

Opening doors for women in education

by CAROL HOLCOMB | *University of Mary Hardin-Baylor*

Elli Moore Townsend established the Cottage Home program at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in 1892, which enabled thousands of women with limited means to earn a college education. Born Sept. 22, 1861, Townsend graduated from Baylor Female College at age 17. After graduation, she taught school several years, then studied for a brief time in Philadelphia.

While in Philadelphia, Townsend came across a pamphlet that celebrated the history of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary and was impressed by what she read of Mary Lyon's efforts there to help underprivileged women achieve an education. In 1881, Townsend was invited to return to Baylor College as a teacher. She accepted the job—all the while pondering ways to help poor women in Texas earn a degree.

By 1888, she had a firm plan in mind that she called the “Cottage Home” program. Townsend petitioned the college trustees to build a house on campus for cooperative living. They refused her request but were not unsympathetic to her plan. One trustee donated personal funds to help her buy a lot across from the school, while others donated lumber and supplies. By September 1892, a small house had been completed with three bedrooms, a kitchen and a sitting room to house 12 girls. When Townsend explained they could not afford any furnishings, the carpenters took pity on them and “knocked together” a pine table and benches. The girls used wooden crates as wash stands and dressers.

The Cottage Home program offered women of limited means the opportunity to work in exchange for their education. The Cottage Home girls worked in school facilities, grew vegetables and made handcrafted items to pay for their educations. As late as the 1930s, the school still boasted its own dairy herd, refrigeration plant, butcher shop, laundry and power plant.

The Cottage Home program survived and grew to include six additional frame houses because of Townsend's grit and determination. Before long, she began promoting a plan for a permanent brick building, dedicated as Ely-Pepper Hall in 1906. In 1944, Townsend advised a student, “You must never admit that a door is closed until you have turned the knob both ways and put your full strength against it.” When Townsend died in 1953, Baptist women across Texas mourned this woman who used her full strength to open doors for women in Christian higher education.

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