LOUISA MAY ALCOTT ON THE CONCORD CENTENNIAL

(This report of the women's role in the Concord, Massachusetts centennial celebration is by Louisa May Alcott. It originally appeared in The Women's Journal of May 1, 1875 with the subtitle, "'Unofficial Incidents Overlooked by the Reporters.' We offer it in celebration of the American Bicentennial.)

Being frequently asked "what part women took in the Concord centennial celebration?" I give herewith a brief account of our share on that occasion.

We had no place in the procession, but such women as wished to hear the oration were directed to meet in the Town Hall at half-past nine, and wait there until certain persons, detailed for the service, should come to lead them to the tent, where a limited number of seats had been reserved for the weaker vessels.

This seemed a sensible plan, and as a large proportion of ladies chose the intellectual part of the feast, the hall was filled with a goodly crowd at the appointed hour. No one seemed to know what to do except wait, and that we did with the patience born of long practice. But it was very trying to the women of Concord to see invited guests wandering forlornly about or sitting in chilly corners, meekly wondering why the hospitalities of the town were not extended to them as well as to their "men folks" who were absorbed into the pageant in one way or another.

For an hour we women waited, but no one came, and the sound of martial music so excited the patient party that with one accord we moved down to the steps below, where a glimpse of the approaching procession might cheer our eyes. Here we stood, with the north wind chilling us to the marrow of our bones, a flock of female Casablancas with the slight difference of freezing instead of burning at our posts.

Some wise virgins, who put not their trust in men, departed to shift for themselves, but 50 or more obeyed orders and stood fast till, just as the procession appeared, an agitated gentleman with a rosette at his buttonhole, gave the brief command.

"Ladies, cross the common and wait for your escort." Then he vanished, and was seen no more.

Over we went like a flock of sheep leaving the show behind us, but comforting ourselves with the thought of the seats "saving up" for us and of the treat to come. We were a cheerful crowd in spite of the bitter wind, the rude comments of the men swarming by, and the sad certainty which slowly dawned upon us that we were entirely forgotten. The gay and gallant presence of a granddaughter of the Dr. Ripley who watched the fight from the Old Manse kept up our spirits; for the indomitable lady circulated among us like sunshine, inspiring us with such confidence that we rallied round the little flag she bore and followed where she led.

Patience has its limits, and there came a moment when the revolutionary spirit of '75 blazed up in the bosoms of these long-suffering women; for, when some impetuous soul cried out "Come on and let us take care of ourselves" there was a general movement; the flag fluttered to the front, veils were close reefed, skirts were kilted up, arms locked, and with one accord, the light brigade charged over the red bridge, up the hill, into the tented field, rosy and red-nosed, dishevelled but dauntless.

The tent was closely packed, and no place appeared but a corner of the platform. Anxious to seat certain grey-haired ladies wearily with waiting, and emboldened by a smile from Senator Wilson, a nod from Representative May, and a pensive stare from Orator Curtis, I asked the President of the Day if a few ladies could occupy that corner until seats could be found for them.

"They can sit or stand anywhere in the town except on this platform; and the quicker they get down, the better, for gentlemen are coming in to take these places."

This gracious reply made me very glad to descend into the crowd again, for there at least good nature reigned; and there we stood, placidly surveyed by the men who occupied the seats set apart for us, not one of whom stirred, although the grandmother of Boston waited in the ranks.

My idea of hospitality may be old fashioned, but I must say I felt ashamed of Concord that day, when all I could offer my guests, admiring pilgrims to this "Mecca of the mind," was the extreme edge of an unplanked board; for, when the gods were settled, leave was given us to sit on the rim of the platform.

Perched there, like a flock of tempest-tossed pigeons, we had the privilege of reposing among the sacred boots of the Gamaliels at whose feet we sat, and of listening to the remarks of the reporters, who evidently felt that the elbowroom of the almighty press should not be encroached upon, even by a hair's breadth.

"No place for women," growled one.

"Never was a fitter," answered one strong-minded lady standing on one foot.

"Ought to have come earlier if they came at all."

"So they would, if they had not obeyed orders. Never will again."

"Don't see why they couldn't have been contented with seeing the procession."

"Because they preferred poetry and patriotism to fuss and feathers."

"Better have it all their own way next time."

"No doubt they will, and I hope we shall all be there to see."

So the dialogue ended with a laugh and the women resigned themselves to cold shoulders all round. But as I looked about me, it was impossible to help thinking that there should have been a place for the great-granddaughters of Prescott, William Emerson, John Hancock and Dr. Ripley, as well as for Isaac Davis' old sword, the scissors that cut the immortal cartridges and the ancient flag some woman's fingers made. It seemed to me that their presence on that platform would have had a deeper significance than the gold lace which adorned one side, or the senatorial ponderosity under which it broke down on the other; and that the men of Concord had missed a grand opportunity of imitating those whose memory they had met to honor.

The papers told the tale of that day's exploits and experiences, but the papers did not get all the little items, and some of them were rather funny. Just before the services began, a distracted usher struggled in to inform Judge Hoar that the wives of
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several potentates had been left in the cold and must be accommodated. Great was the commotion then, for these ladies, being bobs to political kites, could not be neglected; so a part of the seats reserved for women was with much difficulty cleared, and the "elect precious" set thereon. Dear ladies; how very cold and wretched they were when they got there, and how willingly the "free and independent citizenesses" of Concord forgave them for reducing their limited quarters to the point of suffocation, as they spread their cloaks over the velvet of their guests, still trying to be hospitable under difficulties.

When order was restored, what might be called the "Centennial Break Down" began. The President went first—was it an omen?—and took refuge among the women, who, I am happy to say, received him kindly, and tried to temper the wind of his imperbability, as he sat among them looking so bored that I longed to offer him a cigar.

The other gentlemen stood by the ship, which greatly diversified the performance by slowly sinking with all on board but the captain. Even the orator tottered on the brink of ruin more than once, and his table would have gone over if a woman had not held up one leg of it for an hour or so. No light task, she told me afterward, for when the inspired gentleman gave an impressive thump, it took both hands to sustain the weight of his eloquence. Another lady was pinned down by the beams falling on her skirts, but cheerfully sacrificed them and sat still, till the departure of the presidential party allowed us to set her free.

Finding us bound to hear it out, several weary gentlemen offered us their seats after a time; but we had the laugh on our side now, and sweetly declined, telling them their platform was not strong enough to hold us.

It was over at last, and such of us as had strength enough left went to the dinner, and enjoyed another dish of patriotism was told me afterward, for when the inspired gentleman gave an omen—than once, and his table would have gone over if a woman had not held up one leg of it for an hour or so. No light task, she told me afterward, for when the inspired gentleman gave an impressive thump, it took both hands to sustain the weight of his eloquence. Another lady was pinned down by the beams falling on her skirts, but cheerfully sacrificed them and sat still, till the departure of the presidential party allowed us to set her free.

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It was over at last, and such of us as had strength enough left went to the dinner, and enjoyed another dish of patriotism "cold without" others went home to dispense hot comforts and to thaw the congealed visitors who wandered to our doors.

That was the end of it, and by four a.m. peace fell upon the exhausted town, and from many a welcome pillow went up this grateful sigh: "Thank heaven we shall not have to go through this again!"

No, not quite the end; for by and by there will come a day of reckoning, and then the tax-paying women of Concord will not be forgotten, I think, will not be left to wait uncalled upon, or be considered in the way: and then, I devoutly wish that those who so bravely bore their share of that day's burden without its honor, will rally round their own flag again, and, following in the footsteps of their forefathers, will utter another protest that shall be "heard round the world."

WOMEN'S STUDIES REVIEW (continued)

Three classes, one of which is the basic "introductory" course, and one other a course for senior majors
Women's studies coordinator (or director)
Two or three faculty members who teach women's studies
Group of student majors
Women's studies committee(s)
The administrator who is the immediate supervisor of the women's studies program and director/coordinator
Several department chairpersons
Head of the women's center
Chief administrative person responsible for teacher education on campus

The following schools have been invited to participate:
University of Massachusetts/Amherst, Sarah Lawrence College, Brooklyn College, University of Pennsylvania, Bennett College, University of South Florida, Northeastern Illinois University, University of Minnesota, University of Kansas, University of New Mexico, University of Tennessee, University of Washington, Portland State University, San Francisco State University, University of Hawaii.

The selection of these programs, necessarily limited to 15 due to the exigencies of time and money, has been a difficult task, requiring considerable time and energy. Graduate and undergraduate programs have been included, as well as a variety of institutional types and a representative group of mature, developing and new programs. Coherent geographical distribution and attention to minority women were among a number of prime concerns. Several patterns are already suggesting themselves. Most striking, perhaps, is the fact that the most developed women's studies programs tend to be located at large state universities where there are likely to be an abundance of interested faculty and students and at least the possibility of a modicum of financial support from administrations committed to such innovation as interdisciplinary programming. A number of large public universities in urban settings have been chosen, in the expectation (or knowledge) of finding a diverse student population. Two small private colleges have been chosen as well. Thus, the predominant type of institution will be public rather than private and large rather than small.

The final report, however, will place the 15 programs into the national framework of women's studies. Prior knowledge of programs on the part of both investigators will be drawn upon. Similarly, their on-going analysis of the extensive files of The Clearinghouse on Women's Studies will provide information on all of those schools and programs that have been sharing materials with The Clearinghouse. Much of this data will be incorporated into the final report in order to broaden the perspective from which to make recommendations for the future.

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