



## An Invincible Schoolmarm

by Christine L. Thomson

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### *The little-known story of Miss Emily Prudden, who formed fifteen institutions in the Carolinas*

On a spring day in 1884, Miss Emily C. Prudden, a deaf, middle-aged, New England spinster, boarded a buggy in Gastonia, destined for the health resort at All Healing Springs. Despite her disability, the conservatively dressed woman wasn't traveling there to be cured by the mineral waters which supposedly healed everything from scurfula to diabetes. She was riding toward an important business appointment with the hotel owners.

This meeting with the Francis Garretts, concerning fifty acres they had offered for establishing a girl's school, reshaped Miss Prudden's life. Her hopes and plans of that day for beginning one school evolved into a thirty-year career of founding fifteen schools in the Carolinas, including Pfeiffer College.

When she appeared at their office, the Garretts' first impression of Miss Prudden was probably similar to that of Dr. J. W. Garson, a Gastonia minister, who described her: "A woman of impressive appearance, of fine Christian character, very deaf, but evidently a woman of executive ability and vision." (*Gastonia Gazette*, June 18, 1954) As the interview progressed, the resort owners would have agreed with Mary Woodruff's childhood memories of Miss Prudden being "a very dedicated person, very quiet because of her handicap, but with a radiant smile." (*Floyd, Life and Work of Emily C. Prudden*, p. 2)

#### **Her Own Money**

In addition to her favorable demeanor, Miss Prudden possessed the most important factor for establishing a school -- money. Her willingness to initially finance this institution and all her others was crucial to their success. Building materials, construction, furniture, books, and teacher's salaries were within her annual income of roughly \$500.00. (This amount seems impossibly small, but in 1880 the average non-farm worker's yearly earnings were \$386.00 from which he provided for a family of five.) (*Historical Statistics, of U.S.*, 1975, p. 165.)

Although she could afford the first year's expenses, she assured money for their future by pre-arranging benefactors for each school. Individuals or organizations, such as the American Missionary Association, agreed to contribute to and to assume full responsibility of her mission schools after several years. Judge Jones of Minneapolis, Minnesota, was the donor to Jones Seminary, later called Linwood College, which was built on the Garretts' land.

After Miss Prudden left their hotel, the Garretts probably wondered why this lady had exchanged a secure, respected position in New England for a strenuous life in rural North Carolina. If it had been 1983 instead of 1884, Miss Prudden's late-blooming career would have been better understood. Now she would be viewed as one of many middle-aged women who fulfill themselves by professions after the demands of family decrease. Miss Prudden's hopes for "entering ways of large endeavor" were pushed aside by deafness as a teenager. A few years later the responsibility of caring for her sister's orphans replaced any other plans she had. In 1880, Jane Colton, the youngest of the children who Emily had raised, died. The "quiet, happy, useful life" of being a mother ended. At nearly fifty years old, she had a generous income and a strong religious faith that demanded that she accomplish something with the rest of her life.

## Emily's Mission

Miss Emily had discovered her mission while serving as a housemother at the Brainerd Institute in Chester, South Carolina in 1882-83. As a Northerner in a Southern school, she was in no way unique. A Southerner described the migration of New England educators as "the combat was over and the 'Yankee' school ma'ams followed in the train of Northern armies." (Knight, *Public School Education in North Carolina*, 1916, p. 214)

Her reaction to the educational poverty she saw in surrounding rural areas was unique. Girls living there had "no advantage, no church, no society" and certainly, no school. Her sympathies focused into a goal as she thought to herself, "You could build a home (boarding school) in some lovely place and take fifteen girls and train them as your own, and send them out to useful lives." (Prudden, *American Missionary*, 1914, p. 737)

The conditions that she observed were common across the South. Schools were scarce, although most states like North Carolina had accepted the philosophy of free universal education. In 1869 and in 1877, North Carolina had passed laws to facilitate townships to tax and provide public instruction. Unfortunately, the Civil War had so devalued property that revenues only covered basic government functions leaving almost no money for education. By 1882, there were still over a thousand school districts out of 7,000 without any schools. (*Noble, History of Public Schools, 1930. p. 39*) As late as the early 1900's, Governor Charles B. Aycock decried the plight of education in his booming speeches:

"The children of more than 950 public school districts are altogether without school houses, while those in 1132 districts sat on rough pine boarders in log houses chinked with clay. Perhaps under all these circumstances it was well enough that the schools were kept open only seventy-three days in the year and less than one third of the children of school age attended them . . ." (Knight, p. 330)

With this abounding lack of schools, the energetic Miss Prudden wasn't content with only directing the Jones Seminary. A summer vacation at Blowing Rock convinced her that the mountain regions must have help. By 1887, she admitted young women to the Skyland Institute there.

## First for Negroes

While still operating her first school and building the Blowing Rock facility, she planned and constructed Lincoln Academy at All Healing Springs, her first of seven schools for blacks. This academy which opened in 1888 was the first institution to offer high school to negroes in Gaston County.

The concurrent management of these schools established a pattern. For the next three decades, Miss Prudden trekked across the Western Carolinas building one or more schools in such towns as Saluda, Altamont, Hudson, Elk Park, Lawndale, Golden, Mill Springs, Brevard (North Carolina) and Cowpens, South Carolina.

Teachers recruited from the North assisted her at all the homes, as Miss Prudden liked to call them. The students attended from fall through early spring, and religious training was part of the curriculum. No school bore her name, for she asked for neither repayment nor recognition of her efforts when she donated the homes to societies.

When each of her boarding schools opened, the least of Miss Prudden's problems was finding the fifteen girls of her original dream. Live-in students flocked from miles away by schooner wagons; day students trudged the cliched five miles. "I would take them all, buy more beds, tables, dishes and school books" was her solution to the unexpected numbers. Often she and the teachers gave up their own rooms to accommodate fifty or more children in a structure built for thirty-five. (*Prudden, p. 737*)

## Barter System

When farm families had no money for the nominal tuition, Miss Prudden astutely relied on the barter system. "You feed your children at home . . . Well, let them bring the same food and cook it here, and I will do all the rest" was the bargain she offered parents who would never have accepted charity. (*Prudden, p. 738*)

On the strength of corn, sweet potatoes, ham and hard work by the pupils, her school prospered. Mrs. Isabel Mauney, a student at Lincoln Academy in the 1890's, recalled a typical day there.

"Two hours of study came every night in the week and that was done in the chapel with one teacher presiding . . . It was a real school, too. There was no talking, whispering . . . All there were thrashing out lessons. They had no library, only a few odd books . . . There was always a good dictionary, though, at hand, and some encyclopedias. This being a mission school, each student had to do some work, an hour a day at least . . . The small girls did such as bringing in wood, sweeping, carrying the water . . . The larger girls made the beds, scrubbed the floors, cleaned the lamps and of course, helped in the kitchen." (*Gastonia Gazette, Mar. 21. 1957*)

If the life at her homes seemed demanding, Miss Prudden's own travels and accommodations also reflected the hardships of nineteenth century North Carolina. On a trip to Altamont in 1801, her wagon reached the Linville River after dark. When the driver couldn't find the ford, Miss Prudden had him drive her far enough into the river so that she could wade to the other side. The other teachers and the supplies for the school crossed after she located the road by wandering down the overgrown, pitch-black bank. When they arrived at Altamont, their lodgings were a cabin in which "snow through a thousands holes sifted down on our paper as we wrote, and moistened our beds . . ." (*Prudden, p. 740*)

### **Her Greatest Success**

In 1898, Miss Prudden established Oberlin Home and School at the foot of Lick Mountain near Hudson. Named for Jean Frederic Oberlin, a French minister/philanthropist who had introduced modern agricultural methods to his impoverished parishioners, Miss Prudden tried to build a model farm as well as a school there. "Here I helped to train some farmers how to succeed. I gave rent and implements, all in vain. Nothing was learned or done" was her summation of the experiment. (*Prudden, p. 741*)

Although she considered the farming project her only failure, the school located there became her greatest success. The Oberlin Home and School, after moving to Misenheimer, became Pfeiffer College. This institution, which commemorates Miss Prudden's work by hanging her portrait in their student center, is the only school founded by her which still exists. All others were replaced by the growing public schools and state colleges in the 1920's except Lincoln Academy which operated until 1955.

Miss Prudden continued her work with schools until her retirement at the vital age of 80. For the five years remaining in her life, she lived in her adopted home, North Carolina. She directed only that her body be returned to the Prudden grave plot in Orange, Conn. There on her lichened stone, the love for this state and its children that was conveyed to her kin is repeated through her epitaph: "Fifteen mission schools and colleges were founded by her in the Southland and thousands received rich blessing through her loving ministry." (*Floyd, p. 2*)