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Martha McMillan & The Prohibition Party

Martha McMillan, born in 1844, lived in Cedarville, Ohio for much of her life. Her journals, beginning with her marriage in 1867 and spanning 46 years, document her life experiences and family happenings, as well as her religious and social involvements. As an active member of her Cedarville community, Martha often supported and involved herself with social and political movements that aligned with her religious beliefs. One such movement was the Prohibition Party, a political movement that gained notable traction during the 1890s and early 1900s. The Prohibition Party, among other things, strongly disapproved of alcohol production, distribution, and consumption. Martha's support for the Prohibition Party, as shown in her journal entries, echoes some of the religious and social beliefs of her local and national communities and demonstrates the ways in which the Party allowed women such as Martha to participate in politics, contrary to other parties and movements from that time.

The Prohibition Party acquired significant support from Martha's community in Cedarville. Martha herself noted support for the Party when a Prohibition gubernatorial candidate named John J. Ashenurst visited the town on October 28, 1891. In her journal entry for that day, Martha said the following: "Our prohibition candidate... J.J. Ashenurst spoke at the Opera house to night. Mr Mc and Uncle Joe and I went in the Lourie and Harlan also went with us. He had a good audience and gave us a grand speech" (McMillan). Ashenurst would garner only 2.54% of the votes in the 1891 gubernatorial election, ultimately losing to

Republican candidate William McKinley (“1891 Election”). Ashenhurst later served as the State Chairman for the Prohibition Party and hosted the Party’s state convention in May of 1900. The May 18th paper from *The Stark County Democrat* states that “the convention will be the largest one of the party ever held in Ohio, and nearly 400 delegates are expected to be present and in addition to this number it is probable hundreds of visitors will be on hand” (“May 18, 1900”). Although the Prohibition Party never obtained the same national support as the Republican or Democratic parties, their values still resonated with local communities such as Cedarville. As well as Martha and her family, her congregation’s Reverend James Morton also applauded the party’s efforts from the pulpit of the Reformed Presbyterian Church at Cedarville. Like Martha, “Dr. Morton had always maintained a warm interest in the temperance question and some time since identified himself with the Prohibition party, with the principles of which his congregation is mostly in sympathy” (“James Foyil Morton”). The values of the Prohibition Party clearly found support in Martha, her family, and her community in Cedarville.

Cedarville’s local support for the Prohibition Party mirrored broader support for the Party in small towns across the United States. The Party had its roots in post-Civil War fears regarding the prevalence of alcohol consumption in men. In the years after the war, Prohibitionists and those involved in the temperance movement decried the liquor industry, believing that manufacturers “exploited wartime anxieties to create a market among frightened young men who had supposedly shown little previous interest in its products” (Anderson 13). These concerns led the Prohibitionists to form a political party that would continue the moral crusades of the other parties with more fervor in relation to alcohol consumption. On September 3rd, 1869, the Prohibition Party officially launched itself into the political sphere of the United States. In the next several decades, “rural and small-town voters affiliated with Protestant evangelical churches

provided most of the party's support" ("Prohibition Party"). Martha's journals reflect this multitude of support. In addition to Cedarville's support for the Prohibition Party, Martha also documents conventions and speeches in neighboring towns and communities. On June 10, 1891, Martha writes: "After a long time Mr Mc and I got started to Springfield to the Prohibition Convention... We met Aunt Bell and Mary & Mr Mortons at the Convention" (McMillan). Later in August, Martha comments on a Prohibition campaign speech taking place in Xenia (McMillan, 24 August 1891). Just as Martha's local community in Cedarville provided support for the party, so too did many of the surrounding small towns and rural communities in Ohio.

The Prohibition Party resonated with Christian evangelical voters like Martha in particular because of their values and commitment to the moral constitution of America. The Party believed themselves to be the solution to both the Democratic and Republican Parties, who they claimed had abandoned the moral principles foundational to American politics and culture. For the 1892 presidential election, the Party's public platform states "we arraign the Republican and Democratic Parties as false to the standards reared by their founders; as faithless to the principles of the illustrious leaders of the past to whom they do homage with the lips" ("1892 Platform"). The Prohibitionists rejected the notion that morals and politics were distinct and advocated for a party driven by moral sensibilities in order to maintain the same standards enacted by America's founders. The Party openly expressed their commitment to Christian values, as they acknowledged in their platform "Almighty God as the source of all true government, and His law as the standard to which human enactments must conform to secure the blessings of peace and prosperity" ("1892 Platform"). In order to develop a strong moral center, the Prohibitionists broadly agreed that Christian principles were necessary. Martha expressed these same guiding principles, particularly in relation to her Christian faith. In one of her Sabbath

entries, Martha writes that “Morality and every careful calling is the cause of God... One way God pleads his own cause is by raising up witnesses to work for him” (McMillan, 20 September 1891). Martha, as a devout Christian, demonstrated a clear commitment to a moral lifestyle and found the same values echoed in the Prohibition Party.

Additionally, the Prohibition Party remained relevant to people like Martha for its rigid desire to enact significant social and legal reform in response to various social issues. The Prohibition Party came alongside other organizations as a part of the Temperance movement that pushed for a national ban on alcohol manufacturing and consumption. Among these various organizations were “the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the Anti-Saloon League, and the Lincoln–Lee Legion” (Webb 61). Together, the men and women involved sought to enforce their moral principles onto an ever-changing American landscape. One scholar notes that “In the mid-19th century, the temperance crusaders turned from moral persuasion to legal coercion” (Webb 61). No longer content with social discussions, the Prohibitionists wanted to enforce legal consequences on alcohol production, purchase, and consumption. To accomplish these changes, Prohibitionists and Temperance advocates launched various crusades in the latter nineteenth century. One particular movement of note was the Women’s Crusade of 1873-1874. In the harsh months of the winter, thousands of women across the United States decided to take “direct action against the saloon and liquor traffic” through “prayer vigils, petition campaigns, demonstrations, [and] hymn-singing” (“Temperance & Prohibition”). Two of these crusades transpired in Martha’s surrounding communities: Xenia and South Charleston. Although her journals have no mention of the events, her support of temperance and the Prohibition Party showcase the same desire for both social and legal reform. Martha, like many women in her local and national

communities, provided an example of a woman active in her support for temperance and the Prohibition movement.

The Prohibition Party also deserves recognition for its inclusion of women like Martha and its support for women's rights. During its founding convention in 1869, the Party included thirty woman delegates and "became the first political party to include women—citizens ineligible to vote—as party members and, even more notably, shapers of the party agenda (Anderson, "Give the Ladies a Chance" 137). By contrast, neither the Republican or Democratic Party would allow women delegates until the end of the nineteenth century; therefore, the Prohibition Party's choice to include women presented a landmark shift in the political sphere. During this first Prohibition convention, "Women spoke from the floor, entered debates, introduced resolutions, and voted on the party platform" (Anderson, "Give the Ladies a Chance" 137). Since Prohibitionists focused their attention on social issues that concerned the morality of the nation, women felt they deserved a place alongside the men in forming and participating in the Party. Furthermore, Prohibitionists "hoped that women's presence would harness feminine moral authority to an institution, the party system, that was often perceived as intrinsically corrupt" (Anderson, "Give the Ladies a Chance" 137). As well as female participation, the Prohibition Party also advocated for equal wages and women's rights to vote. In their 1892 public platform, the Party expressed their belief that "no citizen should be denied the right to vote on account of sex, and equal labor should receive equal wages, without regard to sex" ("1892 Platform"). Because of their commitment to social, moral, and legal reform, the Prohibition Party recognized the need for both men and women to involve themselves in the movement and possess equal rights in voting and the workforce. Consequently, women such as Martha were able to shape and support the Prohibition Party and movement in ways the other

Parties would not allow for some time after. Martha's support for temperance and the Prohibition Party demonstrates the agency granted by these movements in that they allowed women a historic level of involvement in political reform.

The Prohibition Party of the late nineteenth century was a relevant source of political, social, and religious inspiration for Martha and her Cedarville community. Those in her church and surrounding towns showcased strong support for the Prohibition and temperance movements, precipitated by an urgent concern for the declining moral state of America and its political system. Martha's Christian beliefs certainly influenced her advocacy for Prohibition and temperance. Prohibitionists like Martha sought legal reform in order to combat the growing liquor industry and post-War increases in alcohol consumption. Additionally, the Prohibition Party diverged from other Parties of its time in opening itself to women membership and participation. In conclusion, the Prohibition Party spoke to the social and religious concerns of Martha McMillan and her community and allowed women like her the voice and the freedom to participate in the expanding political climate of America.

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