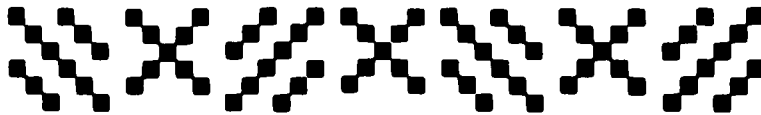


May Wright Sewall: An Indiana Reformer

*Jane Stephens**



In Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis today, upon a hill in Section 38, there is a large and impressive monument for James Whitcomb Riley. Perhaps fifty feet away in the same section there is another monument, equally impressive, for Benjamin Harrison. Between these two there is a small flat tombstone, almost unnoticed, for May Wright Sewall. Writing at the turn of the century, Booth Tarkington noted that "in company with General Harrison and Mr. Riley, May Wright Sewall would necessarily have been chosen . . . as one of the 'three most prominent citizens of Indiana.'"¹ In light of subsequent treatment how strange this assertion seems: most readers of Tarkington's statement today would wonder who May Wright Sewall was.

Sewall established a national and international reputation through several endeavors. She sought to enlarge the role of women in society, to mobilize women and get them to play a larger role in this country and the world. She actively campaigned for a woman's right to an education equal to that offered men. She sought the ballot for women, firmly believing that once educated and armed with political rights women could stop war, clean up society, and create a better world for humankind. Not content with merely improving this world, Sewall also sought to conquer the ultimate frontier. Two months before her death she revealed what had been a carefully concealed belief in spiritualism. By 1920, Sewall's fame as a women's rights activist, peace advocate, and spiritualist had

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¹ May Wright Sewall, *Neither Dead Nor Sleeping* (Indianapolis, 1920), [xvi-xvii].

spread so widely that she was one of the best known Hoosiers in the world.

Born Mary Eliza Wright in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1844, she was a precocious child, reading Milton by age seven.² After attending public schools, Wright taught in Waukesha, Wisconsin, and then entered Northwestern Female College (later absorbed by Northwestern University) in Evanston, Illinois. In 1866 she received the degree of Mistress of Science, becoming one of the first women graduates in America outside Oberlin. In 1871, Wright was awarded the Master of Arts degree.³

After graduation, Wright taught school in the tiny and provincial community of Corinth, Mississippi. Apparently not finding the post-Civil War South to her liking, she accepted a teaching position in Plainwell, Michigan, in 1867 and subsequently became the first woman principal of the school. It was from here that Wright moved to a high school in Franklin, Indiana, where Edwin Thompson was principal. In 1872, she and Thompson married. Both accepted teaching positions in what was later to become Shortridge High School in Indianapolis. Three years after their marriage Thompson died of tuberculosis; however, his widow remained in Indianapolis at the same institution for five years, teaching German and English literature.⁴

In 1880 May Wright Thompson married Theodore Sewall, principal of the Indianapolis Classical School, and subsequently began teaching German in his school. Theodore Sewall shared his wife's commitment to reform, and it was during her marriage to him that she undertook her most ardent work for educational advancement for women as well as her work in the suffrage movement. The couple turned their home, known as Sewall House, into a virtual salon in the European sense, with many notables included on their guest lists.⁵

Throughout her married life May Wright Sewall never questioned the postulate that women should seek self-fulfillment. Those who protested against new opportunities for women, whether in the form of education or the ballot, argued

² Marcia Hoagland, "May W. Sewall—An Appreciation," April 6, 1933, p. 1; copy in Indiana Division, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis.

³ Clifton J. Phillips, "Sewall, May Eliza Wright" in Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, eds., *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1971), III, 269.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Sewall House Visitors' Register (Marion County Public Library, Indianapolis).



MAY WRIGHT SEWALL

Reproduced from Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage* (3 vols., Rochester, 1887), III.

that women were happiest when they were striving to please their husbands and families. To this argument Sewall responded:

To make it the object of one's life to please another person is to forget God, to quench conscience, to lose sight of the personal ideal; it is to nurture deceit in one's self and vanity in that other; it is an object of life as belittling to the one who demands it as to the one who pursues it.⁶

Self-fulfillment for women in the 1880s, however, was no simple matter, as the nature of opportunities in higher education illustrated. Considering the feeble beginnings of what may be called the "higher education movement" for women, consisting of boarding schools, female seminaries, coeducational academies, and female colleges, women by the 1880s had made considerable progress. Yet major barriers to higher education for women remained.⁷ In an address presented to the International Council of Women in 1888, Sewall spoke of progress and

⁶ May Wright Sewall, "Woman's Work," *Indianapolis Times*, May 7, 1882. Sewall edited this column from 1882 to 1885.

⁷ Mabel Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for Women* (New York, 1959), 6.

the problems, using statistics gathered by the Bureau of Education in 1886. Most poignantly, she noted, only 35,976 women were enrolled in the 529 colleges or universities admitting women, compared to the 802 institutions for men with a male enrollment of 78,185. Even including enrollees in normal schools, where in 1886 women outnumbered men 27,616 to 12,616, only 65 percent as many higher institutions were open to women as to men.⁸ Sewall illustrated a further contrast between men's and women's educational opportunities: "Communities and states, like individuals, express their opinions in their investments." Investments in buildings and grounds for higher education for men in 1886 were \$62,356,638, compared to \$9,635,282 for women's facilities. In addition, Sewall protested that there were no state appropriations for the support of women's colleges while state appropriations of \$1,690,275 were made for men's colleges and universities.⁹

Sewall believed that the barriers placed in the path of women seeking higher education were based on three theories. First, there were those arguments arising from the alleged limitations of a woman's nature. Advocates of "natural womanhood" argued that it was "fruitless cruelty to encourage women to undertake an education which they could not achieve, inasmuch as their failure would make their mental limitations conspicuous, and thus add to their disappointment bitter mortification." Even if a few exceptional women should demonstrate their possession of the mental capacity to do college-level work, their feeble bodies would "sink under the severe application to abstruse subjects, and the result of such efforts would be (to quote the awful phrase of one who signed himself 'A Worshiper of Womanhood') hospitals and asylums filled with highly educated female wrecks."¹⁰

Taking the same argument further, Sewall explained that those who advocated this position asserted that even should a few women prove their ability to acquire a higher education, these acquirements would "impair feminine grace, dull feminine sensibilities and destroy domestic tastes, thereby unfitting women for the conjugal and maternal relations in which Heaven had appointed that they should find their chief happi-

⁸ May Wright Sewall, "Higher Education for Women in the United States," *Report of the International Council of Women, Assembled by the National Woman Suffrage Association; Washington, D.C., U.S. of America, March 25 to April 1, 1888* (Washington, D.C., 1888), 56-58.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

ness."¹¹ In her newspaper column, Sewall frequently attacked this argument. By the 1880s, she knew that facts revealed the absurdity of such a position:

in the long ago every claim of women for a share in higher labors and their rewards was met by the assertion that woman's delicate physical organism would not permit it. Short dresses, loose waists and thick shoes, with an increased degree of exercise corresponding to the reform in clothing cancelled this objection; investigation disclosed the fact that the average length of woman's life is greater than man's. Opponents next asserted that woman's mind could never compass the acquisitions and endure the discipline which could alone fit her for man's equal partner in life's duties. The ease with which women bore away prizes and honors as soon as they had collegiate opportunity was an offset to that argument. Then sentimentality and lack of practical faculty was next urged as an argument against their possible success in the world. The steady increase of the women who can and do earn comfortable incomes awakened the fear that women, after all, had too much practical sense—and they urged that professional and business activity and pecuniary independence would harden women's heart and the very source of the world's sweetest sympathies would be dried up.¹²

Proponents of a second argument against women's education asserted that women were created for men and that the education of females should serve the best interests of the male population. Sewall quoted one advocate of this position: the "tenderness, affection, and chivalrous regard with which women had inspired men had been the chief agencies in softening men's rough nature." According to this proponent, when the educated woman became self-sufficient, her independence of man could cause him to relapse into barbarism. In addition, the value of men's college degrees would decrease if granted to women. The first institution that asked authority to confer degrees upon women was refused on the grounds that if women were to wear titles and degrees, it would "cheapen academic honors in the esteem of men and abate their intellectual enthusiasm."¹³

The final argument against women's education was, according to Sewall, the one most widely accepted by women themselves: higher education for women would upset the status quo. Writing in 1883, Sewall asked,

Will the girl who reads Homer, who pores over Euclid . . . be attractive to young men who are wife-seeking? Will the young woman who is trained as an architect, skilled as a physician, or eloquent as a preacher—will she ever be satisfied to abandon these labors for those of the nursery and kitchen?

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Sewall, "Woman's Work," *Indianapolis Times*, January 7, 1883.

¹³Sewall, "Higher Education for Women," 54.

Such were the questions that came from four out of five men with whom Sewall discussed the issue of women's education.¹⁴

To Sewall these arguments implied a fixed conviction that marriage and the home had little intrinsic value and were welcomed only by women to whom all other alternatives were closed. Sewall did not place marriage and family in such a lowly position. In her opinion, fear that woman's social and domestic value would "depreciate according to her development, her self-respect and her self-sufficiency [had] no place outside of indolent fancy."¹⁵ Sewall believed an education enhanced the prospects for a happy marriage. Education elevated marriage from woman's sole pursuit and vocation to one of several options and thus made it approximate more closely ideal marriage. Ideal marriage, according to Sewall, was "the union of one man and one woman who being equally independent, [were] equally and reciprocally dependent."¹⁶

In addition to better marriages, better hygienic and sanitary conditions in nurseries and kitchens would result from women's education. However, Sewall believed that none of these positive arguments for an education should have been necessary because an education was a noble end in itself.

Remembering that an education, if genuine, frees one's powers and liberalizes one's spirit, one must regard this intellectual liberty, which is its fruit, as a sufficient reason for desiring it, especially in the case of women. As a class, women are so trammelled by precedent, prejudice, fashion, social conventions, and narrow experience; as a class they are so encased in their own emotional environment, that intellectual liberty, is perhaps their only certain path to intelligent free-will.¹⁷

Sewall did more than simply philosophize on the question of women's education. She put her ideas into practice at the Girls' Classical School in Indianapolis, which she operated with her husband from 1882 until his death in 1895 and alone until 1907. The school occupied the St. Anna's School Building on North Pennsylvania Street. Sewall insisted that the curriculum for the institution not follow the common pattern for a girls' school, with stress on the social graces, but instead be the same as that of the Indianapolis Classical School for boys,

¹⁴ Sewall, "Woman's Work," *Indianapolis Times*, July 19, 1883.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, July 23, 1883.

¹⁶ May Wright Sewall, "The Domestic and Social Effects of the Higher Education of Women" (n.p., n.d.), 7. This paper was read before the Western Association of Collegiate Alumna at Ann Arbor, Michigan, December 10, 1887. It has been printed in the form of a twenty-two-page pamphlet.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

which in 1882 had been in operation for seven years. The course of study was based on the Harvard examinations for women, which also covered the requirements for admission to Smith, Vassar, Wellesley, and other colleges. Music, painting, drawing, and "similar branches" were *not* taught in the school, but special attention was paid to "physical training."¹⁸ According to Thomas Woody, the noted historian of women's education, physical training was not taught in women's colleges until the latter part of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Sewall's inclusion of this course in the Girls' Classical School curriculum was not only controversial but also was closely related to the issue of women's dress reform.

Within two months of the school's opening, Sewall requested that parents consider the adoption of a "simple school dress" consisting of a kilt skirt and loose waist with a sash. This met the requirements advocated by Sewall for reform in women's dress: freedom of movement; absence of pressure over any part of the body; no more weight than was necessary for warmth, and both weight and warmth equally distributed; and quick changeability. In the day of the corset, bustle, and petticoats, Sewall dared not require such a uniform but urged parents to consider such a dress code for the health and comfort of her students. She required, however, the adoption of special shoes. Some students were wearing shoes whose heels "made it impossible for wearers to participate with success in portions of the gymnastics classes."²⁰

The Girls' Classical School catalogue for the year 1883-1884 summarized what had been accomplished in the past year for women's education: "in both amount and the quality of the work done, including Latin, Greek, Mathematics, French, German and English, the pupils have shown themselves at least equal to the pupils in the School for Boys, and have fully justified the expectation with which the School was founded. . . ." ²¹ Evidence of such success was seen when the cornerstone of a new building for the Girls' Classical School was laid in 1884 at 426 North Pennsylvania Street. By the

¹⁸ Scrapbooks of Classical School, vol. II (Indiana Division, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis).

¹⁹ Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States* (2 vols., New York, 1929), II, 118-20.

²⁰ May Wright Sewall, "A Symposium on Women's Dress," *The Arena*, VI (September, 1892), 490. Also, "A Simple School Dress," in Scrapbooks of Classical School, vol. II.

²¹ "A Simple School Dress," Scrapbooks of Classical School, vol. II.

following year a brochure for the Girls' Classical School stated that graduates had been admitted to Vassar, Smith, and Wellesley colleges upon certification from the principal and without examinations.²²

In 1886 a school residence opened at 343 and 345 North Pennsylvania Street. By this time the school's purpose was twofold. There was still a course of study designed as a preparatory school for colleges, but there was also a course of study for women who were not planning to enroll in college. Graduates of the school who took the college courses could now enroll as juniors at Indiana University or sophomores at Leland Stanford University.²³

Sewall's personal reputation as well as that of the school continued to spread. She was by now the founder of the National and International Councils of Women, which had brought her world fame, and she was still actively espousing the cause of women's suffrage.

At the height of these activities, Theodore Sewall, who encouraged his wife in reform activities, died of tuberculosis in 1895. After his death May Wright Sewall became the sole principal of the Girls' Classical School. She continued adding innovations—an adult education program and a Department of Industrial Domestic Science (later named Household Science). The latter included chemistry, physics, physiology, composition of foods, and practice work in cookery. Classes in invalid cookery and home nursing also were offered. These courses had equal rank with the academic classes. A two-story addition to the school was necessary to accommodate the new department.²⁴ The course of study in domestic science was one of the first offered in Indiana or in the nation. Woody stated that "it required boldness . . . to set up to teach a thing scientifically that had been thought to reside in an individual naturally." The first such cooking school mentioned by Woody was established in 1874. Classes remained experimental throughout the rest of the century, and as late as 1916 only 20 percent of the public schools offered classes in home economics.²⁵

²² See also "Mrs. May Wright Sewall's Girls' Classical School," *Our Herald*, September 27, 1884, p. 5. This weekly journal was published in Lafayette, Indiana, and was devoted to the championship of suffrage and prohibition.

²³ "Special Announcement, 1887-1888," *Scrapbooks of Classical School*, vol. II.

²⁴ "Girls Classical School Catalogue, 1902-03," p. 42, in *ibid.*

²⁵ Woody, *History of Women's Education*, II, 57-60.

In spite of such innovations, by 1900 the Girls' Classical School was having financial problems. First, Fredonia Allen, a former teacher for the school, established a rival school, Tudor Hall, which was modeled after the Classical School. In addition, public high schools had become common in Indiana. As a result of the financial difficulties, Sewall entered into a partnership with Anna F. Weaver in 1905. For two years the women operated the school together, but in 1907 Sewall announced her retirement. In a letter, Sewall explained,

An entry in my diary, made the night before The Classical School opened in 1882, ran thus: 'Tomorrow I commence work to which I now expect to give the chief part of my life for twenty-five years.'

This I have been permitted to do. This entry shows that it was within my intention to give only twenty-five years to this particular method of carrying out my educational ideas. For this opportunity I am profoundly grateful.²⁶

For the next three years Weaver operated the school alone. In 1910 it closed permanently. For a decade prior to Sewall's retirement from the school, however, she had been traveling extensively and working in another field—the woman's club movement—which garnered her an international reputation.

Sewall's genius lay in her ability to organize. She was once described as a "social clockmaker who gets human machinery into shape, winds it up and sets it to running."²⁷ Her international reputation rested largely upon her success in organizing and unifying the women's clubs of the world through what she termed "the council idea." The council idea originated when Sewall discovered that women most often "were interested only in women of their own class or in the legitimate recipients of their own charities." She felt that a typical woman's club of the time consisted of individuals of about the same social position, with similar opinions, tastes, and aspirations. Such groups seldom had contact with clubs of dissimilar backgrounds and interests. Through a National and International Council Sewall sought to bring women of varied backgrounds together under conditions that would show them that though different in traditions, wealth, social position, religion, and political opinions, they were all equally related to larger interests. Indeed, "like-

²⁶ May Wright Sewall, "To the Graduates of the Girls' Classical School," n.d., in *Scrapbooks of Classical School*, vol. V.

²⁷ "Mrs. May Wright Sewall: A Sketch of Her Work," *Indianapolis Sentinel*, April 6, 1902.

nesses existing among the most different classes of women were larger than the differences among the same classes."²⁸

The seed for the council idea was sown at a London reception given for Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in 1882. The two American suffrage leaders decided to form an International Woman's Suffrage Society. A resolution calling for such a society was proposed and adopted at this reception, and an international committee was appointed.²⁹ It had not convened five years later when Sewall was chairing the executive committee of the National Woman's Suffrage Association, which was planning a special celebration for the fortieth anniversary of the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. Under Sewall's direction invitations were extended to this international committee. As a result, European delegates attended the meeting in Washington, D.C., in 1888.³⁰

At this meeting Sewall stated her plan for forming two permanent organizations—National and International Councils—to meet at regular intervals. She moved that a committee be appointed to consider the council idea and specific plans for organization. The committee was appointed, including such people as Frances Willard, Mary A. Livermore, Julia Ward Howe, Lucy Stone, Antoinette B. Blackwell, and May Wright Sewall. This organizing committee met on March 27, 1888, passed a resolution in conformity with Sewall's plan, and adopted constitutions for a National Council and an International Council to be composed of the National Councils.³¹

Sewall travelled throughout Europe urging that a National Council be organized for each country. A "call" was printed and distributed everywhere she travelled, pleading for local women's clubs having the same objectives to form national societies

²⁸ May Wright Sewall, *Genesis of the International Council of Women and the Story of Its Growth, 1883-1893* (n.p., 1914), 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7. The origin of the councils is also described by Inez Haynes Irwin, *Angels and Amazons* (New York, 1933), 229-31, and Anna Garlin Spencer, *The Council Idea and May Wright Sewall* (New Brunswick, 1930), 1-3.

³¹ Sewall, *Genesis*, 13-16. Willard was nationally known as the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Stone and Blackwell had been active as abolitionists and were in the forefront of the women's movement. Howe was co-founder with Stone of the American Woman's Suffrage Association and had won international attention with her song, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Livermore was prominent for her work with the U.S. Sanitary Commission during the Civil War. See biographies in James, James and Boyer, eds., *Notable American Women, 1607-1950*.

so that they could be eligible for membership in the national councils.³²

In the United States Sewall explained that local societies should unite in councils for each town or city and that all state societies should enter state and territorial councils. She asserted "that this general plan of solidarity [would] be helpful to the utmost possible degree, bringing women of all sects and sections into mutual acquaintances, efficiency and fellowship." The simplicity of the plan was, to Sewall, its chief advantage, and the practical applications were unlimited. The case of circulating petitions among women would alone justify such an organization.³³

The number of American local and state clubs, by definition ineligible for membership in the Councils, continued to be a major concern to Sewall. She therefore urged the organization of local and state clubs into one national organization which would qualify for membership in the National Council. Her work bore fruit in 1889 when the foundation was laid for the General Federation of Women's Clubs. Sewall attended the organizational meeting and was one of five women who wrote its bylaws. Within two months of its organization, however, the General Federation decided not to affiliate with the National Council because the Federation itself was a "sovereign and international body."³⁴ Sewall was keenly disappointed. Although she was a founder of the movement and was elected the first vice-president of the General Federation,³⁵ her interest in it gradually waned when the organization failed to join the National Council.

Her belief in the objectives of the councils remained strong, however. The National Council of Women of the United States urged a variety of reforms: that women be admitted to the ranks of the clergy; that women be placed on the board of the National Divorce Reform League; that the United States government pay its employees equal wages for equal work; that dress be reformed; and that the slaughter of birds be restricted.³⁶

The First Triennial Meeting of the National Council of Women reached a most important decision concerning the

³² Sewall, *Genesis*, 38-40.

³³ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁴ J. C. Croly, *The History of the Woman's Club Movement in America* (New York, 1898), 100.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Sewall, *Genesis*, 46-47.

World's Exposition of 1893. The United States Congress made plans for celebrating the discovery of America by organizing an exposition in Chicago in 1893. Since the first meeting of the International Council was planned for the same year, Sewall wished for her group to meet in Chicago as one of the world "congresses" the United States government had scheduled in conjunction with the exposition. Sewall obtained permission. The congress was to be referred to as "the World's Congress of Representative Women."³⁷

Sewall was delighted. She printed an invitation to "women in all parts of the world interested in any department of intellectual activity, in philanthropy or reform":

Every living question pertaining to the education or the employment of women may be discussed in this congress. In its session the women's view upon every issue affecting humanity—upon the home, the church, the state, and her own function in these institutions—may be presented. What such a congress may do for the uplifting of humanity if the women of the world avail themselves of its unique advantages for stating their views of the present conditions of the race, of its struggles, its possibilities, its hopes, is incalculable.

The aid which such a congress will give to the solution of the hundreds of problems included in what is massed under the phrase, 'The Woman Question', is equally beyond measure. Humanity may well entertain eager anxiety regarding the manner in which women will respond to this matchless opportunity.³⁸

Between September 13, 1892, and May 1, 1893, the Organizing Committee sent out 7,198 letters and 55,000 copies of the printed address to all parts of the world.³⁹

When the World's Congress assembled, 126 national organizations of women were represented. The secretary of the World's Congress Auxiliary stated that total attendance at the meetings exceeded 150,000 persons. The week's congress proved so successful that the United States government presented Sewall an award, and a room of the Woman's Building was allotted for the two Councils for exhibits with a permanent desk assigned for the International Council.⁴⁰

Sewall's dream had come true. By 1900 Bertha Knobe referred to her as a leader of over five million women by virtue of her election as president of the International Council of Women.⁴¹ Also in this year, President William McKinley recognized Sewall's influence by appointing her to represent the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴¹ Bertha Demaris Knobe, "Mrs. May W. Sewall: Leader of Over 5,000,000 Women," *Harper's Bazaar*, XXXIII (June 2, 1900), 8.

women of the United States at the International Congresses for the Paris Exposition.⁴²

By 1907 the International Council of Women was the largest of all organizations of women. It consisted of over twenty national councils and represented approximately eight million women. Both the National Council of the United States and the International Council still exist. Each, however, was at its zenith during Sewall's lifetime. A contemporary of Sewall observed: "the varied organizations of women for specific reforms and for philanthropic work themselves nationalized, and later internationalized their activities, until the object each pursued was so strong in its own specialty that the need for coordinated support offered by the Council ceased to be felt and the financial support of the Council was neglected."⁴³ The attainment of women's suffrage also reduced interest in the Council because once women could vote they could voice their needs politically. It was in this realm of women's suffrage that Sewall made one of her greatest contributions to reform.

Much work had already been done in Indiana when Sewall joined the suffrage campaign. Indiana was one of five states that formed a state women's rights organization within three years of the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, but when Sewall arrived in the state in 1872 no significant progress had been made. Indiana's suffrage movement was suffering the same fate as the national movement: it had been totally disrupted by the Civil War and four years later split into two groups. Most Indiana suffragists remained loyal to the more conservative American Woman Suffrage Association led by Lucy Stone. Sewall favored the more radical National Woman Suffrage Association, founded by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and remained aloof from the Indiana branch of the American Association.⁴⁴

In March, 1878, Sewall and nine other individuals frustrated by the conservative nature of the old organization held a secret suffrage meeting of their own. According to Sewall, "mysterious whisperings" advertised the fact that there was to be a meeting of people known to have "advanced ideas" con-

⁴² Ida H. Harper, "The Work of the International Council of Women," *World Today*, XIII (July, 1907), 698.

⁴³ Spencer, *The Council Idea*, 50.

⁴⁴ May Wright Sewall, "Indiana," in Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage* (6 vols., reprinted New York, 1969), III, 533-58.

cerning women. In response to the secretly circulated summons, nine women and one man, whom Sewall described as "not mutually acquainted, but the most courageous of those to whom the call had come," assembled to discuss women's suffrage.⁴⁵

The secrecy of the meeting seems strange since suffrage had been debated in Indiana for fifteen years by this time. However, in the 1880s "respectable citizens" refrained from openly advocating suffrage. Sewall was by now teaching in the highly respected Indianapolis Classical School; perhaps this explained her apprehension. She later looked back upon this first meeting with amusement.

As a participant, I may say that the company had the air of a band of conspirators. Had we convened consciously to plot the ruin of our domestic life, which opponents predict as the result of woman's enfranchisement, we could not have looked more guilty or have moved about with more unnatural stealth.⁴⁶

At that meeting only one issue was definitely settled. A discussion ensued whether the new society should take a name concealing its primary goal from the public or one openly advertising it. The group chose the latter. Sewall concluded that "the fact that ten conscientious, upright persons could thus secretly convene in an obscure room, and that such a question could agitate them for more than two hours, is the best indication . . . of the conservative atmosphere which enveloped Indianapolis in the 1870s."⁴⁷

The Indianapolis Suffragists held their next meeting in April and advertised it in the local newspapers. Twenty-six men and women attended this meeting and established a permanent organization, the Indianapolis Equal Suffrage Association. The new society chose Sewall as its representative to the Jubilee Convention held by the National Woman Suffrage Association in Rochester in 1878, celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the first Seneca Falls meeting. It was at this meeting that Sewall gave her first speech on women's suffrage to a national audience. Afterwards, Lucretia Mott commended Sewall for her "strength, philosophic clearness and beauty of diction." Stanton, Anthony, and Frederick Douglass also con-

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 535.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 535-36.

gratulated Sewall, and from this date she maintained a lasting friendship with all three.⁴⁸

In December, 1880, the new Indianapolis society directed a letter to each member of the Indiana General Assembly. It clearly warned the legislators that their careers were being watched carefully and urged that they take up the "Suffrage Question," devoting a day to hearing the arguments of suffrage advocates before voting to remove "the unjust restrictions of the elective franchise to one sex."⁴⁹ Earlier that year, in a letter to Sara Andrews Spencer, corresponding secretary to the National Woman Suffrage Association, Sewall stated what she thought was holding back progress in Indiana: "We find languor of effort here, but the reason of it seems not so much a disbelief in the cause as an apathy—as the belief that suffrage for women is so *sure* a thing that it is not necessary to struggle for it!"⁵⁰

Sewall dedicated herself to the elimination of this apathy by writing about the subject often in her column in the *Indianapolis Times*. Many arguments had been advanced over the years opposing the franchise for women. One often heard was the fear that the exercise of political rights by women would lead to moral deterioration. Sewall protested that far from this, civil and political equality would bring a moral elevation:

Hitherto, the codes of morality for men and women have differed widely. . . . Excessive eating and drinking and unchastity deemed horrible in a woman have been called by easy names, glazed over and winked at in men; on the other hand, the irritable temper, habits of deception and malicious gossip . . . which would jeopardize any man's reputation and business prospects, have been half expected in women, and in them called by pretty names that have made the vices seem ornamental virtues, or at worst amusing foibles, and have indeed been indirectly nourished.⁵¹

Sewall believed the two separate moral standards were clearly evident in the presidential campaign of 1884 between Grover Cleveland and James G. Blaine. Among the campaign slander was the accusation that Cleveland had fathered an illegitimate child. When Cleveland did not deny the accusation, Sewall charged:

The present campaign brings into prominence the two moral standards of men and women . . . we have presented various arguments for believing that this

⁴⁸ "Sketch of May Wright Sewall," *Our Herald*, December 13, 1884.

⁴⁹ Sewall, "Indiana," 535.

⁵⁰ May Wright Sewall to Sarah Andrews Spencer, January 16, 1880, May Wright Sewall Papers (Marion County Public Library).

⁵¹ Sewall, "Woman's Work," *Indianapolis Times*, January 27, 1884.

morality will be hastened by women's political recognition. . . . The degree to which the country needs this influence is sadly evidenced by the proclamation of young men that Cleveland's crime, granting him to be guilty of all of which he is accused, is not one that affects his fitness for official life.⁵²

When women received the ballot, a moral elevation would occur in national politics. According to Sewall, purity in the state would be enforced by those who guarded purity in the home.⁵³

A second argument against woman's suffrage was the belief that woman's place was in the home. She should take no vital interest in public affairs because it was not in her nature to do so. Sewall never doubted that a woman's first duty was to keep the house and care for her family. Nor did she question that a man's first duty was to earn a living for his wife and children. However, no one argued that all of a man's time must be absorbed by his first duty. Likewise, Sewall saw no reason why a woman's home duties should completely "absorb, monopolize and exhaust her."⁵⁴

A more facetious argument declared that the ballot would destroy beauty. An antisuffragist male made the following comparison between the enfranchised woman and a bearded woman:

The vote, ladies will in no way serve you, will aid none of you in your work; on the contrary, it will rob you of your beauty. Political rights! It is as one should talk of the mustache and the beard. A bearded woman! Is she pretty? No! Pray then continue to leave politics to men as you leave to them mustaches and beards, and yourselves, remain women.⁵⁵

Sewall replied that the ballot would not make a woman plain. Rather it would enhance her beauty by emancipating her. Happiness was the key to beauty and

it was that martyrdom of the body and that agony of spirit inherent in a state of slavery which made women ugly. Political rights would render women beautiful, because they would procure her at the same time moral independence and material comfort. Men tell women that the ballot will be of no service to them. How does it happen that the sex that votes is much happier and more comfortable than the sex that does not vote?⁵⁶

Those who agreed that a woman's looks would hardly be altered for the worse might still contend that women had no need for political rights because they were already represented.

⁵² *Ibid.*, September 7, 1884.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, April 6, 1884.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, April 27, 1884.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

It was argued that the great majority of women were either under the age of twenty-one or were married and therefore had no need for the ballot because they were "under such influence and control as that relation implies or confers."⁵⁷ To Sewall this was the most unfair argument of all. The claim that suffrage was not a right but a privilege to be doled out to those who were deemed worthy was too unjust to be comprehensible:

No reason on earth can be given by those who claim suffrage as a right of manhood which does not make it a right of womanhood also. . . . If it be urged that their interests are so bound up in those of man that they are sure to be protected, the answer is that the same argument was urged to the merger in the husband of the wife's property, and it was pronounced by the judgment of mankind fallacious in practice and in principle. If the nature of men and women are so alike, for that reason no harm is done by suppressing women, what harm can be done by elevating them to equality. If the nature be different, what right can there be in refusing representation to those who might take juster action about many social and political questions?⁵⁸

Such arguments seemed to reduce apathy among Hoosiers, and as a result of letters, petitions, and mass meetings, the Indiana Senate and House adopted a suffrage amendment in 1881 and submitted it to the next General Assembly. However, the liquor industry responded with a campaign to link women's suffrage with a proposed prohibition amendment and defeat both. Elections in 1882 led to rejection of both amendments by the 1883 General Assembly.⁵⁹ In June, 1884, Sewall disclosed feelings of frustration. She expressed what she felt to be

the hopelessness of carrying this question to the masses for a just decision. . . . The majority of men are not yet governed in their actions by wisdom and justice; therefore whatever may be said of National Legislation—the average intelligence of such bodies is beyond doubt in excess of the average intelligence of the masses.⁶⁰

Her frustration was understandable because for the next three years suffrage remained at a standstill in Indiana. The fight in 1883 was the climax of the decade. The legislature refused to give serious consideration to woman's suffrage.⁶¹

In May, 1887, new life for suffrage began when the Equal Suffrage Society transformed itself into a state organization which was to be an auxiliary to the National Woman Suffrage

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, May 11, 1884.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ For an account of this campaign, see Sewall, "Indiana," 540-44.

⁶⁰ Sewall, "Woman's Work," *Indianapolis Times*, June 15, 1884.

⁶¹ Sewall, "Indiana," 544; Clifton J. Phillips, *Indiana in Transition: The Emergence of an Industrial Commonwealth, 1880-1920* (Indianapolis, 1968), 498-99.

Association. Susan B. Anthony visited Sewall to encourage her and agreed to hold the annual convention of the National Woman Suffrage Association in Indianapolis in May, 1888.⁶² The following year, the two Indiana state suffrage societies agreed to merge into one state organization. By the time of this merger, a national alliance had also occurred. The newly formed National Council of Women was influential in persuading the two national suffrage organizations to combine as the National American Woman Suffrage Association. This organization joined the National Council, and Sewall's work as a suffragist merged with her work within the councils.⁶³

During the last decade of struggle for women's suffrage, Sewall was not in Indiana. Though she remained an avid suffragist, she found what she considered to be an even more urgent cause which dominated the next decade of her life. This new cause was to be the last in which Sewall would participate—the search for international peace.

That Sewall should become a peace advocate at the turn of the century was not at all surprising. The peace movement, like the temperance crusade, was closely identified with feminists, and although the American peace movement was older than the woman's movement, Sewall was the first actually to organize a national woman's movement behind the peace effort. She accomplished this by guiding the International Council of Women into accepting a peace platform that from 1899 to 1914 dominated the work of the organization and helped it become a driving force in the peace movement throughout the world.⁶⁴

The first line of work which all councils agreed upon was the promotion of peace and arbitration. A resolution was first adopted in 1899 which committed the International Council to working for the establishment of peaceful relations among the nations throughout the world by every means in its power. The same resolution was reaffirmed by the International Council in 1904 and 1909.⁶⁵ These peace resolutions were intentionally worded in broad terms so each national council would be free to

⁶² "Indiana," in Stanton, Anthony and Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, IV, 615.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 615-17.

⁶⁴ Merle Curti, *Peace or War: The American Struggle 1636-1936* (New York, 1936), 116-17.

⁶⁵ May Wright Sewall, "Woman's Part in the Promotion of Internationalism," in *Proceedings of the Third American Peace Congress Held in Baltimore, Maryland, May Third to Sixth, 1911* (Baltimore, 1911), 419.

promote peace in its own country along lines which might vary according to local conditions. However, the International Council itself, through its Committee on Peace and Arbitration, attempted to promote internationalism by what Sewall referred to as "all friendly means."⁶⁶

Peace was promoted by annual executive meetings held in the capitals of the countries belonging to the International Council. Headquarters were also maintained at various international expositions, such as the Columbia Exposition in Chicago in 1893, the Exposition of Paris in 1900, and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis in 1904. At all these expositions the International Council circulated peace literature and stressed the peace movement as a major aspect of its work.⁶⁷

Sewall, as president of the International Council and chairperson of its Committee on Peace and Arbitration, advocated other means of securing international peace. She firmly believed that nationalism as taught in school textbooks should be eliminated and replaced with a more international feeling of brotherhood. She urged that each National Council make a rigid examination of all textbooks on the history of its own country to ascertain to what degree the relative importance of war and military glory were exaggerated. "It is believed . . .," she wrote, "that to a degree which would be appalling were it realized by the world, modern history . . . results in the development of an arrogant and vain-glorious regard for one's own country, and in contempt, resentment and hatred toward other nations."⁶⁸

In addition to the promotion of these changes in textbooks, Sewall urged that textbooks be adopted in the United States which would teach the real story of industrial development which came about because of the "successive tides of immigration." According to Sewall, "It is most inconsistent, and to a very large degree futile, for us to meet in peace congresses and discuss with some degree of respect the great nations, and do nothing to abate the mutual ignorance and consequent dislike, not to say hatred, of the representatives of different races in

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ May Wright Sewall, "To the Women's Meeting Convened as Part of the Thirteenth International Peace and Arbitration Congress Assembled at Park Street Church, Wednesday Evening, October 5, 1904," in *Official Report of the Thirteenth Universal Peace Congress Held at Boston, Massachusetts, USA, October Third to Eighth, 1904* (Boston, 1904), 132.

the different cities in which we live." In addition, Sewall urged mothers to remove all toys from nurseries "that bring into a child's mind the thought of military pomp and show, of warfare, with its contentions and its glories."⁶⁹

Sewall's arguments along with the work of the International Council brought her fame among the peace advocates. In fact, at the four Peace Congresses which were held between 1904 and 1911, Sewall was either a speaker or a guest of honor, representing the International Council and giving an account of the work of nearly eight million women whom she represented.⁷⁰

When war broke out in 1914, Sewall was dismayed but became more determined than ever to work for peace: "While many distinguished advocates of Peace felt that work for its establishment was inevitably suspended by the war—to me the war seemed a proclamation to the women of the world that some action by them which would assert the solidarity of womanhood was imperative."⁷¹ Consequently, she organized and chaired, under the auspices of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, an International Conference of Women Workers to Promote Permanent Peace. The conference met in July, 1915, and brought together approximately five hundred people from the United States and eleven foreign countries. The climax of the conference occurred on the sixth and final day with a speech by William Jennings Bryan, who had only recently resigned as secretary of state under President Woodrow Wilson.⁷²

Later Sewall attempted to take matters into her own hands by having a personal interview with President Wilson on November 2, 1915. During this interview, Wilson stated that the United States could not take any official step toward mediation in the European War or toward organizing a conference for that purpose at that time. Sewall left feeling, however, that Wilson was sympathetic with the plan for informed, unofficial initiatives.⁷³

Later that month Henry Ford invited Sewall to participate in his unofficial peace expedition. She joined it but doubted

⁶⁹ Sewall, "Woman's Part in the Promotion of Internationalism," 420.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ May Wright Sewall, *Women, World War and Permanent Peace* (San Francisco, 1915), xii.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 177.

⁷³ May Wright Sewall to Louis Lochner, January 10, 1916, Telegrams, Letters and Other Papers Relating to the Ford Expedition in 1915 (Indiana Division, Indiana State Library).

Ford could fulfill his promise "to get the boys out of the trenches by Christmas." All that she expected to accomplish was to divert public attention from war, to stimulate peace workers in every country to renewed efforts, and to deepen the participants' resoluteness in the cause. The mission actually did strengthen the peace movement in neutral European countries, but the press viewed it as a monstrous joke, and the reputations of the participants suffered.⁷⁴

Once the journey was over, Sewall dropped out of public life. Whether it was from the humiliation of the trip or from her age or poor health (she was now seventy-two) was not known, but between 1916 and 1920 no public statement in print or otherwise seems to have been made.

In 1920, the year of her death, Sewall publicly revealed another dimension of herself. She had, no doubt, used this last five-year period preparing for publication in a new frontier, one which involved her in the strangest aspect of her career—spiritualism.

Despite the popularity of the spiritualist movement around the turn of the century, Sewall kept her involvement a well-concealed secret until two months before her death. She gave two reasons for maintaining silence over the twenty-five-year period of her experiences. First, those who contacted her from the spirit world urged her not to give messages to the world at that time, and secondly, the few friends (possibly a dozen in all) in whom she confided intimated that she was a victim of a mental delusion. Public discovery of her belief in spiritualism could have destroyed her credibility as a practical reformer. Therefore, she waited until "extreme feebleness" had taken her permanently out of public affairs before revealing her psychic experiences.⁷⁵

Sewall's book on spiritualism, *Neither Dead Nor Sleeping*, shocked fellow Indianapolis residents. As Anton Scherer, a local journalist, recalled:

Nothing rocked the foundations of Indianapolis quite as much as the appearance of *Neither Dead nor Sleeping*. . . . The book, I remember, took everybody

⁷⁴ Sewall's goals are given in a letter to My Dear Friends in Hoosierland, December 16, 1915, in "Papers Relating to the Ford Expedition." Ford's plans as well as the reaction of the press are described in Burnet Hershey, *The Odyssey of Henry Ford and the Great Peace Ship* (New York, 1967). Merle Curti evaluated the impact of the expedition in *Peace or War*, 261.

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Morgan, "Mrs. May Wright Sewall Tells of Talks with Departed Mate," *Indianapolis Star*, May 9, 1920.

by surprise for up until that time nobody . . . had the least idea that Mrs. Sewall was in touch with the spirit world.⁷⁶

Sewall had indeed properly guessed the reaction, but she declared that the book was necessary because there were those who "might obtain from the book some of the sure comfort of knowing the simplicity and naturalness of the life into which they passed from the life of the earth." She also expressed a belief that eventually psychic science would be taught in high schools and universities, just as natural science was then taught.⁷⁷

Sewall's adventures into the spirit realm began shortly after the death of her second husband, Theodore Sewall, in 1895, but her real conversion to spiritualism occurred at an 1897 Chautauqua meeting at Lily Dale, New York, when a "sitting" was arranged for her with a "slate writer." At this sitting, Sewall chose a clean slate that was sponged off and tied it with her own handkerchief. She then held it in her own hands with no other hands touching it. She wrote down questions on "bits of paper that had not passed out of her hands." The answers to these questions were written in the form of a letter on the slate which was opened later in Sewall's hotel room. She explained that she opened the slate expecting to find it bare, but instead found that it was covered with "clear and legible writing," with "perfectly coherent, intelligent and characteristic replies to questions which had been written upon the bits of paper that had not left my hands."⁷⁸ After this experience, Sewall explained, "I knew as clearly as I now know after twenty-two years of constant study and experimentation that I had, so to speak, acquired actual knowledge, if not of immortality, at least of a survival of death—I had learned that the last enemy is destroyed, in that he can destroy neither being nor identity, nor continuity of relationship."⁷⁹ From this time, Sewall claimed to have had almost daily communications from her dead husband. Her book also described piano lessons by the recently deceased master, Anton Rubinstein, and her most unusual recovery from Bright's disease after following the instructions of a medieval priest.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Anton Scherrer, "Mrs. May Wright Sewall Spirit Talks," *Indianapolis Times*, October 16, 1946.

⁷⁷ Morgan, "Sewall Tells of Talks with Departed Mate."

⁷⁸ Sewall, *Neither Dead Nor Sleeping*, 9.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

In the introduction to *Neither Dead Nor Sleeping* Booth Tarkington discussed the paradox presented to followers of May Wright Sewall, who suddenly discovered that their unquestioned oracle had been living "on the unknown Sea." Tarkington admitted he found himself in a "condition of astonishment" when Sewall called him to examine her manuscript before its printing. He observed:

It was to me dumbfounding to find that for more than twenty years this academic-liberal of a thousand human activities, Mrs. Sewall, had been really living not with the living so to put it. And as I read, it seemed to me that I had never known so strange a story; and at times, dwelling upon her long struggle to cure her malady, and to make herself a proper messenger for those known to us everyday people as dead, it seemed again that these almost grotesquely painful sacrifices of the flesh were recorded, not of a modern lady of the world, but of some medieval penitent. . . .

Tarkington continued that there was one thing of which there could be no question: Sewall did "put away" a malady pronounced fatal. Nor would anyone who had known Sewall believe that she had intentionally deceived herself during the long experience with "supernatural beings." Tarkington concluded that her experiences either were authentic or a mysterious product of her own subconscious.⁸¹

When the public learned of Sewall's involvement in spiritualism, it was not as kind as Booth Tarkington. This strange activity quickly overshadowed thirty years of work in education and women's rights. The image of the frail old woman who fasted according to the directions of a priest from the Middle Ages and pounded away at a piano chosen for her by Rubinstein was too potent to overcome the image of a strong-willed woman who had fought for equality and justice.⁸²

This fact perhaps explains why Sewall's place in Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis is not as well known as those of her two friends and contemporaries, Benjamin Harrison and James Whitcomb Riley. Nonetheless, as the field of women's history is further explored the work of Sewall and other forgotten reformers will emerge as real and significant monuments. The truest estimate of Sewall is found in what Booth Tarkington described as "the longing in all humility, to be of great help to the world."⁸³

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, [xx].

⁸² Scherrer, "Mrs. May Wright Sewall Spirit Talks."

⁸³ Sewall, *Neither Dead Nor Sleeping*, [xxii].