Mary Stillwell (1862-1947)

Mary Stillwell established the first Salvation Army corps in Portland in 1886. Her work led to the opening of the first headquarters for the organization in the Pacific Northwest.

Mary Matthews was born to English parents in Corfu, Greece, on January 27, 1862. Her father was in the British army, and the family moved frequently, eventually settling in Canada. At the age of seventeen, she was sent to London to further her education. While living in London, she began attending Salvation Army meetings and enrolled in the Women's Training College, where Emma Booth, daughter of the organization's founder, was principal. Matthews joined the Salvation Army and became an officer, rising to the rank of captain. During her time in London, she met Henry Stillwell, who also became a Salvation Army officer, and the two began a courtship.

The Salvation Army first expanded its work to the United States in 1880, when officers landed in New York City. Henry Stillwell was sent to San Francisco to establish a corps, arriving in the city in 1883. Mary Matthews received orders to join him and the couple married soon after she arrived. Rather than a honeymoon, the newlyweds worked to open a Salvation Army corps in Oakland. By 1886, Henry Stillwell was in charge of all Salvation Army efforts in California.

In the summer of 1886, Henry Stillwell sent Mary and two female cadets to Portland to begin a corps in Oregon. She took with her the couple's ten-month-old child. The *Oregonian* reported on August 28, 1886, the arrival of members of the Salvation Army by boat. Touring East Portland, Stillwell found “saloons lining every inch of Union Avenue, filled with rough characters who wanted nothing to do with salvation.”

On October 3, Captain Mary Stilwell held a Salvation Army outdoor service at the corner of Southwest Fifth Avenue and Burnside Street in Portland. In a week’s time, she rented an old frame building on Burnside, between Fourth and Fifth Avenues, and established the first Salvation Army corps in the Pacific Northwest.

Recounting her memories of the early days of the Salvation Army in Portland, Stillwell told the *Oregonian* in 1935: “In those days our main trouble was not lack of money so much as persecution by the hoodlum element. Drunken men from the saloons—I think they were sometimes paid—would interrupt the meetings, and we had no police co-operation. The press was not very friendly, in fact one might say that the pulpit, the press and the police were all against us.”

In December 1886, she established a corps in Salem. Henry Stillwell joined his wife in Portland in early 1887. He was promoted to major and became the head of the Oregon-Washington Division. The Stillwells went on to open corps in Oregon City and Tacoma, Washington.

Henry Stillwell died in March 1905. Mary Stillwell raised the couple’s eight children on her own, four of whom became Salvationists. In the spring of 1905, she was chosen as the organization’s secretary for Women’s Social Work, a position she held for seventeen years. Responsible for overseeing work at rescue and maternity homes between Chicago and Honolulu, she frequently traveled to the West Coast. She visited Portland annually until 1922 as part of her responsibilities as secretary. She visited the city once more in 1935 as a guest speaker, having previously retired as a colonel in the Salvation Army.

Mary Stillwell died on June 28, 1947, in Atlanta, Georgia.

Written by Morgen Alix Young

Further Reading:

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