

MARY ANN OLCOTT
Librarian
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Mary Ann Olcott was born in 1837 in Moriah, Essex County, New York, and is therefore 86 years old. Her mother's people belonged to the industrial class of New Englanders. Her father, descended from revolutionary ancestors, was engaged in the lumbering business. When Miss Olcott was seven years of age, her parents moved to Wisconsin. They started in a steamboat at Port Henry, a little town near their home, on Lake Champlain, went down through Lake George and connecting rivers to the Hudson, through the Erie Canal to Buffalo, stopping off at Rochester to visit her mother's people. From Buffalo they came by packet through the lakes to Milwaukee. Here they stayed about three years when they moved to Oshkosh, the family traveling on the Green Bay stage, their household goods going by team. In Oshkosh, a village of about 800, about 1847, Mr. Olcott bought the Winnebago Tavern, one of the two public houses in the town at the time. About 1850, Mr. Olcott sold out and moved his family to his father's farm three miles from the small settlement of Oshkosh. The seven years spent on the farm Miss Olcott always speaks of as seven wasted years. While living in town she attended the only school in town at the time which was a little log schoolhouse. When Mr. Raymond opened a private school during the early 50's before there was a public high school, Miss Olcott boarded in town and entered the school. She paid one dollar a week for her board and room. Later on Miss Russell opened a private school for girls and Miss Olcott finished her education there. She taught a few months but did not enjoy the work so gave it up. The family moved into town again in 1857 and Miss Olcott is still living in the house her father built at that time at 151 High Street.

In 1870 and 1871 Miss Olcott assisted her sister in managing a library which had been started by a stock company two years previously. It had run out of funds and the books had been moved to a room in the office of Judge Cleveland which he had offered free of rent. How to keep the library open without funds was a problem but in 1872 Miss Olcott took entire charge of the library and in various ways she kept it going raising a little money through monthly fees and book rentals till in 1875 it was burned with the whole business section of Oshkosh. Everyone was lamenting the library when it was found Miss Olcott through her wonderful foresightedness had insured the books for \$1200 the previous year.

Miss Olcott invested the whole sum in books and opened the library at her home. She maintained it there for three months, then moved it first to one store building then another, till she was finally allowed to place it in a room in the post office building. Here it remained till 1891 during which period Miss Olcott paid the rent from revenues received from book rentals, bought coal, wood, and gas and was her own janitor. Miss Olcott mothered the library as she would a child, it seemed her one ambition to keep the library open and to keep improving it. She served the public faithfully, was supposed to receive a monthly salary of \$10 but for four years of that time she did not receive anything. When she was obliged to move from the post office building Miss Olcott packed the books and stored them for five years. In 1896 she was given a space in the City Hall and opened a free library which she maintained till 1900. Miss Olcott was the sole librarian from 1872 till 1900, twenty-eight years. Then as the result of her efforts a library building was built. She had persuaded Mr. and Mrs. Harris, well-to-do people of Oshkosh, to bequeath their property to the city for a library. This they were willing to do as their daughter who had recently died had taken so much pleasure in Miss Olcott's library. The \$75,000 which they left was to be increased by an equal

amount from the city. This was done and Miss Olcott had the great pleasure of seeing her beloved books housed in a magnificent building. The library was put in charge of a Library Board and Miss Olcott made reference librarian on a salary. This position she held till her health failed.

In 1895 Miss Olcott helped form a club called the Old School Girls. All those were eligible who attended the first elementary schools and the high school previous to 1862. Miss Olcott was elected first president. They met once a year regularly reading the minutes of each previous meeting, containing always the names of those present. They were often entertained between times by different members of the club and spent many happy hours together reminiscing of old school days together. There were originally 31 members but the number has been gradually reduced through death to ten. One of the first by-laws enacted by the club was to appoint August 2 of each year a memorial day on which flowers should be placed on the graves of the departed ones.

Miss Olcott had been asked many times to sit for a portrait to hang in the library but always modestly refused. The Old School Girls finally took it upon themselves to have it done without her knowledge. Mr. L. Merton Gruenhagen who had recently returned to Oshkosh after having attained success in Europe as a portrait painter was asked to paint her portrait unbeknown to her. This he did and also made a frame for it of solid wood hand-carved in a simple modest design. On May 13, 1908 a formal presentation of the portrait was made by the Old School Girls to the library board. All the Old School Girls were present and it was a very happy occasion for all.

Miss Olcott's life was the library. The evidence of the success of the library is evidence of the success of her life.