

**Autobiography
of
Ida Woods Foster**

March 1936



Preface:

In April of 2011 while sorting through a plastic tub full of pictures and news clippings I ran across a homemade book. The following was on the inside cover.

“When Kathleen (Madison) graduated from High School in 1936, the English teacher asked each one of the English Class to choose some book, make an outline of its contents, and also give an autobiography of its author. This work of course, required a greater part of the last semester for its compilation, and in the English Class was termed their ‘term theme’.

In trying to furnish some sort of an autobiography for Kathleen to work from, her ‘term theme’ has become something like an heirloom for the family.

Ida Foster

The above was handwritten by Ida and pasted inside the front cover of the project. I had either never seen this volume, or, if I had, never really paid any attention to it. As I read through it I realized I needed to transcribe this autobiography and save it for the family; similar to what I did with my Grandmother Laura Gonnam’s Memoirs. The volume itself will remain with my family artifacts.

**Kerry Gonnam
April 2011**

I was born Oct. 18th, 1876, (Centennial Year) on a farm 5 miles from Mazon, Ill., and I remember that it was about the time that a great deal was being said about the second coming of Christ, and some religious sects who believed that the event was certainly due and that it would mean the end of the world, gathered many times that summer on hillsides and prayed and sang and fully expected to be carried away in the clouds to glory.

(Such conversation impressed me greatly as a child, but I did not learn until I was more than 40 years old, that those happenings marked the first year that Science & Health with Key to the Scriptures by Mary Baker Eddy, was published and given to the world, which book explains and demonstrates the Christ idea more fully than any other book ever published.)

As a child I was rather frail and very timid, and I remember how my Father used to go with me to school on the first day, when we would get a new teacher, and explain how timid I was, and that they would need to be very gentle with me.

I was about 6 years old when the K & S RR. was constructed, and I remember how it ran along the edge of my Father's timber lot and how Mother boarded the men who worked on it. Father took us over to see the work engine, but I was almost too much afraid to ride on it. When the road was completed, Father took us to Kankakee for a visit and I was much surprised to find we rode inside a passenger coach, instead of on top of the freight cars, as my childish mind had fancied, when seeing the mixed trains pass our home. A stop was scheduled near our home on the O.J. Booth farm, and the Station was named Booth's Station. The Booths were my Mother's people.

Later the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe RR. extended its line to Chicago and crossed the K & S RY. at the center of Mazon Twp. Then the town of Mazon came into existence and nearly all the buildings from Old Mazon were moved up to what they then called Mazon Center. Father used to come to town once a week to get the mail and groceries. Later Mother drove over Saturday afternoons with me, for my music lesson.

I had no brothers, so both of my sisters used to help Father with the chores, but I was always afraid of the cows and horses and Mother needed me to help with the housework and the family sewing, and I spent much of my time with my music or studying. I played the little organ at the Sunday School and Church Services at the Parker School House for years.

In the rural districts at that time, they usually hired a teacher to teach what they called the winter term, and often a different one to teach the spring and fall terms, and in 1892 the Rural Schools were graded and placed under state supervision, and a class of 5 girls, including myself, passed the examination and graduated in February 1893. We kept on going, however, until the spring term closed July 1st, the teacher allowing us to study Algebra, Rhetoric, Physical Geography, etc., and on the closing day we had a picnic in my Father's timber, and I read a School Prophecy of 51 verses, which I had written, entitled "A Vision of the Future". The three last verses ran like this:

Before the future hangs a veil
Which none can penetrate
The only way for us to know
What lies beyond is but to wait

And tho this be but a fantasy
By imagination wrought
I sincerely hope that by us all
Such ends may be sought

That when a score and five of years
Have by us quickly flown
None of the scholars in our school
Will be less favorably known

This was my first poem put before the public.

At that time there was a two year course in Mazon High School and a three year course in Morris, and some of these studies were alternated, so I was obliged to take a year in each place in order to get the studies that seemed best for a teacher to get, as it was my ambition to teach school, and in due time I obtained a first grade teaching certificate in Grundy County and taught in the rural schools for 3 years. I used to teach school during the week, a Sunday School Class on Sundays, give some music lessons, and furnished the Mazon Creek items for the Morris Herald.

In October 1896 I was married to Ray E. Woods, who had taken a Civil Engineering Course at Dixon College, and had done considerable surveying with the County Surveyor of Lee County, but his father needed him in his Pure Bred Cattle Business, so he went into partnership with his father and brother under the firm name of J.N. Woods and sons and we lived on a farm in Goodfarm Twp. for 5 years.

My husband's health began to fail him, after sustaining what we thought to be but a slight injury in his shoulder, and in 1902, with our two little daughters, the youngest but a few weeks old, we went to Kansas, where his Father had just moved, and a Doctor out there suggested a camping trip to the Rockies.

So he purchased a team of mules and fitted up a camp wagon with every convenience we could think of, swinging a hammock from the roof for the Baby to ride in, and with a tent for camping and a culinary outfit in the rear of the wagon we were prepared for a pleasant trip. We sent for my Sister in Illinois to go with us, as she was also in failing health, and as soon as she arrived in Ottawa, Kansas we set out for the Rockies. We had many new and interesting experiences in crossing the plains of Kansas; the mirages in the summer heat, the black tarantulas that terrified me more than the rattlesnakes that sometimes crossed the Old Santa Fe Trail before us, and at one time visited our tent at night.

Several things developed on this trip that we did not enjoy. Jack the mule was subject to tantrums, and what he couldn't think of, to do at such times, no designing mule need ever try to do. Then the summer of 1902 proved to be the wettest season in many years, sometimes we could not travel because of the rain, sometimes the bridges were out, and a raging torrent crossed the road before us, and the dampness was poor for the campers. At Dodge City, Kansas, Baby and I both became very ill and as soon as I was able I boarded a train for Colorado Springs taking my Sister and the children with me. My husband hired a cowboy named Charlie to drive the rest of the way, and then sold the mules and the outfit.

Colorado Springs is sometimes called The City of Sunshine and it is a beautiful place, and Pike's Peak and Cheyenne Mountain 5 miles to the west are beautiful and grand to behold. We used to sit on our back step summer evenings at sundown or a little later and watch the grotesque figures in outline on Cheyenne's rugged crest. Automobiles were just coming into general use in the cities at that time and we used to write back home and try to describe their rapid wheeling down the boulevards. But, the Baby was never quite well after that and my husband spent part of his time in a Sanitarium and finally passed away one cold morning in December 1902, and I returned to Illinois with the children leaving my Sister in Colorado. (Note: Sister was Mabel R. Waters who died 8/24/1906 and is buried in Wheeler Cemetery with her parents.)

My parents tried to make us comfortable with them, but I was ever weary and dissatisfied and dreaming of what might have been. Finally I gathered my household goods together and moved to Mazon. I boarded the schoolteachers, did dressmaking, gave a few music lessons, wrote considerable, and was always studying some textbook from the school.

Then I fancied a Business Course would just suit me, and I moved to Ottawa to be near Brown's Business College, and boarded students there to earn my way and make a home for the children. But in a few months my Sister sent for me and I stored my furniture again, and left my little girls with my mother, while I went to Colorado to be with my Sister in the short time she had to live. Many times, however, I was privileged to take wonderful trips into the mountains, up the Ute Pass, down thru Williams Canon to the Cave of the Winds where the wonderful natural organ of stalactites is played; up to the top of Seven Falls where Helen Hunt Jackson was buried; thru the Garden of the Gods; and up Pikes Peak to Bruin Inn. And I saw my first moving picture in beautiful Stratton Park at the foot of Cheyenne Mountain one evening. This was in 1906.

The period that followed my Sister's passing was the darkest I had ever known, living far in the country and with the care of my invalid daughter and with my own increasing frailty I could only hope for the light in the darkness that seemed to engulf my very Soul. It was at this time that I wrote the poem "Lead, Kindly Light". However, hoping was one of my strong qualities so I sent for a Home Study Course from the Brown's Business College and my faithful daughter stood by me to the letter and dictated and timed my stenographic work and also the typewriting.

It was during this time when we were with my parents on the farm that my Mother was bidden to be present in Ottawa, Ill. on Aug 21, 1908 for the Semi-Centennial Celebration

of the Lincoln – Douglas Debate. Mother had often told us how she had heard this debate in 1858 and how her relatives over there were active in planning for the debate and entertaining Mr. Lincoln, and how she entered into friendly conversation with him often on that day. So Mother and I went to the Celebration and sat on the stage with the very few who had heard the original debate, and wore a Survivor's badge on her shoulder. Mother used to tell the children, too; how she was privileged to wait upon James A. Garfield before the days of his presidency, she being employed at a summer resort at Mineral Springs, Ohio, where he was spending his summer vacation. She said of him, "He always seemed so kind." I remember, tho I was a small child, that she cried when the news came that Garfield had died of his bullet wound in 1881.

In the spring of 1909 I had earned my diploma from the Brown's Business College, on the Home Study Course. And could make good time in Shorthand and typewriting, thanks to my little daughter. So, I placed the invalid child in a Home and School for defective children near St. Louis, and went over to the city to secure employment and be near her. It was in June 1909 that I arrived in St. Louis. I had with me my 11-year-old daughter, a trunk, and one address, The Underwood Typewriting Company, and I went to the Employment Agency of this company. My credentials were my teaching certificate from Grundy County, Ill. and a diploma and recommendations from the Brown's Business College.

In a short time I obtained a position at the main office of the Norvell-Shapleigh Wholesale hardware House in St. Louis, where about 75 stenographers are employed on the first floor. The head stenographer in our department resigned soon after I began working there, and to my surprise the manager placed me at her desk, where I worked nearly 6 years.

Twice a day I had a 45 minute ride on the street car from our room to the office where I worked, and back at night, and there was something in the hum and whirr of the wheels, and also in the peculiar solitude of being alone, as it were, in a jostling crowd of business folks going and coming from work, that set my mind to framing up verses. This seemed to bring a little order out of the seemingly chaotic surroundings, and the girls at the office always liked my verses, and gave me things to write about for them, so I wrote a great deal of poetry in the time I was in St. Louis. St. Louis proved to be a boon to me. I found the Christian Science Church there. It was food for my soul. It just suited me. I lost my fears. I took on flesh. I became my old, happy self again, and many times have I blessed the day I arrived in St. Louis. There came a day when I wrote a poem for the girls in the office, and some of the verses were like this:

TWENTY YEARS AGO AND NOW

Yes, Girls, I am soon to leave you
And I see you would like to know
How it was I found my Prince Charming
And how things came to be so

Well, you see, he and I were sweethearts
In the days of long ago
Twenty years and more had drifted by
Since he was my bashful beau.

Then came the long separation
Unwelcome and unforeseen;
Ah! How could we know in those early days
What the drift of the tide would mean.

The years passed on, until one day
A letter came from home
It said he had recently buried his wife
He, too, was sad and alone.

Then came my vacation, all the old friends
Were calling, -- the hours gaily sped
There came a message over the phone,
"I am coming tonight." He said

The days that followed were filled with joy
The evenings like "snatches of songs"
And the rest__ is the same sweet story of old
That to every heart rightly belongs.

Feb. 1914 my daughter, who was just finishing a course in the Geiser Conservatory of Music in St. Louis, came back to Mazon and I was united in marriage to Wallie Foster, with whom I had spent many happy days in my youth in our home neighborhood. Feb. 1915 we moved to our own farm 1 mile NW. of Mazon, which we named Maplevue Farm, and began to transform it from its dilapidated condition to a habitation more befitting the name.

I believe we are all more or less familiar with those agents who come around and take the picture of your house, and go to Chicago for a couple of weeks, and fix it up and frame it, and then come back and try to sell it for a nice sum. One of these men came soon after we moved in, and I looked at the picture and told him that \$10 wouldn't hire me to hang such a picture on my wall and added, "Come back in about 10 years." Well, many times in recent years I have wished for that picture just for the sake of comparison with what the place has since become.

I brought with me from St. Louis, a typewriter, and afterward I bought an office desk, as these things had seemingly become a part of my necessary equipment. I collected the poems I had written while in St. Louis, and pasted typewritten copies of them in a snap shot album, and named the book "St. Louis Memories". It was soon after this, that the Rev. Mary Moreland who was at the time Pastor of the Congregational Church in Mazon, came out to see me, and liked very much to read from this hand made book, "St. Louis

Memories” that lay on my library table. It was at her suggestion, that I chose a list of poems from it, and naming it “O’er Time and Tide” had it copyrighted and published.

In the years that followed I had some time for the community, church and school service, - helped to organize the Burleigh School PTA and was its President for some time; helped to organize the Farmers Wives Club of Mazon and was its first President; and served as President of the Mazon PTA one year. In 1927 I began my service of three terms (9 yrs) on the Mazon Twp. High School Board of Education and served 7 of those years as its secretary, and at different times substituted for the President. I also often served as Sec’y. or Treas. of other organizations.

From 1930 to 1933 I served as First Reader of First Church of Christ Scientist of Morris, Ill., arriving at my desk Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings regardless of the weather. One evening I went through such a dense fog that the only way I could tell whether the car was on the pavement was by the sound of the wheels. This work as Reader required an hour or two of study each day, and I was obliged to resign from every other organization except the School board in order to carry it. During this term as Reader, my Father passed away, and a friend suggested that it would be lovely if I could read his funeral service, as I had been reading funeral services for others right along. I thought this over and decided to do it, and have always been so glad that I did, for the doing of it, for him, comforted and sustained me more than all the sympathy of my loving friends. In July 1934 I entered a metaphysical class in Chicago taught by William T. Kirtland CSB at the Edgewater Beach Hotel, and many times during those days I was glad I had been a stenographer, as we were obliged to write rapidly sometimes. But, at the close of this work I had earned the CS degree which is a “consummation devoutly to be wished for” among Christian Scientists.

In our home at Mapleview I have been very happy. We have seen our parents, the invalid daughter, and many other dear friends pass from our sight, but that always comes with the tide of events. We have seen the capable daughter grow up into a capable mother for her daughter and son. We have seen a long time hope fulfilled in a splendid son who has been our joy thru the years of his development. I can quote with sincerity from Joyce L. Brisley in the C.S. Monitor:

“Bless my heart, how good it is,
Just to be alive!
What a million things to do
In this glorious hive!
I could burst with the joy of it,-
Life, and the employ of it!”

March 1936

(Signed) Ida Woods Foster