals.

superintendent of the Department of Social Purity (also called White Shield and White Cross), Cole took on the position, determined to do her best.

The area of purity reform was relatively new, and the National WCTU's Department of Social Purity had just been established the year before. The social purity movement did not form as a response to an increase in prostitution or sexual impurity, but was one expression of Americans' growing dissatisfaction with and perception of society's overall immorality. Arising from the same concerns for personal virtue and social welfare as the abolition and temperance movements, purity organizations attracted men and women already involved with reform work, as well as parents worried about the future of their children. Efforts to reform prostitutes and other promiscuous women had existed for many years and had been endorsed by the WCTU, but these "rescue" efforts did not garner much enthusiasm. However, motivated by events in England, American reformers, including many women, began to speak out on sexual immorality and proposed a preventive approach to the problem.

One such incident in England was a sensational exposé in 1885 of the international trade in children for sexual purposes. Though the episode had taken place in Europe, the facts of the case were shocking enough to motivate Americans to action, especially after the WCTU uncovered instances of forced prostitution in Michigan and Wisconsin lumber camps. The possibility of a child prostitute trade in the United States naturally scared mothers, and caused many of them to overcome their reticence about public involvement in sexual reform. A positive development in England was the formation of the White Cross Army, a society established by the Church of England to promote chastity in young men. Members pledged to refrain from "impure" thoughts and actions, such as masturbation and visitation of prostitutes, and to respect a single standard of morality for men and women. The idea of moral societies quickly caught on in the United States, and in 1885 the WCTU established the Department of Social Purity, which emphasized preventive measures, like these societies, as a cure for the problem of sexual immorality.

The WCTU of Iowa was well

JAMES H. BEED COLLECTION (IHSU, IOWA CITY)

*Keep them from being tempted during the 1866
This must have been printed during the 1866
or a little later.*

TO THE VOTERS OF HAMPTON:

We, the ladies of Hampton, moved hereto by our deep interest in the peace and quiet—the honor and prosperity of our town, earnestly beg of you not to degrade the morals of our village and expose our husbands and friends to the corrupting influences of intemperance by voting to license beer saloons in Hampton, and your petitioners will ever pray, etc.

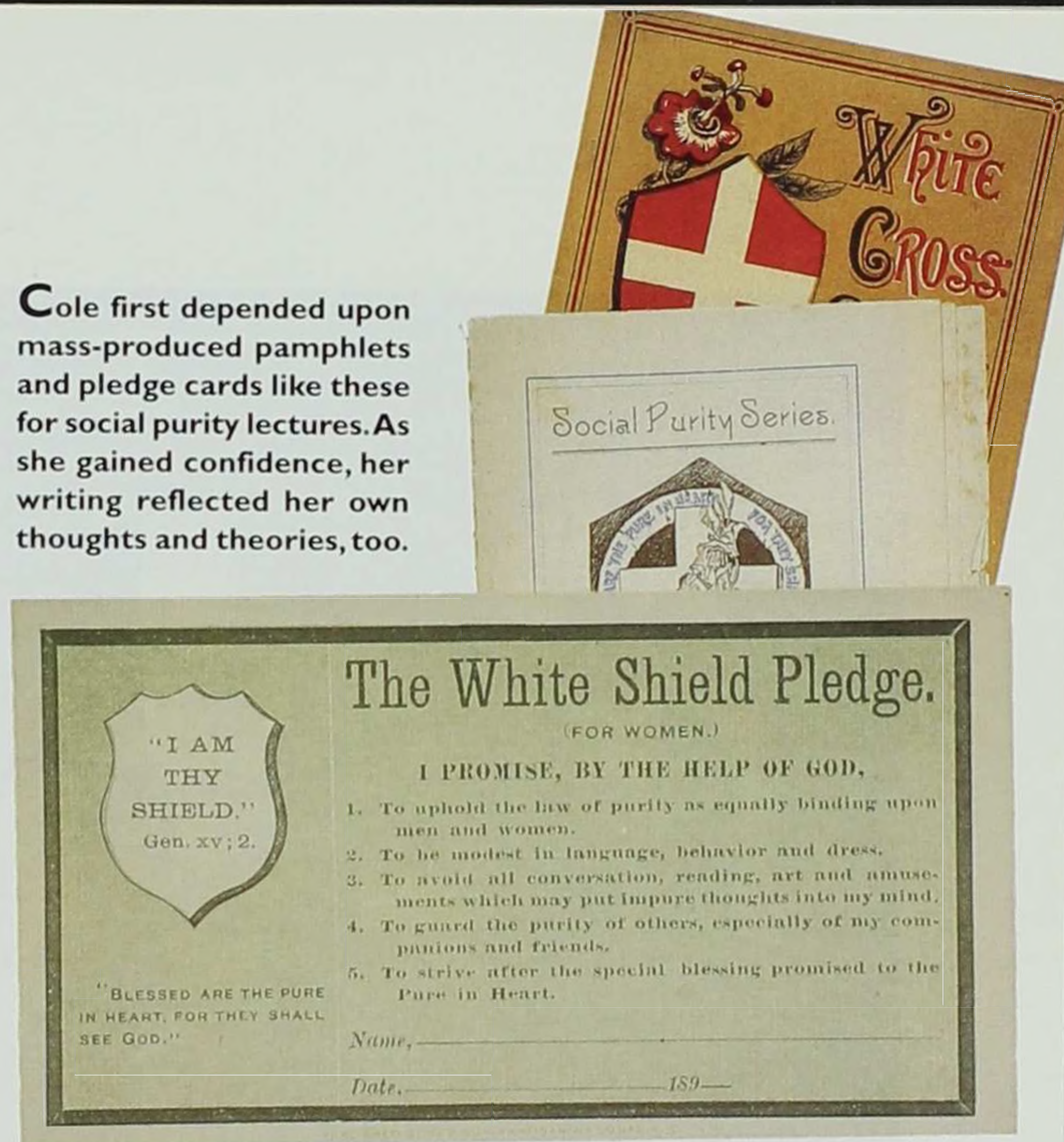
Signed by the following ladies: Mrs. A W Crawford, D Watt, Amanda Porter, Mary Jacobson, B A Sweley, Amelia Goldsborough, C Roberts, Mary Shane, C L Cloek, M L Butterfield, Mary Hodges, J Scott, Phoebe G Benson, Mary Hanson, C S Gullford, James Thompson, Jas. Mahoney, W E Atchison, M Gokey, C Bielby, D B Pond, W T Butts, T H Coble, M E Wright, E A Glenn, E B Hill, Josiah Phelps, J B Galor, Hannah Brown, Mary Relahan, Mary B Winkler, Della Flynn, A W Beach, M J Powell, Minerva Krog, Jennie Hanson, J S Jones, Hannah Cro-nan, Rachel North, Sarah Jane Holmes, Sarah A Pratt, Sarah P Coon, Emily Erickson, Mary E Martin, P Banta, R M Curtis, W E Eldridge, Robinson, G B Robinson, W H Hoxie, Eunice Gillett, Sarah Maynard, Mary L Raymond, Martha E French, Lizzie Hanna, Alexander, H D Smith, J W Wright, A M Balley, G L Pinkham, M P Boutin, Samuel Boutin, C W Boutin, Mary Brown, J West, J F Lattimer, J M Hemingway, L A Pease, N J Griffin, W B Waterbury, mer, M A West, J F Lattimer, G A Corning, M J Dow, G M Spencer, A R Carter, C S Tattle, Rilla McCrollis, A Eastman, J M Hemingway, J H King, W T O Rule, J D Myers, F X Miller, Sarah Gould, E W Hodges, E M Tyler, C H Pease, G H Brock, Parks, Elizabeth Jeffers, Edith Jeffers, M G Hinken, C H Pease, W T O Rule, J D W. J. Sweet, O F Sweet, C Rogers, John Atchison, J H King, W T O Rule, J D Larnagan, C Parker, Eliza M Spears, M McDonald, Steve Meyer, Tilly Clara E Rule, R A Vivers, C W Goldsborough, H E Norton, Steve Jones, S M Bell, R Benson, M

in step with, even ahead of, the times. Before work with prostitutes was a popular reform, it already had a department that concentrated on "rescue work" and maintained the Benedict Home in Des Moines, a refuge for pregnant single women and ex-prostitutes. In 1886, the state organization added the Department of Social Purity to concentrate on preventive work. Iowa's WCTU members also recognized that the two types of work, preventive and remedial, were entirely different; they attempted both, but kept the departments separate. Though Cole became the head of the Department of Social Purity, she was not involved in the operation of the Benedict Home and did not engage in remedial work with prostitutes. In Iowa, as in many other states, the WCTU's preventive efforts were especially important, because no other group was dealing with that aspect of social purity.

Because her department was so new, Cole did not come into the position of superintendent with a clear idea of what to do and how to do it. She was basically asked to plan the goals and methods of a new department, even though she did not have experience with either state-wide WCTU work or purity reform. Much of her knowledge of the social purity movement came from national reform magazines like *The Arena*, *The Forum*, and *The Philanthropist*, which she would later speak of as indispensable for a purity worker. She also took advantage of the pamphlets published by the National WCTU; these included information on social purity issues and suggested topics for Mothers' Meetings. She probably based her first lectures and meetings on these publications before developing her own theories and style. Though Iowa was far away from the East, the headquarters of the social purity movement, Cole was able to keep up to date with the literature and ideas of national reform leaders.

Cole had not worked with social purity organizations before, but many of her beliefs were common to the movement. Purity reformers were very concerned about the home, and they perceived promiscuity and prostitution as threatening the security of the family. The institutions of marriage and family were based on fidelity, trust, and respect, and unchaste behavior was contrary to these ideals. Cole's religious convictions also came into play, and she agreed with others who asserted that sexual impurity was contrary to God's will. The body was "God's temple," she believed, and should be treated with respect and love; to be impure was to disparage God. Purity work also appealed to Cole's belief in the equality of men and women, because reformers argued

Cole first depended upon mass-produced pamphlets and pledge cards like these for social purity lectures. As she gained confidence, her writing reflected her own thoughts and theories, too.



against the double standard for judging sexual behavior. Cordelia and William had always felt that women and men, though different from each other, ought to be judged on the same moral standard.

Cole was probably drawn to preventive work because of her deep-seated concern for and understanding of children. As a teacher and a mother, she had seen the importance of good child rearing and could apply that idea to work against sexual impurity. She believed that most people who practiced prostitution or immoral sexual behavior did not really want to, but were somehow led into these activities through ignorance. Young women did not desire to engage in premarital sex or become prostitutes, she reasoned, but were victims of their own ignorance. They were not alert to the dangers of dance halls or the smooth promises of older men, and fell into situations they had not wished for. Along the same lines, Cole believed that if boys were not taught about sex from their parents, they would learn the details in a sordid way from their friends or on the street. Without understanding or respecting the responsibilities of sex, these young men could become fascinated with pornography and racy shows. Cole fervently believed that proper instruction on sexual matters would eliminate many instances of "impure" sexual behavior.

Cole addressed work for purity by doing something she was both comfortable with and good at—writing. Writing letters to the editor had proved beneficial to her work for the Ladies' Library Association and for other community improvements, and she used



this method to publicize social purity issues. Her letters to Mt. Pleasant and Burlington newspapers began to focus on purity reform topics, like the need for stricter age-of-consent laws and chaperoned entertainment. Because her work for the WCTU was more than a local effort, she expanded her letter-writing campaign to include *The Iowa Messenger*, the Iowa WCTU's weekly paper, expressing her views and encouraging local unions to increase their work for social purity.

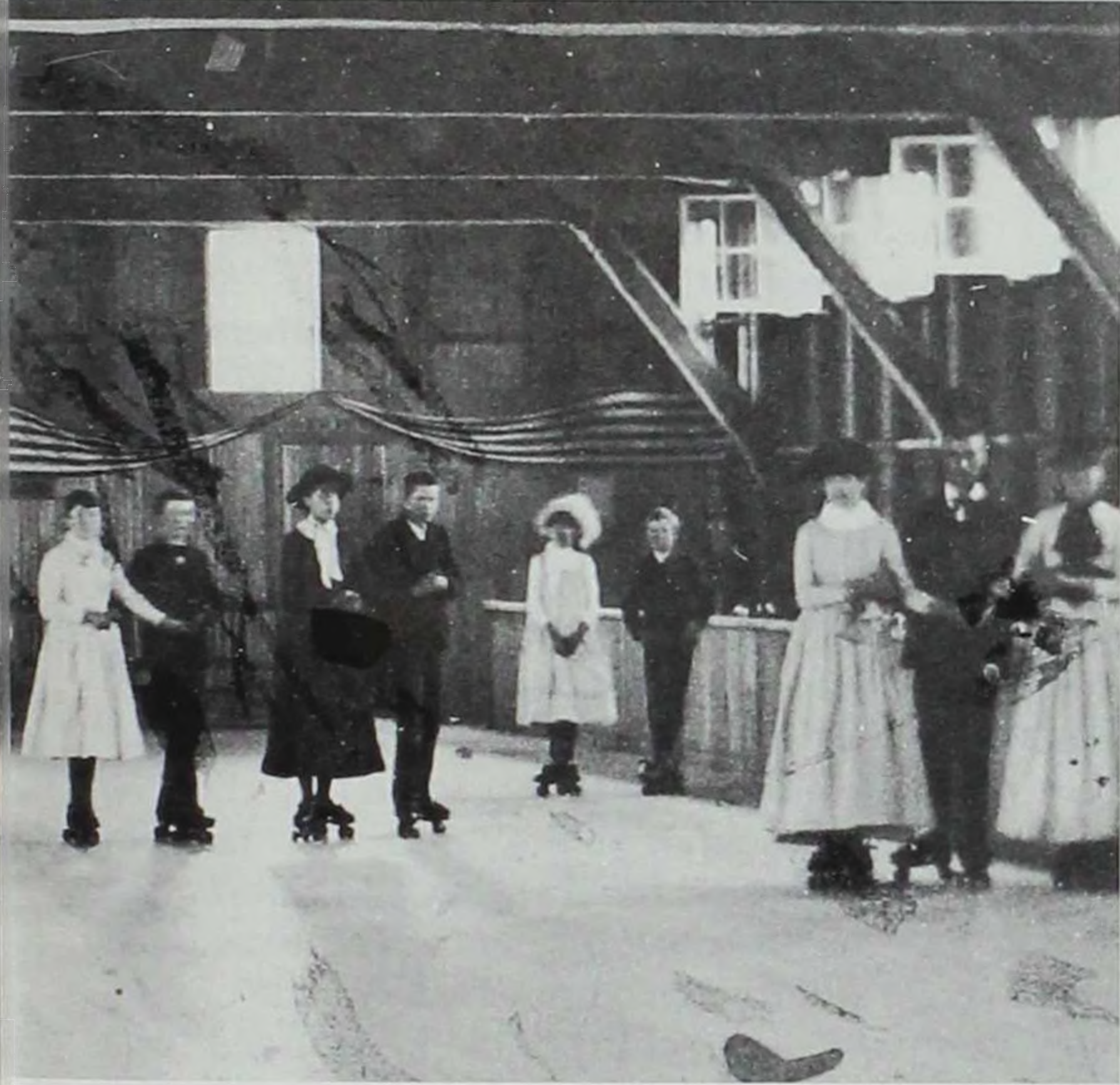
As she came to believe that letters were not enough to achieve the changes she envisioned, Cole "very timidly," in her own words, started to give public lectures. Speaking in public was especially difficult because she was a woman; in addition to her natural reluctance, she had to overcome the belief of many people that women should not speak in public, especially about sex. Opinions were changing, but the propriety of a woman acting as Cole did was still an issue. In several speeches she argued against the prejudice that prevented women from becoming involved with anti-prostitution work. Cole never mentioned public opinion as constraining her, but she did realize that by speaking about sexual purity she was doing something very new. In one small town, she thought that her audience came to see her primarily out of curiosity, as they had never heard a woman give a speech. Cole managed to overcome her hesitancy and many people's objections because of her strong feelings

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She began her speaking career with lectures in the Mt. Pleasant area, but quickly expanded her range to include the entire state, traveling to any town that requested her. Eventually Cole broadened her scope and launched tours in other states, including Kansas, Ohio, and Missouri. Her schedule was demanding; the first year she reported visiting about 90 places and giving 170 lectures. Cole intensified her efforts in the next few years in an attempt to visit even more towns and speak to even more audiences. In her busiest year she traveled over 9,000 miles, visited 116 places, and gave 257 talks, not including her visits to schools and Sunday schools. Because the demand for her lectures was so high, she scheduled all her visits to an area for the same time, usually allowing five or six weeks for a tour. At each town she visited, Cole tried to give at least one speech to a mixed audience and one to women only.

Cole's public lectures to mixed audiences usually served to familiarize people with purity reform and to mobilize their support for her work. Though prostitution and sexual "impurity" had always existed, they had not been discussed openly, especially by women. By initiating dialogue about impurity, Cole forced parents to face the possibility that their children might be

COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM



Although roller skating was a popular pastime in the late 19th century (as it was here at Sioux City's Goldie Roller Skating Rink), Cole and other social purity workers cautioned girls to stay away from rinks unless they were chaperoned.

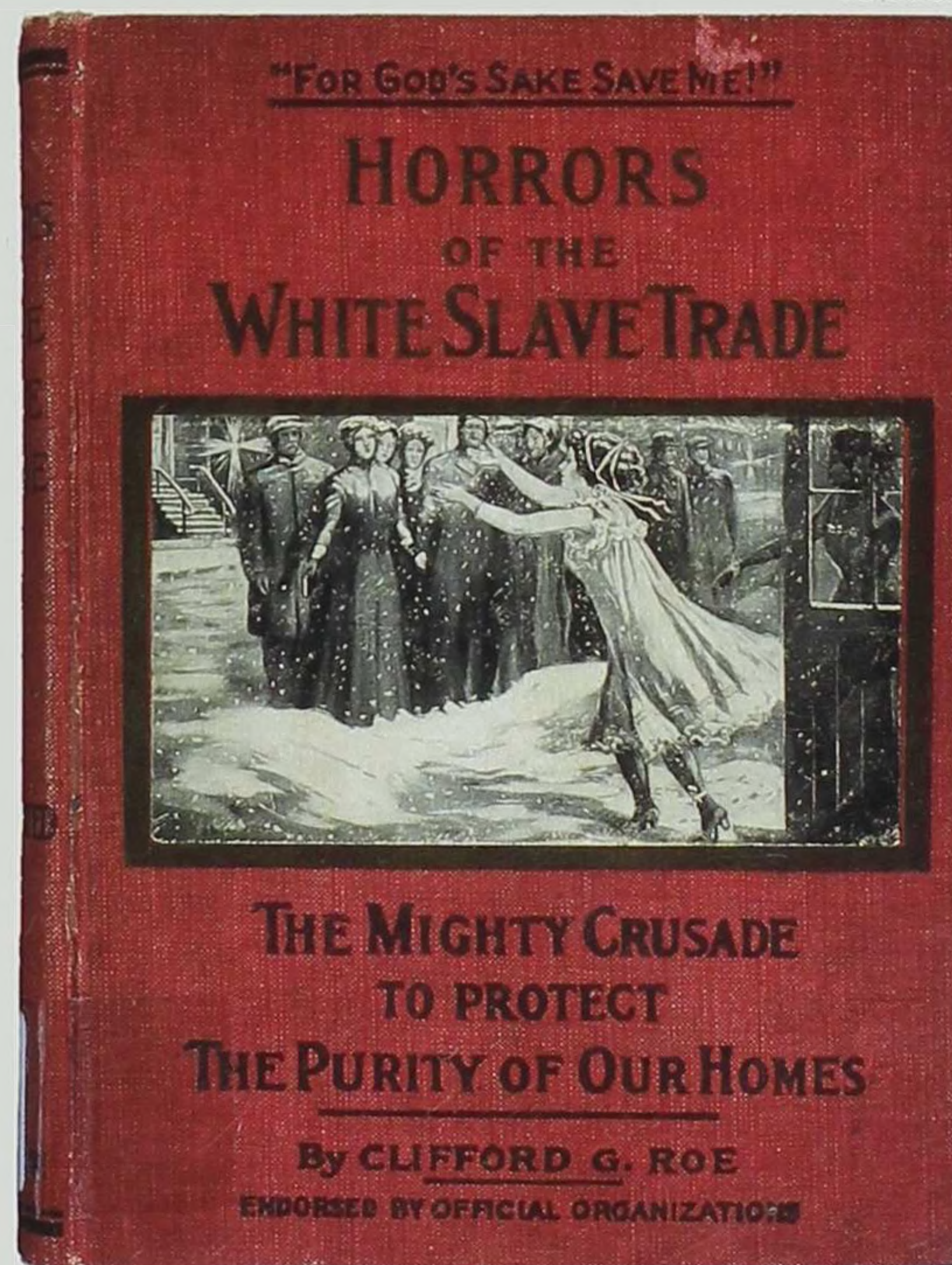
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Because the subjects she discussed were so delicate, Cole had to be careful not to offend anyone. She also had to keep from appearing unfeminine, because female lecturers were often criticized for being too forceful or mannish. Apparently, Cole succeeded; she received excellent reviews. Newspapers agreed that she was a "motherly, womanly woman," who approached her topic with "delicate tact." They also complimented her on her speaking style, which was

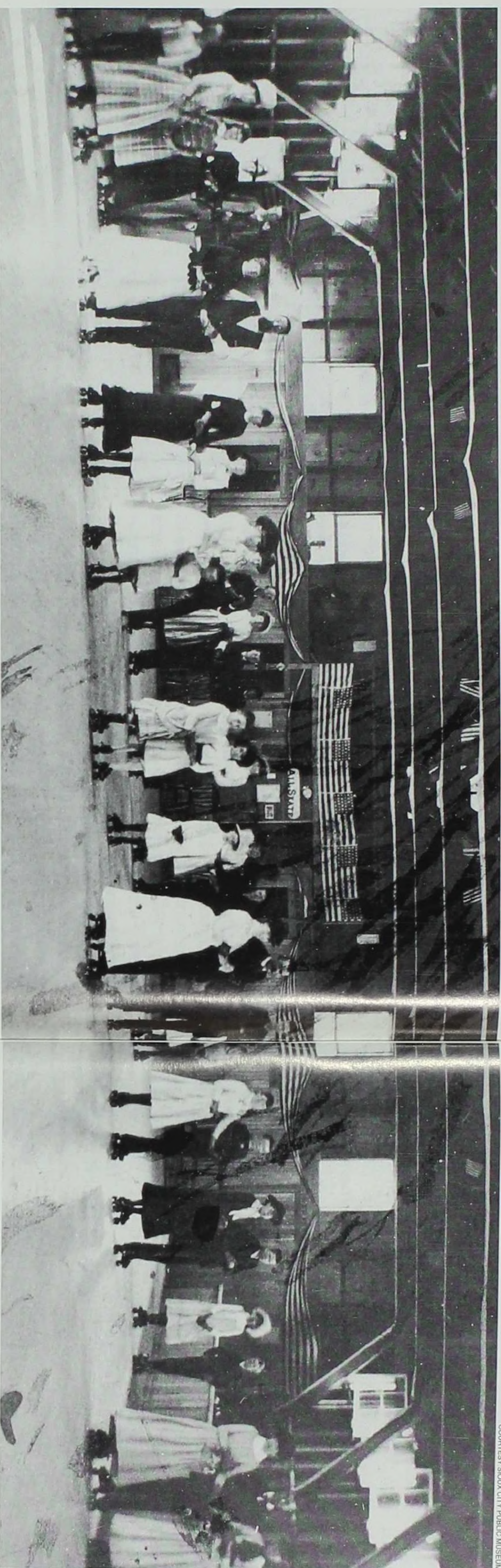
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Though being a female lecturer could often be difficult, Cole believed that women were better suited than men for leading the social purity movement. She accepted the traditional idea of separate spheres for men and women and agreed with many that women were especially influential in the areas of morality and the family. She viewed women as "queens of society [who] plant high moral standards" for men to follow and believed they had a special understanding of chil-

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



The fear of sexual predators eventually reached the level of hysteria as books decrying the "white slave trade" appeared. The one above is *Horrors of the White Slave Trade: The Mighty Crusade to Protect the Purity of Our Homes* (1911); one chapter, "How the Great Prairie State Cleaned Out the Vice Districts," details Iowa's Red Light Injunction and Abatement Law. The reform movement often depicted prostitution as the root of all social evil and assumed all prostitutes had been lured into it, because prostitution as a chosen profession fulfilling an economic need clashed with the 19th-century ideal of womanhood as one of innocence, purity, and domesticity.



COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM

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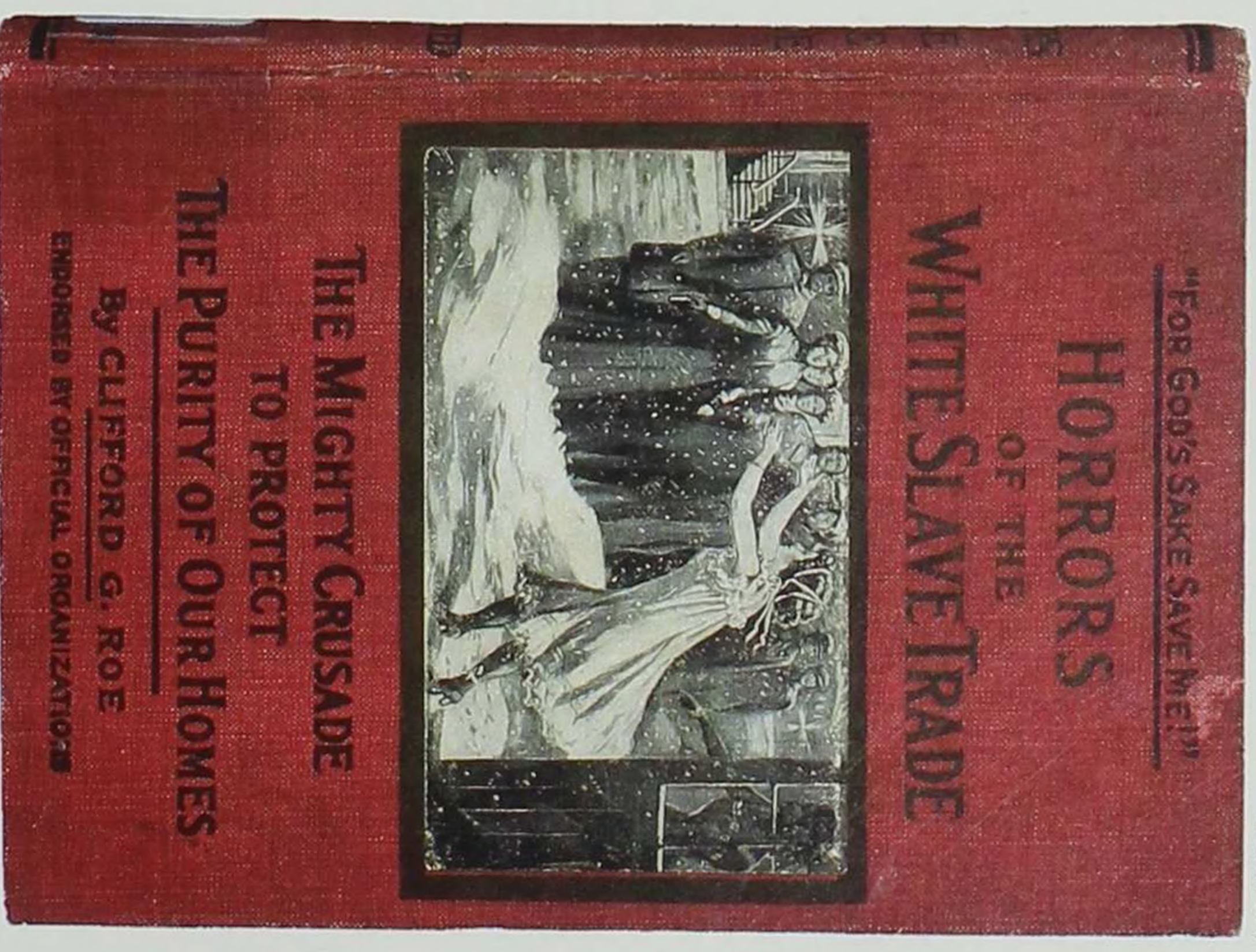
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SHIRLEY OWEN

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dren. Because she believed, as did most women in the WCTU, that women were responsible for the atmosphere of the home and that society was only a larger household, Cole often reminded women that their mission was "to be the home-keeper of society." It was their responsibility to mobilize and work for the purification of the community, because only with their help would sexual immorality end. Because of these beliefs, she viewed her addresses to women as the best way to further White Cross and White Shield work.

Her talks for women were less formal and more detailed than her public lectures. At these Mothers' Meetings, Cole addressed women on their special duties in preventing children from growing up to be sexually impure. In particular, she told them to instruct their children at an early age about sex. Cole especially encouraged mothers to use examples from nature by explaining to their children the pollination and growth of flowers, as well as the birth of their pets. Then the mothers could advance the conversation and apply the lessons of nature to human beings.

An excellent example of the methods Cole suggested is the "Egg Lesson." She encouraged mothers to teach their children that everything living comes from an egg and to show children the different types of eggs that exist for vegetables and animals. Then the mother would explain that "every egg has its nest"; like a bird's nest containing bird's eggs, fruit is a nest containing seeds. The children would then be taught that some animals keep their nests and eggs inside the mother's body; the obvious step was for the mother to then explain to her children that they had come from "the most wonderful of all nests" and eggs. While avoiding the indelicacy of actually naming body parts, Cole hoped to show mothers how to explain pregnancy simply and in a way that left children with more respect for and understanding of nature, as well as their own sexuality. If children respected their own potential and understood the consequences of their actions, Cole believed that they would refrain from extramarital sexual behavior.

Though Cole's sex education lessons lacked specifics, her advice was a definite break from the widely held idea that children should remain totally uninformed about sexual matters. The idea that parents should keep quiet about sex stemmed from the assumption that young men and women would refrain from sex if they were not taught about it. This belief was applied especially to girls, as they were presumed to be inherently more innocent and moral than boys. A

letter to the *North American Review* in 1893 supported the belief that "the maiden's . . . defence from evil lies, not in a knowledge of the world, but in a loftiness of ideals." Because adults mentally connected ignorance of sex to innocence of impurity, children often did not receive any sex education from their parents. As a result of Cole's talks, however, many mothers who heard her speak changed their opinions and began teaching their children about sex. Her Mothers' Meetings were extremely popular, and local women's groups frequently organized their own, meeting monthly to discuss social purity issues and their thoughts on children and motherhood.

Though Cole advocated openness within families and lectured on purity topics, she was wary of any public exhibition of sexuality that could lead children into impurity. She praised the "Comstock law" of 1874, which prohibited the distribution of pornography through the postal system, and advocated stricter enforcement of laws that suppressed the sale of "impure literature" and pictures. Cole even urged local unions to copy and distribute Iowa's pornography laws and to establish a committee to watch out for and report violations of the law, such as graphic advertisements for "demoralising shows." One such show in 1889 put up billboards in Des Moines, much to the dismay of the city's women, who protested and tried to get them removed. Cole and other members of the WCTU supported these efforts, because they agreed the posters were harmful to children and presented a degrading picture of women.

Cole also supported efforts to raise the age of consent, the age at which a girl could agree to sex without the act being classified as rape (boys were assumed able to consent to sex at any age). Before the emergence of the purity movement, the age of consent in Iowa was ten, the national average; by 1896 numerous bills to raise the age had been submitted and it had been changed to 15. The change was due, in part, to the WCTU, which had submitted petitions and assisted legislators in writing bills. Believing that every girl needed to be protected from the "violation of her chastity" until the age of 18, Cole spoke and wrote in support of the change.

In addition to working for legislative solutions to pornography and the exploitation of children, Cole showed parents how to protect their children from potentially damaging entertainment by closely monitoring their activities. Echoing an idea from her work for the Mt. Pleasant library, she asserted that trashy novels could present unsavory role models for children,

so mothers should make sure quality literature was available. She also warned her audiences of the dangers of public dances, roller skating rinks, and any other form of unchaperoned entertainment where girls and boys could mix.

Cole's efforts to protect children can be viewed as restrictive, but her concerns did reflect a serious situation. While prostitution was not increasing, the exposés of child prostitution and of the traffic in young girls were; parents believed, with foundation, that their girls were in danger of being tricked into a life of prostitution. The desire to raise the age of consent was based on this fear; with a high age of consent, the seducer or rapist of an innocent girl and the customer of a child prostitute could be prosecuted. Likewise, parents were worried that their boys were constantly tempted to frequent red-light districts and read trashy literature. Cole and other purity reformers opposed the popular belief that sexual behavior was natural for boys. They argued that boys needed to be held to the same strict standard of sexual morality that girls were; this necessitated parents monitoring their

Once insecure about public speaking, Cole eventually won solid praise. Her speeches trod the line between delicacy and forcefulness. A Shenandoah reviewer wrote: "The lecture grappled with the greatest evil of modern society. The lecturer handled it without gloves."

PRESS NOTICES,

THE FOLLOWING EXTRACTS FROM MANY.

Mrs. Cole is an exceedingly pleasant speaker, whose remarks show well matured thought, which she expresses in fine English. Her address was long, yet she held the closest attention of the audience during the entire delivery.—*Sioux City Journal*.

The address was delivered in a modest and eloquent manner. The house was crowded. No such address has ever been heard in Bloomfield. The impression she made here is most profound, and we trust lasting.—*The Legal Tender Greenback*.

Mrs. Cole gave a very earnest address. In beauty of diction, power of illustration and force of reasoning it was a strong, interesting appeal for social purity.—*Omaha Bee*.

The lecture on social purity, by Mrs. C. T. Cole, on Sunday evening last, was attended by a large, respectable and very attentive audience. The lecturer is a close, vigorous, logical reasoner, and she is more remarkable for the matter than the manner of her all-important discourse. Laying the axe to the root of the tree of evil, she demonstrated clearly that reform, to be efficient, must begin at the foundation of society—in the home, in the heart. * * * The lecture grappled with the greatest evil of modern society. The lecturer handled it without gloves.—*Shenandoah Post*.

Her address was one of the finest ever listened to in our city. She held the large audience in almost breathless stillness throughout.—*Marshalltown Correspondent of Messenger*.

It, the White Cross movement, has few abler advocates than Mrs. Cole, and all right-minded people will give her every encouragement in the grand work she has taken up.—*Iowa State Register*.

It, the Congregational church, was crowded and many were left standing in the aisles. From the moment the motherly looking woman stepped to the front till she retired, the attention of the audience was intense.—*Sioux City Tribune*.

On Sunday evening the spacious audience room of the Presbyterian church was crowded to overflowing to listen to the address of Mrs. Cole, of Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. Her address throughout was singularly pure and eloquent, replete with strong argument, clearly and forcibly stated. * * * It was certainly productive of great good to all who heard it.—*Fremont, (Neb.,) Tribune*.

Those who had the pleasure of listening to Mrs. Cole's lecture on "Social Purity," at the M. E. church, were charmed and unanimously vote it to have been one of the finest lectures ever delivered in Cherokee. The lady handled her subject most skillfully. The lecture contained many gems of thought, expressed in language chaste and beautiful. * * * Should she favor Cherokee again the opera house would hardly contain the audience who would wish to hear this gifted and refined woman.—*Cherokee Journal*.

boys' friends and entertainment. Cole did not view restrictions on children's behavior as confining, but as ensuring children's innocence and chastity.

In order to make her lecture tours more effective, Cole initiated a Department of Social Purity column in *The Iowa Messenger*. Cole's "Notes From the Field" did not necessarily appear in every issue, but Cole wrote more, by far, than any other WCTU department. Though other superintendents reported their activities in the paper, only one other woman had an established column like Cole's. In her column, Cole often developed her reform theories and recommended work plans to the local unions' purity departments, but she mainly discussed the many places she visited on her lecture tours for the WCTU. Usually written with an optimistic tone, the column not only publicized her activities, but also allowed her to report the achievements of local unions and thank everyone who worked toward purity reform. Cole well understood the hopelessness and feelings of isolation WCTU workers could experience, and her column provided them with a link to other reformers and encouraged them to keep up their efforts.

Although she knew her work was worthwhile, Cole did not always enjoy her lecture tours. The long tours were the best method of scheduling her talks, but being on the road for six weeks at a time was both physically and mentally difficult. To get in as many speeches as possible, she often gave two or three a day. In a letter to her daughter Olive, she wrote that she spoke three times in one day and participated in a local meeting that night. The next morning she was up at seven, ready to give one more lecture before leaving town. Cole usually traveled by train, which was not a pleasant experience in 1890. She described the stations as "dingy," and the trains as "dingier," and she often waited long hours for a delayed train. She complained to Olive that she couldn't sleep in the stations or on the jolting trains, so she reached her destinations already exhausted.

Her terms for lecturing were "entertainment and collections," which meant that the town provided her with a bed and food, and she received the money donated by her audiences at the end of her lectures. Most often she stayed with a WCTU member or minister; she always spoke favorably about her lodgings, but she often wrote home that she was unable to sleep in the unfamiliar surroundings.

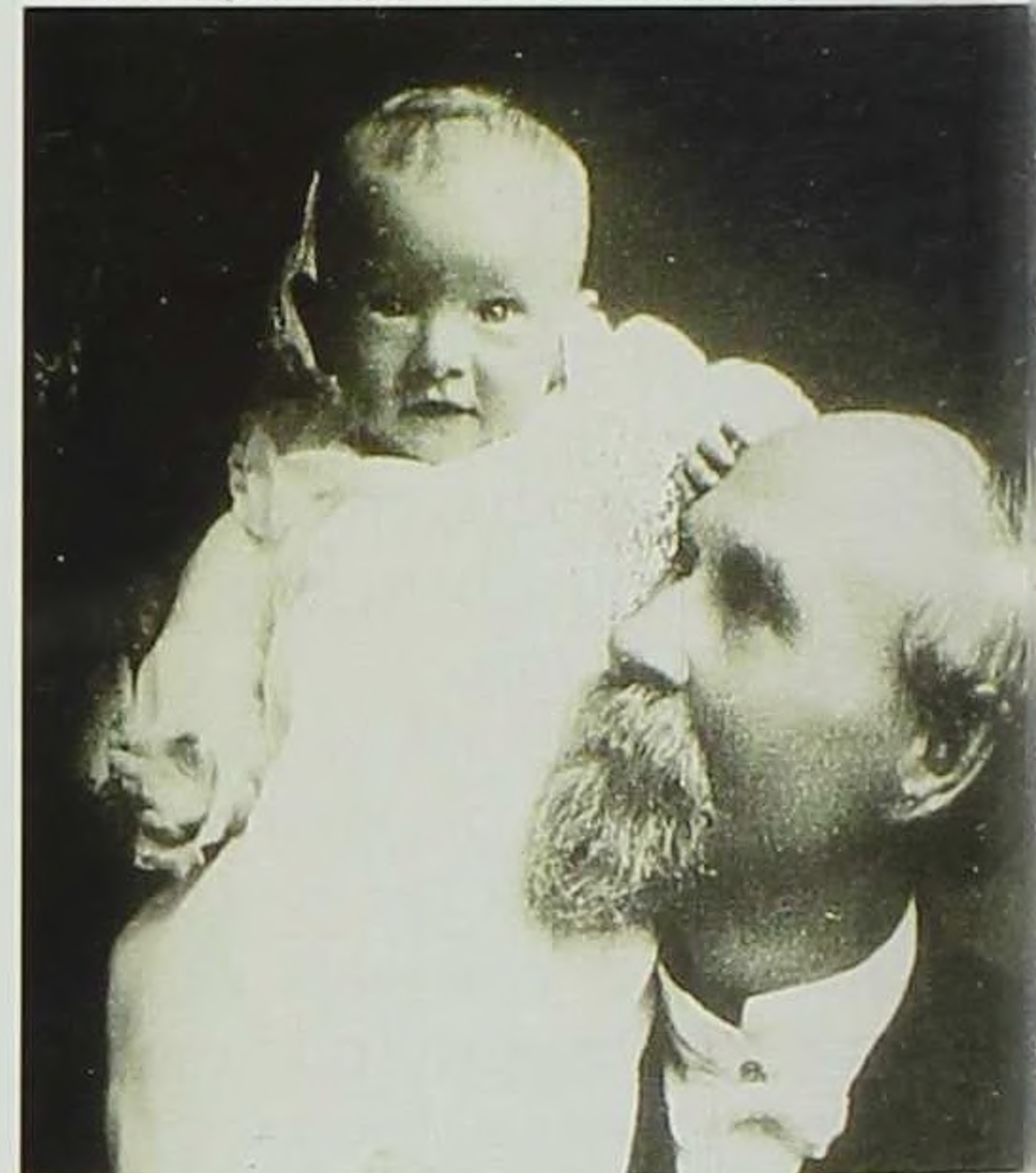
Cole depended on her hosts and her collections; though the Coles were wealthy, she did not spend her money on food or lodging during her tours and only

spent it on travel when absolutely necessary. Her travel expenses came out of the donations, and although she probably received some money from the state WCTU, she never had a surplus of funds and was never paid a lecturing fee. On one disastrous trip, she started out with only a little more money than the price of her first train ticket, because she was depending on the collections to pay her way. After she purchased her ticket, it began to pour so she had to buy rubber boots. Then her eyeglasses broke and her collections ran unusually low. She came out all right, but William had had to send her money.

Cole's reasons for refusing to make herself more comfortable by spending her own money are not completely clear, but they may have had something to do with her religious outlook. She believed that purity work was a "holy crusade against all that defiles the temple of God." Her lectures spread the message of God, and she was doing missionary work, just as she had always wanted. In keeping with this belief, Cole approached her tours with "faith enough to start round the world—with a few dollars to begin with." With this attitude toward purity reform, she believed that God determined the results of her work, and that the details were best left up to Him.

With her busy schedule and uncomfortable working conditions, it is no wonder that Cole frequently became sick. She was 54 years old when she began lecturing, and the difficult travel, lack of sleep, and taxing schedule probably affected her more than it would have a younger woman. In 1888, she was forced to cancel a series of speaking engagements because of illness due to overexertion. Refusing to lighten her work load, she caught a severe case of the flu in 1890, which caused her to give up lecturing for the winter. From then on, Cole went through several periods of "enforced quiet," and had to slow down her strenuous

SHS-IOWA CITY (UNITARIAN CHURCH GLASS LANTERN SLIDES)



William Cole, probably with a grandchild. By broadening their concern for children and family, the Coles became leading voices in the social reform movement.

speaking schedule. Cole's own fragility frustrated her, as she had come to love lecturing and the excitement of field work. She continued speaking but could not give nearly as many talks as she had in the past.

Because she could not always lecture, Cole came to rely on her writing abilities again. She wrote not only for newspapers, but intensified her communication with the WCTU's town and district purity leaders. Cole also published several pamphlets on purity topics and instructions on running meetings. Printed and distributed by the National WCTU, Cole's writings included "Hearth and Home Meetings," "Manual for Social Purity Workers," "The Teacher's Opportunity," and the series "Helps in Mother-Work." Her "Helps" sequence, which outlined the sex education lessons for children she suggested at Mothers' Meetings, was strongly promoted by the WCTU and proved popular with both purity workers and parents.

Her fellow WCTU members had always recognized Cole's abilities, calling her "brave and self-sacrificing" for devoting her time to purity work. They consistently sent her as a delegate to the national conventions. The National WCTU also saw Cole's potential, appointing her Associate Superintendent of the National Department of Social Purity. Though she had to resign in 1891 because of illness, she later became the National Secretary of the department, an office that required less travel. Cole received her greatest honor in 1893, when her biographical sketch was included in National WCTU President Frances Willard's *A Woman of the Century*, a compilation of prominent women reformers.

Cole gradually decreased her involvement with the WCTU in the early 1890s, and her presence was sorely missed. She had succeeded in organizing a network of purity workers across the state that kept the work going, but no one could provide the inspiration or enthusiasm Cole had. Her successors did not speak or write nearly as often or as well, and they were unable to motivate the local unions. The efforts for purity reform did not die out, but without Cole's constant encouragement, the department could not maintain the level of support it once had.

Though she was no longer active in the WCTU, Cole continued working for temperance and purity reform. In 1895, she and William bought *The Champion of Progress*, a temperance newspaper, which they co-owned and co-edited after changing its name to *The Dial of Progress*. The motto of their paper was "For the right—forever, For the wrong—never" and in it they advocated a wide variety of reforms. The Coles published articles on any topic they felt deserved atten-

tion, writing on such varied subjects as cigarettes, current dress fashions, and world politics. The main focus of *The Dial* was temperance, and the paper soon became the official organ of the Iowa Prohibitory Amendment League, an organization founded by the Coles in 1896 to work for the reinstatement of the prohibition amendment to the state constitution.

Cordelia Throop Cole died in 1900 at the age of 66, worn down by years of hard work and her short but exhausting stint as a lecturer. She had worked for social change throughout her life and continued writing for *The Dial* and the Ladies' Library Association from her sickbed. After she died, many people praised her generous spirit and spoke of all her accomplishments for the community, as well as her achievements for social purity. Cole would have been gratified at the compliments, and would have replied with William's remark in her obituary: that her spirit lived on, especially in her children.

Cole's belief that women constituted the moral backbone of society moved her to work for the welfare of children and the sanctity of the home. Though she accepted the popular perception of a woman's role, her vision was not limited. Part of a ground-breaking group of reformers who dared to break the silence and speak out on sexual issues, she addressed issues yet unresolved today. Support for purity reform increased with the Progressive movement of the early 1900s. Alarm over the trade in women and children reached the point of hysteria, and the Mann Act of 1910 made it illegal to transport a woman across state lines for sexual purposes. Cole did not live to see society embrace the ideal of social purity, but there is no question that the purity movement owed much of its popularity in the early 20th century to women like Cole. ❖

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NOTE ON SOURCES

The major source was the Cole-Throop Collection at the State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI-Iowa City), donated by Martha Smith, Cordelia Throop Cole's granddaughter-in-law. Other helpful sources at SHSI (Iowa City or Des Moines) were the records of the Iowa Unitarian Association; proceedings of the annual meetings of the WCTU of Iowa; *The Iowa Messenger*; *The Dial of Progress*; and, at the University of Iowa Libraries, *The Arena*. Secondary sources include Ruth Bordin, *Women and Temperance* (1981); Louis Haselmayer, "Amos Bronson Alcott and Southeast Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* (Fall 1965); David Pivar, *Purity Crusade* (1973); and Cynthia Grant Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood* (1990). Special thanks go to the Crane family, who now live in the Coles' home, for their hospitality and help. Annotations to this article are kept in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files.