

“Atheist’s Samaritan Bent Won Over Ottawa”  
By John Mark Lambertson  
Originally published in The Ottawa Herald September 26, 1987

Etta Semple’s crusade at the turn of the century was for “intellectual, religious and social freedom.”

At the same time, Kansas had another woman fighting a crusade, Carry Nation, who sought to better the world by abolishing booze.

Semple approved of temperance, but sharply disagreed with nation’s religious motives and efforts to force prohibition.

The two crusading adversaries therefore made quite a contrast. They met once, in the summer of 1901, and entertained those nearby with an arm-in-arm stroll, engaged in earnest but amiable debate. As one wag wrote, “One believes in no saloons, and one believes in no god.”

1901 was also the year that saw a change in the course of Semple’s crusade. For three years she had edited the Freethought Ideal, a weekly paper, and was worn out. Financial hardships, caring for her family, home, and the needy, and numerous other concerns had taken their toll.

Her husband Matt’s serious illness that fall was perhaps the deciding factor that forced her to abandon the paper, although not her cause. She emotionally wrote to her readers, “...We love him so. He is our all...his life is dearer to us than the pittance invested in the Ideal.”

No longer having the paper gave Semple more time not only to restore Matt’s health, but to help countless others. Ever since she was a girl, she appeared to possess unusual healing powers. By the early 1890s, she was taking people into her home for treatment of all kinds of internal disorders, dislocations and deformities.

“Her diagnosis of a case was by clairvoyancy,” The Ottawa Herald reported. “She would talk to a patient a few moments and then diagnose the ailment without an examination. Baths were used greatly in her system of cures.” Chiropractic massages were also employed.

Semple’s reputation grew and patients from all over the Midwest came to her door. In 1902, the Semples built a large house on the site of their old cottage at 128 N. Locust, just south of the old Locust Street bridge.

Made even more rambling with several additions, the Semple Sanitarium still stands today, although empty and largely forgotten.

Here the sick, lame and infirm were nursed back to health, regardless of whether or not they could pay. The atheist proprietress ironically earned the Biblical title of ‘The Good Samaritan.’

Etta Semple didn’t believe one had to be a Christian to show compassion and help one’s fellow man. Once in defending her beliefs, she wrote: “Although I am poor, still not one cent of dishonest money ever crosses my palm. For 12 years our house has been the home of dozens of unfortunates of one kind and another; no tramp ever went away hungry, and no fallen woman has been kicked down by us.”

Etta Semple, however, also had her enemies.

This was vividly “brought home” the night of March 28, 1905. An intruder slipped through her bedroom window and, with an axe and knife, savagely attacked the figure sleeping in the bed.

Fortunately for Etta Semple, she was not in her room that night, having given up her own bed for an ailing patient. Mrs. Caroline Hostetter Jobe of Wellsville was not so lucky. The

elderly widow struggled for a week with a partly crushed skull and several abdominal wounds before dying.

There was no sign of robbery, implying Semple was the intended target. Several other reports of a prowler in Ottawa that night suggested a demented person made a random attack, but Etta never believed that was the case.

The murderer was never found.

Little is known of Etta Semple's later years other than the fact she remained busy in attending to the needs of others. She died of pneumonia on April 11, 1914, at her sanitarium. She was 59.

Her death was mourned at the top of The Ottawa Herald's front page with multiple headlines: "A Philanthropist Will Long Be Remembered Here," and "Good Deeds of a Good Woman Are on the Tongues of Ottawa Today."

The people of Ottawa, although taking quiet pride in their number of churches, also honored their outspoken atheist neighbor, whom they had come to respect.

At the final hour of her funeral, businesses closed, the court adjourned, and so many made their way to the huge house on Locust Street that its large rooms couldn't hold them all.

The service quickly was moved to the front steps and several hundred friends, rich and poor, filled the street. It was the biggest funeral Ottawa had ever seen.

It was also perhaps the most unusual. No minister spoke. No hymns were sung, no flowers decorated the parlor.

"In the bright sunshine of the beautiful spring afternoon," The Herald reported, one of her friends paid tribute "in touching and eloquent words."

The eulogizer also read a couple of poems she greatly admired and the throng sang the secular song, "Scattering Seeds of Kindness." Her pallbearers included some of Ottawa's leading businessmen.

Several years before her death, Etta Semple wrote the inscription for her tombstone, "If perchance there is money left to erect one."

It read, "Here lies a woman that through her peculiar disposition lived a life of turmoil, as did all who knew her."

Today, this remarkable woman, once noted for her independence from orthodox views, superhuman curative powers and countless charitable works, has been quietly forgotten. Her remains rest on the west side of Hope Cemetery in an unmarked grave.