

“An Ottawa Pioneer with a Touch of Infamy”  
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Originally published in The Ottawa Herald September 25, 1987

Numerous notable, interesting, unusual and sometimes eccentric people have been a part of Franklin County’s history.

Because such individuals tend to “stand out in the crowd,” they also tend to be remembered for years to come.

That is not always the case, however. Mrs. Etta Semple, one of the most intriguing and remarkable women Ottawa has ever seen, has been almost totally forgotten in the 73 years since her death.

Etta Semple was unique. Her religious and political views, atheist and liberal respectively, were not those of the typical turn-of-the-century Ottawa housewife. Her outspokenness on the social issues of the day also was unusual. The fact that she aired her views by publishing a “Freethought” newspaper here raised even more eyebrows.

Her earnest and tireless dedication to helping the poor and social outcasts went far beyond that of any “Christian” in Ottawa. And her perplexing power to heal the sick and lame at the osteopathic hospital he operated was, in itself, a feat worth remembering.

In short, there was nothing ordinary about Martha Etta Donaldson Killmer Semple. It is therefore puzzling how Ottawa could forget someone so unforgettable.

She was born in Quincy, Ill., in 1855, the daughter of a God-fearing couple who raised their children in a Christian home. As a young woman, however, Etta became disgusted with what she viewed as a rampant hypocrisy and bigotry among Christians, and left the church.

Little else is known of her background and education, but Etta Semple’s intellectual abilities were formidable. She could write and debate with stinging clarity and forcefulness. She also was an avid student of the Bible, knew it more thoroughly than some ministers, and believed that it degraded women.

By 1887, Ella Killmer was a young widow with two boys from Illinois when she met and married Matthew Semple, an Ottawa barrel maker. They had one son, Wendel Phillips Semple, named for the noted American reformer.

In the 27 years she lived here, Etta Semple proved herself to be a whirlwind of energy. Besides carefully attending to the needs of her family, she nursed the sick, clothed the poor, and took in the homeless.

She was, in the words of The Ottawa Herald at the time of her death, “one of the greatest benefactors for humanity Ottawa has ever had.”

To the discomfort of many, Etta Semple was also one of the town’s greatest radicals. She was a fearless champion of the working class, attacked racial bigotry, advocated equality for women, opposed capital punishment, and vehemently fought “blue laws” that legislated morality.

Her most impassioned causes were rooted in the U.S. Constitution, and she vigorously promoted and exercised the freedoms it guaranteed. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of, or in her case FROM, religion were her lifeblood.

To further those freedoms, Etta Semple was a founder of the Kansas Freethought Association, and at one time served as its president. Several of the KFA’s state conventions were therefore held in Ottawa’s Forest Park.

The stated aim of the Kansas Freethought Association was to “fight ignorance, superstition and tyranny” and to keep our constitutional freedoms “untrammelled.” The core of

the Freethought movement was the belief that, "Every human being has a right to do precisely as he pleases so long as he does not infringe upon the equal rights of any other human being.

Etta extended that to mean that Freethought "strives to do away with selfishness, envy, malice, scandal, gossip, greed, jealousy and backbiting."

To publicize her beliefs, she twice ran for office on the Socialist-Labor ticket, once for the Kansas State Board of Education and once for state superintendent of education. She lost both times, but ran well ahead of the other candidates of her party.

She also served briefly as a vice president of the American Secular Union, and wrote two novels, "The Strike" and "Society", which addressed the needs of working men and women.

Mrs. Semple's most notable and successful forum for her views was established when she took the editorship of the Kansas Freethought Ideal, at some financial hardship. Turning her parlor into a print shop, she put out the radical eight-page newspaper twice a month.

The Ideal had a circulation of nearly 2,000 and was filled with editorials, writings of other Freethought advocates, notices of meetings and lectures and letters to the editor. As another wrote, it "has something to say and knows how to say it."

The paper's skeptical view of religion and liberal stance on social problems sparked considerable debate, much of it heated. The most angry and critical letters to the editor merited Mrs. Semple's most scathing responses of crisp logic and sharp words, all published in the paper.

To the Christian woman who called her "little better than...a procuress," or whorehouse madam, Etta Semple tartly replied:

"If heaven is composed of such hatred, such abuse, such tyrannical onslaughts, such Christian love, I don't want to go there. Hell is far preferable."