

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS, V: AMELIA J. FROST

by Tom Cox

Marcus Whitman, Henry Spalding, Henry Jackson, and Henry Kendall are more widely known, but of all those after whom rooms in Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church have been named none is more familiar to the congregation than Amelia Frost. In part this is simply a result of proximity. The Frost Room sits just off the narthex, readily accessible. With comfortable furniture, a large library, and a warm decor, it is a favorite meeting place. Memorabilia and framed photos on the walls remind visitors of Frost's work. But there was another sort of proximity that also makes her better known among members of the church than the others — her work was carried on closer to hand, indeed it repeatedly intertwined with that of First Presbyterian.

Born in Gaines, New York, in 1850, and educated there and at Phipps Union Seminary in Albion, New York, Amelia Frost was deeply religious. After joining the Presbyterian Church in Leroy, New York, where she lived with an aunt and uncle, she offered herself as a home missionary, not feeling strong enough for foreign fields. For a time she worked with ex-slaves in Texas, but her work there came to an end as national priorities shifted and the Freedmen's Bureau was abolished. New doors soon opened. The non-sectarian Women's National Indian Association was sending missionaries to tribes where no evangelical work was being done, supporting them until such time as some denominational mission board was willing to take over. In 1887 the Connecticut Women's Indian Association, an adjunct of the larger body, called Amelia Frost to work at a mission school on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. Although she had never been to the West — or any place like it — she accepted and, in company with a second missionary (a Miss Stiles who was not destined to stay long), left for Idaho.

What Amelia Frost found on her arrival at Fort Hall must have been disheartening. The once-large Fort Hall Reservation had been whittled away by whites as railroads took land for right-of-ways and squatters — many dispatched by authorities in Utah — seized much of the best land in the south for pastures and crops, land that had long supplied vital sustenance to the Shoshone and Bannock. Government provisions, promised by treaty, often failed to arrive — and when they did were not always distributed equitably, the Bannock insisting that the Shoshone were unduly favored. In 1878, starving Bannocks left the reservation in a desperate search for food; whites, remembering the Nez Perce War of only a few months earlier, panicked, and fighting soon broke out. Chief Buffalo Horn was killed in one of the first encounters, and even non-belligerent Indians fleeing for safety, Shoshone and Bannock alike, were attacked. The Bannock War left lasting scars on the reservation. Amelia Frost arrived to find the Indians deeply suspicious of all whites, including missionaries. Dr. A. L. Cook, a recent agent, had made matters worse by heavy-handed practices aimed at forcing Indians to send their children to school and to assimilate, and his bitter quarrels with agency personnel had seeped into the mission school, undermining morale and effectiveness. A scarlet fever epidemic in 1891 made matters worse, convincing many tribal members that, as traditionalists had warned, sending children to the mission school was “bad medicine.” Moreover, continuing pressure from residents of Pocatello for further reduction of the reservation, which at that point surrounded the town, increased Indian suspicions and encouraged them to see whites as incorrigibly grasping and hostile.

But gradually things improved. Amelia Frost, gentle and loving, contributed to the change. At first she lived and worked in an agency building at Fort Hall, and although the Indians initially opposed giving up any land for mission work, after three and a half years they consented and 160 acres southeast of the agency became available for a mission building and supporting cropland. Until it burned in 1900, Frost lived in one room of the resulting mission building, ran a school for Indian girls in another, supervised a dormitory for young Indian girls upstairs, taught Sunday School for the white children at the agency, and drove out in a one-horse buggy to countless homes to teach, care for the sick, and pray. By 1892 the agent was able to write that Frost was “universally liked and respected by both Indians and whites.” Slowly her work paid dividends. In 1881, prior to Frost’s arrival, no Indian on the reservation could read and write; by the turn of the century, 252 could.

Progress continued. In 1899, the Rev. James Hayes and three other Nez Perce Christians (products of Sue and Kate McBeth’s missionary activities) arrived from northern Idaho to aid the work at Fort Hall. Agents reported that Hayes was poorly trained and not well received on the reservation. But he was not without some success. Disarmingly he told Sho-Bans, we used to come to steal your horses, now we come as brothers to bring you the Gospel. Within four months of Hayes’s arrival, the First Presbyterian Church of Fort Hall was organized with eighteen members — all Indians except for Amelia Frost, who transferred by letter from Leroy, New York. By this time, she was hard at work with the help of Hubert Tetoby, an early convert who became an elder in the Fort Hall church, translating the Bible and various hymns into Shoshoni.

Then things began to unravel. In 1900 the mission building burned to the ground; a year later Frost learned that the ladies of the Connecticut Indian association had grown too elderly to continue to support her work. The Connecticut group offered the mission property to the mission boards of various denominations; the Presbyterians declined to take it over, citing a lack of funds, although perhaps also seeing it as out of step with their function of building missions to counter the Mormon influence in the area’s white communities. Eventually, the Episcopal Church accepted the offer and commenced work on the reservation that has continued ever since.

Frost persevered. Soon she was able to report a new assignment: “I have been appointed by the Women’s Bd. Of the Pres. Ch. ‘Missionary and Bible Reader to the Bannocks & Shoshones’... I shall not have as much care [as before]. So many times when the girls were ill I got little sleep at night.” Idaho’s Congressional delegation pushed through legislation granting 160 acres near Gibson, eight miles north of the agency, to the Presbyterian church for a new mission; Frost and others worked hard to obtain sufficient support from Indians, various benefactors, and the Presbyterian Board of Church Erection to construct a new mission building on it. In the meantime, the congregation met in the house of convert Billy George (whose parents had fought alongside Chief Buffalo Horn). As many as 47 attended services there. Frost, who resided with the George family after the old mission burned, reported: “Billy has three rooms in his home. My cot is in the sitting room—we have to set it out on Sabbath to make room.” At the same time, she continued her work aiding the sick, teaching, and praying. She spent her salary and private gifts on her Indian friends — “and,” as Leigh Gittens has noted, “now they were many,” in part because, as one Indian told his wife, Frost “treated them just as tho’ they were white.”

James Hayes, the Nez Perce minister, went even further, saying: “She loved the Indians better than herself.” But all this came at a cost. In 1902, Amelia Frost’s health broke, and she went east to recuperate; she soon returned, however, and continued to work on the reservation, only to be injured in 1904 when struck by a runaway horse and wagon. In 1907, poor health forced her final retirement and return to New York state. Repeatedly she expressed a desire to return to Fort Hall, but was never able to do so. However, she left her membership with the Fort Hall church. When asked why she did not transfer it to Rochester, where she spent her last years, she always replied: “I could not make the Indians understand if I took my membership from the Ft. Hall Church, so I think it best to leave it there.”

Amelia Frost’s work on the Fort Hall Reservation was near to hand for Pocatello’s First Presbyterian Church, but some of what she did came even closer. On July 12, 1904, as the Pocatello church was taking its first steps to organize, she and two Shoshone took part in the Gospel Tent services singing the hymns “Stand Up, Stand Up For Jesus” and “No, Not One” in Shoshoni. They were back at the services three days later and reportedly gave the first five dollars donated for the building of First Presbyterian’s initial chapel. She returned time and again. In 1906 she spoke at length of her work on the reservation, and after her death in 1927, memorial services at First Presbyterian brought a host of friends, Indian and white. The program included Amelia Frost’s favorite hymns and a prayer in Shoshoni by her one-time collaborator in translation, elder Hubert Tetoby of the First Presbyterian Church of Fort Hall. Leigh Gittens summarized, “She was eulogized by many and loved by all.”

So, is it any wonder there is a room in the church named in Amelia Frost’s honor — or that it is the nicest, most used of all the church’s memorial rooms?