MOODY STILL LIVES

WORD PICTURES OF D. L. MOODY

by

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CHAPTER THREE

NORTHFIELD A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AND TO-DAY

PIONEER AND COLONIAL HISTORY

TO UNDERSTAND all about Mr. Moody one must understand all about Northfield as it was a hundred years ago and as it is to-day. Here he was born. Here he came back to make his home, and his home base. Here he developed a religious and educational center. Here he died, and was buried. Let us then delve briefly into its history.

The centennial of his birth takes us back to 1837, but behind that are two hundred years of Northfield history. When the tercentenary of the granting of a royal charter to the colony of Massachusetts was celebrated in 1930, Northfield was able to keep step with its own tercentenary.

Before the coming of the white man the territory was occupied by a tribe of river Indians called the Sguakheags. Reliable indications of their settlement abound to-day in such forms as sites of villages, granaries, burial places, arrowheads and stone chips, stone implements, fire stones, council fires, and skeletons. Literally miles of Indian frails and trenches are still observable in the vicinity.

In 1669, that is, 49 years after the landing of the Pilgrims, a committee of four men was deputed by the Provincial Court to seek new sites for English settlement. They worked their way West from Boston along Indian trails, and on reaching Crag Mountain they looked down on what is now the township of Northfield. Here was a cleared area of river lowlands where the squaws used to cultivate fields of corn and pumpkins. The men fished in the river and hunted in the woods and hills.

Of course, these features made the place desirable for white settlement, so upon the recommendation of the explorers these lands were reserved for a town site by the Provincial Court. Early in 1671 a party from Northampton came up and purchased over 10,000 acres from the Indians. The deed is still in existence. In 1673 a further purchase was made, a town was laid out, and settlers arrived. Relations with the Indians were peaceable until 1675, when King Philip organized a collective inter-tribal effort to drive out the whites. A massacre of some Northfield settlers occurred, and the survivors abandoned the town.

A second settlement in 1685 had to be abandoned in 1690 for similar reasons.

It was not until 1714 that the situation was sufficiently relieved to effect a third and permanent settlement. The Treaty of Utrecht ended Queen Anne's War in 1713. By its terms France relinquished all claims to the allegiance of the Indian tribes known as the Five Nations. But hostilities were renewed in Father Ralle's War. 1722-25. A blockhouse named after Governor Dummer of Massachusetts was now erected some eight miles up the Connecticut valley, and thereafter Northfield was relieved of its exposure to direct attack by Indians. For upward of 75 years it had been the most northerly white settlement in the Connecticut valley.

But permanent peace had not yet arrived. The Old French and Indian War, 1744-49, and the Last French and Indian War, l754-63, both occasioned by wars between France and England, brought battle and bloodshed to Northfield. General Wolfe's brilliant victory on the Heights of Abraham and the capture of Quebec in 1759 were followed by the capture of Montreal in 1760. The whole province of Quebec and its dependencies surrendered to the British, the power of France in Canada was eliminated, and so the Indian peril waned.

With the restoration of stable peace Northfield reorganized its life, growth and reconstruction ensued, new industries sprang up. Then the Revolution! Northfield of course lined up with the rest of Massachusetts, organized a company of "Minute Men" in 1775, raised a company of soldiers in 1776, and did its part against the British. It shared the common lot of political confusion and economic distress after independence from the mother country had been won. However, order and prosperity were soon recovered, and foundations laid for modern Northfield. But the small industries faded away before the invention of labor-saving machinery and the advance of the capitalistic system.

This brief outline of pioneer and colonial history shows that Northfield has a past full of adventure and romance. A few Indians from the North used to spend summers in Northfield until about fifty years ago.

NEW ENGLAND HERITAGE

Dwight Lyman Ryther Moody was born in Northfield on February 5, 1837, sixth in a family of the nine children of Edwin and Betsey Holton Moody. Lyman is a family name in the town. Ryther also was the name of a local family of no special interest or permanency. Its use was soon dropped.

His Moody and Holton forbears were of pure English stock.

John Moody of the county of Suffolk, England, reached America in 1633, and settled in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Two years later he joined a party that moved West into the Connecticut valley and founded Hartford, Connecticut. His name is listed on the monument in the Ancient Burial Ground erected in memory of those first settlers. Thence his descendants moved up the valley, until finally in 1796 one Isaiah Moody came to Northfield.

He appears as a landowner in 1797, when he bought four acres of land, which were in possession of the family until acquired by Northfield Seminary in 1920. Edwin, a son of Isaiah, born here in 1800, married a local girl, Betsey Holton.

The Holton family stems from William Holton, who reached America from England a year later than John Moody, 1634. Like the latter, William Holton settled in the Connecticut valley, and his name is on the Hartford monument. A grandson came to Northfield over 200 years ago. He acquired a grant of land from King George II on Bennett's Hill, on the west side of the river, near the entrance to Mount Hermon School, and the family has held possession of it ever since, so that a deed of transfer has never passed on the property. Betsey Holton was born in this homestead in 1805.

There are no Moodys now in Northfield except descendants of Edwin and Betsey Moody. They have not kept in touch with collateral branches of the family, nor vice versa. But the Holton connections form a numerous tribe in the vicinity, and a biennial Holton Family reunion brings many more from afar.

Edwin Moody and Betsey Holton were married in 1828, and lived in a homestead in Northfield built five years before. Here Dwight was born. The house now bears a bronze tablet, "Birthplace of D. L. Moody."

This outline shows how Mr. Moody was descended from English and New England stock. I wonder if he did not inherit his build from the English. The typical New England Yankee is pictured like Uncle Sam, lean and lanky. Some of his brothers fitted that picture, but Mr. Moody weighed about 250 pounds, and was about five feet ten inches tall, though his broad shoulders and substantial build deceived one as to his height. President Theodore Roosevelt reminded me of Mr. Moody in his stocky build and dynamic energy. One sees more men of his build in England than in New England. However that may be, we may agree that he exhibited the best qualities of the God-fearing Puritans in his personal life and in his career.

Edwin Moody was a mason by trade, which in those days included brick-making as well as building. I have in my possession the old-fashioned leather-bound ledger in which he kept his accounts. It was given to me by Mr. Moody's sister, Aunt Cornelia Walker.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

What was the Northfield like into which Mr. Moody was born a hundred years ago?

The township straddles the Connecticut River, about eight and a half miles long, North and South, and five miles wide on the average, East and West. The northern boundary is the state line separating Massachusetts from New Hampshire and Vermont. Its population in 1830 was 1,757; in 1840, 1,673. A hundred years ago the population was distributed over the township in prosperous farms, with a village at the center that had a post office (established 1797), two churches, schools, a Masonic Lodge (instituted in 1796, its charter being signed by Paul Revere), two or three private water companies (the first organized in 1797), lawyers and doctors, stores, grain and other mills.

The well-to-do residents lived in their own substantial colonial frame houses, many of which are standing to-day, often occupied by descendants of the original families.

The town had been laid out with one Main Street running North and South, ten rods (165 feet) wide, with side roads leading to the river lands and to the wooded hillsides. Over a hundred years ago this street was lined with double rows of elms on each side, a noble avenue. Replacements have since been made as needed. The original home lots were laid out on Main Street in generous slices that ran to the river on the West side and to the wood lots on the hills on the East side. The original lot lines have been hopelessly scrambled in most cases with the passing of the years.

In the early New England settlements the church was financed and directed by the town. About the turn of the century the controversy between Orthodoxy and Unitarianism broke out. The Northfield minister of that time was liberal in thought, joined the Unitarian denomination when it was organized, and carried his church and most of his parishioners with him.

They included the elite of the town. Thirty men and women, however, could not accept the new deflated theology, withdrew from the first congregation, and incorporated the Unitarian Society of Northfield. The Moodys remained adherents of the Unitarian Church. Every Sunday the children were sent there to Sunday school, over a mile away; but what was a walk of a mile in those days? Rev. Oliver Capen Everett, minister from 1837 to 1848, is remembered for his kindness and help to Widow Moody and her children in the days of her struggle against poverty. The only baptism Mr. Moody ever received was at the hands of Mr. Everett, but it was in the name of Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

The story is that on May 28, 1841 a neighbor stuck his head in at the window of the little red district school-house and asked if any of Ed. Moody's children were there, and said their father had just died suddenly. He had gone about his work as usual that morning, but a pain in his side sent him home. About one o'clock in the afternoon he was found dead, kneeling beside his bed as if in prayer. Heart disease was said to be the trouble. Mr. Moody had to guard against the same trouble for a score of years, and died of it.

Dwight was four years old when his father died. The shock of his sudden death was about the earliest thing he could remember.

The widow and young children were now left in trying circumstances. The father had not been provident. The homestead was mortgaged. Mrs. Moody had no one to rely on but herself. What little the older children could earn was trifling. But she held on bravely, kept her brood together, triumphed over adversity, and lived to enjoy a happy old age under the old roof, generously cared for by her famous son.

The old family Bible containing the record of family births, a book of devotions, and a catechism, which were Widow Moody's only books, are still preserved.

Those early years of privation and hardship did not embitter Dwight.

On the contrary, his mother's courageous character and firm family control were thankfully remembered all his life. Lessons of hard work, thrift and sympathy for the needy were ingrained in his own character. In many lives it would seem as if early privations built a character foundation for future greatness.

I have often interrogated older men and women who were contemporaries of young Moody, but never could get much satisfaction. They had almost nothing to tell about him. He was just one of themselves, no better, no worse. No one ever saw indications that he would become a great man.

In 1829 some leading citizens organized the Northfield Academy of Useful Knowledge. They purchased the old Hunt's Tavern (still standing), and refitted it to serve their purpose. The school was continued until 1845. Another select private school was also conducted in this building later, and was attended by some of the older residents still living. D. L. Moody is listed among the pupils in one or more of the old prospectuses, but his education was meager at best, and its deficiency proved more or less of a handicap all his life.

I have been told by contemporaries that Widow Moody and her family were regarded or disregarded about as we to-day think of the poverty-stricken families that live on the fringes of our towns and villages. Out of these disheartening but not dishonorable conditions came this man who was to enjoy the confidence and friendship of the greatest in the land. His humble origin never bothered him. As I have said, he did not live in the past. His native essential worth proved itself in his whole career.

TO-DAY

The present era of Northfield's expansion and well-being may be said to have begun with the return of Mr. Moody to his home town in 1875 as a world-famous evangelist. But Northfield had already progressed in several directions. The Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad built its road through Northfield and opened a depot there in 1850, a double-deck bridge over the Connecticut River and a roadway under the rail tracks. Two town-supported ferries were other picturesque conveniences for crossing the river; one of them is still operated every summer. The Connecticut and Passumpsic division of the Boston and Maine Railroad followed the valley West of the river.

The Civil War and the opening up of the West had their repercussions in the family and business life of the town. Many of the young men and women heard the call of the cities and of the West: among them Dwight Moody. I cannot find record of any return visits until 1875. His daughter recalls some visits as a girl, but they had no special significance. He went to England for his first great campaign in 1873, and remained there until August 1875, reaching in some respects the highest peak of his remarkable career. His Chicago home having been swept away in the Great Fire of 1871, he had no home in America, so he came to Northfield to see his aged mother, with whom he had kept up unbroken correspondence all the years of his absence. He was now 38 years old.

His future lay in evangelistic work, which would take him from city to city during the winter months.

The summer would be spent in rest and study and preparation for the next winter. But where? A trifling cause became a deciding factor as to the place. His mother's land adjoined a twelve acre farm belonging to a neighbor who was annoyed because her hens trespassed in his cornfield.

Mr. Moody wished to remove this friction, and finding that Mr. Alexander would sell out for $3,500, he closed the deal at once. The sum of £500 had been given him by a wealthy convert in England, Mr. Edward Studd, as a thank offering. He returned the check, saying he had no use for it. Mr. Studd sent it back to him, but again Mr. Moody returned it. Mr. Studd insisted, and sent the check a third time, and now Mr. Moody used it toward the purchase of this farm for a home. It was his only home until he died there. The knoll called Round Top where he and Mrs. Moody were buried is part of that property.

But his summers were not to be so easy. It became his custom to invite neighbors and visitors to his home for Bible readings, as he had done in his Chicago home. Then in 1879 he started Northfield Seminary for girls on land adjoining his own place. September 1880 saw the first of the famous Northfield Bible Conferences. Mount Hermon School for boys was founded in 1881. The annual College Student Conference followed in 1886. The Northfield Training School for women was opened in the hotel in the fall of 1890. A Young Women's Conference held its first session in 1893. The magazine "*Northfield Echoes*" began publication in 1894. An Eastern depot of the Bible Institute Colportage Association of Chicago was established in 1895, also Camp Northfield in 1895. The "*Record of Christian Work*" came to Northfield in 1898. To-day, some of these enterprises have been merged or discontinued, but four other annual summer conferences and a score of other conventions which are not under Northfield management, meet in Northfield throughout the year.

These activities soon transformed the north end of the town, which is known as East Northfield. The horse-and-buggy era passed. Public utilities were introduced. New roads have been built, hundreds of all-the-year residences have been erected, and in addition a hundred or more summer cottages on the hillsides and highlands. A new Trinitarian church was built in 1888-9 at a cost of $28,000. Its capacity is 1,200, perhaps the largest in the county, being intended to accommodate not only the townspeople but also the students and faculties of the two schools, which had no chapels of their own at that time.

A first-class hotel, erected in 1888 and several times enlarged, open all the year, accommodates hundreds of visitors; there are also other hotels and inns of less capacity. The whole town has benefited culturally and economically by the presence of thousands of visitors at the summer conferences, and by the student and faculty constituencies of over 600 in each of the two schools; for though Mount Hermon is located over the township line in Gill, it enters largely into the business and social life of Northfield. The town has, however, retained much of its old-time attractiveness. Its population, not including the constituencies of the schools under present census regulations, is now 1,950.

Northfield is one of the beauty spots of New England. There is a quiet charm that captivates the visitor.

From the front porch of his home Mr. Moody had a restful view that he loved of the Connecticut River valley, with hills to the West and North, reminiscent of the English Lake country. The eye and the mind can feast on beautiful landscapes in any direction all the year round. Winter sports attract hundreds of enthusiasts, while thousands of summer residents, vacationers and conference delegates find plenteous opportunities for all kinds of outdoor life and diversion in an atmosphere of purposeful Christian upbuilding and inspiration. Main Street, nearly two miles long, is perhaps the finest old avenue of its kind in New England. It is a grand town to live in. The people make fine neighbors.

When first he returned to Northfield after his triumphs overseas, Mr. Moody—a prophet in his own country—was viewed with a certain amount of jealousy and suspicion or incredulity by the Unitarian old-timers but most of them came to appreciate him highly. A few were bitter and hostile as long as they lived, but he was always a simple, unaffected man among his neighbors.

When the end came the townspeople were unanimous in feeling that they had lost the town's most famous son and their best friend. He had never held aloof from town interests. He was always ready to do his share for its advancement, and to help needy individuals, regardless of their religious connections or social standing; and he did it sympathetically and unostentatiously. They believed in his genuine goodness of heart, and they were glad to hear him preach.

Northfield is a different place without him, but the fragrance of his life and Mrs. Moody's abides.

The gist of this chapter is that Mr. Moody rose out of humble beginnings with extremely limited religious, social and cultural advantages, "**a root out of dry ground**," but with great possibilities for organizational initiative. He made the town famous by his life and work, lifting it into world prominence and usefulness, and it has not dropped back. There are "Northfields" in all the continents, with conferences modeled after Mr. Moody's Bible conferences. Yet strange to say, neither the town of Northfield nor the schools has a marker or monument to which his name is attached except a bronze bust in Sage Chapel and a bronze tablet on his birthplace.

He once said he would rather save one soul from death than have a monument of solid gold reaching from his grave to the heavens. "The monument I want after I am dead and gone is a monument with two legs going about the world, a saved sinner telling about the salvation of Jesus Christ."

Still, as in the case of Sir Christopher Wren and St. Paul's Cathedral in London, come to Northfield and look around and you will see a noble material monument!

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