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FROM SERFDOM TO CULTURE



JESSIE D. GUTZLAFF

Recently I ran across a little booklet published in 1939 under the above title. It contains a biographical sketch of Miss Jessie D. Gutzlaff, written by Alfred F. Little, a gentleman who met her in 1901. At the time, Miss Gutzlaff was visiting friends in Albion when she was enroute to the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. Mr. Little was very much impressed with this small blind Chinese woman and how she was such an inspiration to all whom she came in contact. Miss Gutzlaff was evidently endowed with a sweet and gentle disposition and great religious zeal.

She took her name from Dr. Karl Gutzlaff who was a Christian Missionary working through the Netherland Missionary Society. He evidently went to China in 1831 aboard a Chinese junk with a crew of 50 and 250 tons of cargo. His description of Chinese seamen at the time is certainly very interesting. In his own words, "The major part of them are opium smokers, gamblers, thieves and fornicators....their language most filthy and obscene". By 1834 Dr. Gutzlaff was under the British government, Chinese Secretary to the Hong Kong government. It was through this connection, that in late 1842, Mrs. Gutzlaff brought three little Chinese girls to the State School for the Blind in Columbus, Ohio. We can only surmise that the Gutzlaffs recognized that these children had little or no chance as waifs, to succeed in Hong Kong during that era.

In 1846 when the Superintendent of the Blind School moved to Geneva, N.Y. he took Jessie with him. When she was thirteen years of age, she was admitted to the New York City Institute for the Blind where she remained until 1852.

It was at that time that Mrs. Gutzlaff wrote in a missionary paper requesting that someone take Jessie

into their home. Hence, Jessie arrived in Albion, N.Y. in the year 1851 to live with the Middleton family who conducted a private school for the instruction of girls. Mrs. Middleton managed the affairs of the household with a daughter, Jane, who supervised the institution of learning. It was evidently customary for the Middletons to take in homeless young women. Some even became teachers for the Middletons, such as Jessie. In 1938 Rev. John T. Sanborne, Rector of Christ Episcopal Church stated that: "The records of the church show that on January 1, 1852 the following were entered on the books as a family unit - Mrs. Middleton, Jane Middleton, Mary Middleton and Jessie Gutzlaff."

We know that Mary Middleton later married Charles Smith, a clothier in Albion. And it was the Smiths that Jessie was visiting in 1901.

Jessie remained with the Middletons for around ten years. While with them, she became an accomplished pianist and was taken around the country by Jan Middleton to perform for financial returns.

In 1861 Jessie Gutzlaff enrolled in the Pennsylvania Institute for the Instruction of the Blind. It was here that Jessie became a proof reader. Shortly after the introduction of Braille, the institution opened a little printing office. Soon after, Braille was introduced into the instruction program of that school.

Our little booklet From Serfdom to Culture states the following from a letter written by the librarian of the Pennsylvania Institution:

"Miss Jessie began to read proofs about January, 1893, soon after American Braille was introduced into the school. She read all proofs except mathematics and the foreign languages. According to records she has read in American Braille (machine work) 52,679 pages, covering 426 titles. In addition to this there were probably as many handwritten (Braille) sheets, copied by former pupils, each one passing under Miss Jessie's fingers. Especially with these handwritten sheets Miss Jessie felt the responsibility, and a misspelled word could not possibly slip her fingers. She was always a conscientious worker, and whether it was machine or hand work she was always distressed if anyone found a mistake she had overlooked. Miss Jessie also kept up with Revised Braille, grade one and one-half - the university type for the blind recently agreed upon in this country. Fortunately she had learned the English Braille in her younger days, and unlike the rest of us, was not obliged to learn a new system. In Revised Braille, grade one and one-half, she read all the proofs, of all English books that had been embossed in our printing office prior to her death."

The memoir also states that she could recite the entire book of Psalms. Jessie Gutzlaff died in 1920 but was remembered by all who knew her as a devoted Christian with a gentle disposition. She was a person of innate refinement with a resulting personality that was the affection of all. She was able to overcome tremendous obstacles and labored to save all she could from her meager earnings. When she died she left \$5,000.00 which was willed to two schools in Shanghai for the education of Chinese children.

"In my distress I cried to the Lord, and He answered me."

Psalm 120:1