

The Courageous Dissent of Kansas Freethinker Etta Semple

Presented By
Vickie Sandell Stangl
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Etta Semple was born in 1854 but was a woman far ahead of her time in asking questions about the existence of God and challenging accepted religious dogma. Most unusual was Etta's merging of Freethought principles with "New Thought" healing without religious overtones. Her life and story keenly reveals America's discomfort in acknowledging and respecting dissent or minority viewpoints during the late 19th and early 20th century.

By the time of her tragic death in 1914 of pneumonia, Mrs. Semple had won over many detractors due to her selfless work in healing the sick at her Natural Cure Sanitarium. It was difficult for citizens of the early 20th century to accept that nobleness and goodness of character could exist without religion. Etta showed it was not only very possible, but also heroic under such negative opinions about freethinkers. While many prejudices still exist today against freethinkers (Atheists, Humanists, Agnostics) Etta's Freethought philosophy made her a constant target within the community of Ottawa, Kansas where she wrote, lived and advocated for freedom of conscience.

Ottawa was founded by Baptists missionaries and by 1888 there were seventeen active Christian churches. However, behind these very visible symbols of religion, America was teeming with dissent; a growing movement of freethinkers were re-examining religious teachings and the role of religion in government.

Although it's rarely noted by historians, high ranking individuals within the government and society were alarmed by the rise of religious leaders pushing to amend the US Constitution and declare America a Christian nation. New discoveries in science and technology were also creating a stir in re-examining long held beliefs. Due to these circumstances the Freethought Movement began to coalesce Kansas freethinkers organized a Liberal League at Bismarck Grove in 1879 near Lawrence, Kansas that included such notable men as Kansas Governor Charles Robinson.

The Freethought Movement was gaining momentum but polished speakers on the stump were not enough. The movement needed courageous, dedicated individuals who were unafraid of challenging taboo issues and cultural norms. Mrs. Etta Semple would prove to be just the person to spearhead the Freethought Movement in Kansas. Her rise to prominence occurred over the issue of censorship.

As president of the Kansas Freethought Association, Mrs. Semple grew frustrated when the KFA was censored by the town fathers and church leaders of Ottawa. How could the KFA spread their ideas and confront the erosion of church and state by public officials if the town newspapers were so closed minded they refused to publish anything about their meetings or

activities? Etta decided to take on the ownership of *The Freethought Ideal* (1898-1901) and expose the public to the principles of Freethought. This was a huge jump in her notoriety and to the verbal abuse and threats that would follow her and her family.

Etta not only published a newspaper, but she followed politics and its impact on freethinkers and their issues. She jumped into politics first in 1889 to run for the Superintendent of Public Instruction and again in 1900 to run for the Ottawa Board of Education, 4th Ward. While she was not successful in her bids, she was highly respected for her intelligence and work on behalf of Freethought. In 1901 she reached the pinnacle of her Freethought work when she was elected at the national level as one of the vice-presidents of the American Secular Union.

When it came to fearlessness of purpose and taking unpopular positions towards iconic figures and beliefs, it is easy to think of Etta as a kind of female Christopher Hitchens of her period. [Hitchens, who died in 2011, was a superb writer/journalist writing for Vanity Fair and an outspoken Atheist.] She perpetually challenged the dominant belief systems in the most brutally honest examinations as possible especially daring in the patriarchal world she lived in where women were considered inferior to men. She had nothing but contempt for such contrived divisions in society based upon class, creed and gender. She saw no reason to tolerate a system that kept a few at the top of the society wealthy and fat, while starving and controlling the majority at the bottom by threatening them with unemployment and the fires of hell or end times.

Prominent citizens such as the famous author Mark Twain could hide behind humor and anecdotal stories to poke fun at religious superstitions and biblical scripture to protect their reputations, but Etta refused to censor her views or soften her message to be more accepted in polite society. People were miserable and sick because what they believed was sick and killing them. She labored to change the disease of religion as she saw it, and free people to live in the NOW and treat each other as admirably as possible.

Mrs. Semple was considered a heretic in Ottawa, Kansas for many reasons. Perhaps most annoying to Etta and to the citizens of Ottawa, was the establishment of Blue laws. These laws were aimed at enforcing the Sabbath and closing all other activities and businesses down for worship. For example, in 1893 the Wichita City Council prohibited theatrical performances and athletic games on Sunday.¹ Etta supported female suffrage and the Socialists Labor Party to "improve the lives of Americans struggling under the capitalist system."² What then, could be more outrageous to the good citizens of Ottawa than a woman who refused to observe the Sabbath, declare women should vote and throwing her lot in with the laboring man in defiance of the capitalist system? The publication of her newspaper was scandalous enough but combining all these other aspects to her repertoire of issues certainly earned her the title of Ottawa's infidel.

There is no question her newspaper publishing days were amazingly brash. She attacked amoral ministers and ran a series of "Women in the Bible" topics to examine the unflattering and misogynist depictions of women. Etta also anger the faithful by printing the contradictions

found within scripture since she felt the majority of Christians did not read the bible but blindly followed their faith as infallible. Etta was most persistent about exposing church-state violations she believed were willfully committed by Kansas public officials in disregard of their constitutional duty to uphold religious freedom and freedom of conscience under both the state and federal constitutions.

The *Freethought Ideal* also served as a vehicle to criticize America's growing imperialism and the Spanish American War. Nothing angered Etta more than the combination of American Imperialism mixed with the hubris of Christian missionaries who transported their faith to the natives of other lands and stripped indigenous people of their own spiritual beliefs and heritage.

While Etta wrote and lived in the Golden Years of the Freethought Movement in America, one fateful event would greatly alter the course of history for freethinkers. The assassination of President William McKinley on September 6th, 1901 made freethinkers an easy target in a country looking for a scapegoat for McKinley's murder.

McKinley's death at the hands of anarchist Leon Czolgosz, confirmed the public's view that anarchists were atheists out to destroy America. U.S. Senator Jonathan Prentiss Dolliver delivered a speech about McKinley's assassin, reaching the sweeping conclusion that the "The fatal word in the creed of anarchy is atheism."³

The effort to demonize freethinkers greatly chilled any freedom of speech within the Freethought Movement. During this period of anger, religious and political leaders also accused the twin devils of liberalism and science as advocating destroying America. Since freethinkers were aligned with liberalism and supported the new science, this increased the negative feelings about freethinkers.

Freethought editors quickly denounced McKinley's assassin but Etta published a column trying to understand the motivation behind such a tragedy. She reasoned that if a man was desperate to feed his family and nothing but misery was on the horizon for his children, while the men in power grew richer and richer removed from the calamities of life, what alternatives existed for the man without hope? Etta condemned the murder of McKinley but readers only remembered her sympathetic point of view. Her newspaper column raised her own profile as an agitator who should be silenced. Etta must have realized it was no longer safe to speak so freely in America and the realization that it would make continuing the fight for Freethought less productive.

At the end of 1901, Etta Semple came to the conclusion that her days of trying to talk sense to the rest of the world was at a stalemate. She had stood her ground and planted the seeds of Freethought but her humanitarian spirit was urging her to use her skills to heal others. Etta's Sanitarium was attracting more and more patients and with her husband's recent health scare along with the growing demands of a weekly newspaper and the drain of resources to keep the paper published, Etta wanted balance and harmony in her own life. Imbalance created unhealthy individuals both physically and mentally and Etta was always true to her principles. Her life was out of balance. She was tired of feeling as if she was only tearing

something down, and wanted to build something positive in the world. As she movingly declared in her last edition: "Friends, when we lay down this burden of strife, what a load is gone."

Footnotes:

- (1) Stangl, Vickie Sandell Etta *Semple: Sister Out of Christ/ Kansas Freethinker and New Thought Healer*. (Master of Arts thesis, Wichita: Independent Digital Printing Company., 2003), 72.
 - (2) Ibid., 99.
 - (3). Ibid. 239
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RESEARCH SOURCES:

In researching the fascinating life of Etta Semple unfortunately, there were very few primary materials or personal artifacts from the Semple family. Of course, Etta's foresight to donate her newspapers to the Kansas Historical Society was invaluable. In many ways, Etta used the newspaper to discuss her own life from time to time and to really explain her views on Freethought and what she called Mental Science and her purported clairvoyance. The papers cover a period from 1889 to 1901 and the papers are fascinating reading because of the historical information as well as local issues and personages highlighted by Etta. Below is a partial list of the sources used in my Master thesis: *Etta Semple: Sister Out of Christ/Kansas Freethinker and New Thought Healer*

PERIODICALS

Freethought periodicals of the time were invaluable to this research and I feel confident there are more papers or more information they may contain information about Etta yet to be discovered. I found the *Freethought Magazine* of 1899 published out of Chicago by Mr. Green to be particularly helpful. It was Green's magazine that ran a feature story on Etta and her business partner Laura Knox. In this story Etta explains her legal separation from Charles Killmer when it had been assumed that Mr. Killmer had died before Etta had remarried Matthew Semple in 1887 in Ottawa, Kansas.

Freethought periodicals that refer to Etta or affirm Etta's information:

1. *Appeal to Reason*. 1895-1898 (Girard, Kansas)
2. *Daily Call* 1889 (Excelsior Springs, Missouri) 2 January.
3. *Evening Herald* 1905 (Ottawa, Kansas) March 28-August
4. *Frankfort Times*. 1932 (Frankfort, Indiana) 10 May

5. *Lucifer the Light Bearer*. 1900-1902. (Valley Falls, Kansas)
6. *Mirrors of Progress*. Jun 28 1879-Dec. 31, 1881. (Kansas City)
7. *Blue Grass Blade*. 1894-1901 (Lexington, Kentucky) * Etta personally knew the editor of this newspaper.
8. *The Liberal League Newspaper*. 1880. vol. 1 no. 1 (Cincinnati) 29 January.
9. *Ottawa Evening Herald*. 1914 13-14 April
10. *Ottawa Daily Republican*. 1890-1891.
11. *Ottawa Herald Weekly*. 1901-1902

[Etta's ownership and publication of the **Freethought Ideal** included changes in the publication's name, and changing from a semi-weekly to a weekly publication. The names of the Freethought paper are as follows:]

- A. **The Freethought Vindicator**. 1895 (Ottawa) [This newspaper was actually a membership newsletter for KFA]
- B. **Freethought Ideal** 1898-1901
- C. **Freethought Ideal and Vindicator** 1901 Nov. (Ottawa)
- D. **New Thought Ideal and Health Vindicator**. 1901 Dec. (Ottawa)

PRIMARY SOURCES:

- * Atkinson, William Walker. *The Law of New Thought: A Study of Fundamental Principles and their Application*. Chicago: The Psychic Research Co., 1902.
- * Bourquin, F. *Platbook of Audrain County Missouri*. North West Publishing Co., 1898.
- * Ingells, Sheffield "John E. Remsburg" *History of Atchison County Kansas*. Lawrence: Standard Publishing Co. 1916.
- * Macdonald, George. *Fifty Years of Freethought*. Vols. I & II. New York: The Truth Seeker Co., 1931.
- * Mechem, Kirke, Ed. *Annals of Kansas: 1886-1925*. Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1954-1956

- * *Portrait and Biographical Record of Leavenworth, Douglas and Franklin Counties, Kansas.* Chicago: Chapman Publishing Co, 1899.
 - * Putnam, Samuel Porter. *Four Hundred years of Freethought.* New York: The Truth Seeker Co., 1894.
 - * Still, Andrew. *Autobiography of Andrew T. Still: With A History of the Discovery and Development of the Science of Osteopathy.* Kirksville: Self-published, 1897.
 - * Semple, Etta. *The Strike.* Atchison: Home Printing Press, 1894.
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SECONDARY SOURCES

- * Carter, Paul. *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971. [Excellent study regarding the upheaval in religious thought and devotion due to the carnage of the Civil War.]
- * *Reflections of Franklin County and Chautauqua Days.* Ottawa: Franklin County Historical Society, 1961.
- * Gaylor, Annie Laurie. *Women Without Superstition "No Gods-No Masters".* Madison: Freedom from Religion Foundations, Inc., 1997.
- * Malin, James C. *A Concern about Humanity: Notes on Reform 1872-1912 at the National & Kansas Levels of Thought.* Lawrence, Self-published. 1964.
- * Sears, Hal D. *The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America.* Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1977.
- * Stangl, Vickie Sandell Etta Semple: *Sister Out of Christ/ Kansas Freethinker and New Thought Healer. (Master of Arts thesis,* Wichita: Independent Digital Printing Company., 2003.
- * Turner, James. *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1985.
- * Warren, Sidney. *American Freethought, 1860-1914.* New York: Gordian Press Inc., 1966.