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# Teacher of America's Legislatures

Raymond Schuessler

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# Teacher of America's

She was Dorothea Dix, who devoted her life to humanizing

By Raymond Schuessler

Not many teachers have been so strongly identified with a single cause or been so successful in establishing a reform so vital as Dorothea Dix in her crusade to institute proper care for the mentally ill.

It was she who convinced America that the country's insane constituted a serious problem that society could no longer ignore.

In 1840, when she began scouring the jails and poorhouses for abused inmates, there were eight mental hospitals in the nation; by 1880 there were 123.

Miss Dix was directly responsible for the founding of 32 state mental hospitals and was the inspiration for hundreds more here and throughout Europe.

Teaching was her original profession, but she soon learned that the things she wanted to teach could best be done in the great classrooms of legislatures around the country, including the United States Congress. Society would be her classroom.

Dorothea Lynde Dix was born in Hampden, Me., April 4, 1802, the grandchild of Elijah Dix, a wealthy Boston physician, chemical manufacturer, and land speculator.

Her father, Joseph, less ambitious, dropped out of Harvard to marry Mary Bigelow, a woman 18 years older than himself. Unable to earn a living, Joseph began an itinerant Methodist ministry and was often absent from home.

Her mother became a semi-invalid and Dorothea raised her two brothers. "I never knew childhood," she said in later years.

Disillusioned by the life she led, she went to live with her grandmother who found the restless 12-year-old too difficult to control and in two years shunted her off to a great-aunt in Worcester.

Eager for knowledge, Dorothea studied incessantly and, at 14,

she opened a school for children.

At 17, she returned to live with her grandmother and spent many hours in libraries and attending lectures.

At 19, she opened a "dame school" for wealthy young girls in her grandmother's house and in her off hours taught school for poor children. Her intense passion for knowledge was contagious and her pupils were swept up in her enthusiasm for the natural sciences and all fields of learning so often closed to females in those days.

## Chance encounter helped her find life's work

One of her students, Mary Channing Eustis, wrote of her: "She was tall, dignified, somewhat stooped (tubercular), very shy in her manners, but with an iron will to which it was hopeless to appeal. . . . Her greatest stress was always on moral character."

Her photograph reveals she was an attractive young girl with blue eyes, lovely wavy brown hair. Yet she affected the popular look of a schoolmarm—severe hair arrangement pulled back, stern expression, and long somber dresses.

She had a number of proposals, which she spurned. Somehow she sensed that she had a set mission in life: "Right or wrong, aloneness is my proper position," she once wrote.

In 1824 she drove herself to exhaustion and tuberculosis. Forced to rest, she became governess in the family of William Ellery Channing, the Unitarian leader and friend of Emerson and the New England Transcendentalists.

Unable to teach, she began to write, producing "Meditations for Private Hours" in 1828, "American Moral Tales for Young Persons" in 1832, and many more works.

Restless to return to teaching, she opened a new school in Boston with some success but again, as was her nature, she overworked. This time it was a complete nervous and physical breakdown.

Her doctor suggested she go abroad and rest and let crusades be championed by stronger souls. When Dr. Channing proposed she visit some friends of his in Liverpool, Miss Dix acceded.

She spent 18 delightful months on the estate of William Rathbone, an affluent Unitarian merchant. Not content to abandon crusades entirely, she became acquainted with Dr. Samuel Tuke, son of the founder of York Retreat, a Quaker house for the mentally ill.

Returning to America in 1837 she led a vegetative existence on her grandmother's estate, restrained from ever teaching again. But fate had bigger plans for the frustrated teacher. Her classes would soon be for legislatures, nations and queens.

In 1841, when she was 39, a Harvard divinity student asked her to teach a Sunday school class for women in the East Cambridge jail.

Dorothea gasped in horror at the jail scene. Among the vagrants, prostitutes and drunkards were four dirty, ragged, pathetic and insane persons.

Their quarters were filthy and

## Successful at home, she carried her reforms overseas

unheated, the walls covered with frost. When the teacher complained at the condition, she was told, "Lunatics have no sense of cold . . . they are born depraved."

She brought the case to the local courts and with the help of the reformer Samuel Gridley Howe, who was inspired by her, an article on the subject was printed in the





# legislatures

## the care of the insane

local newspapers. Shortly after, the quarters of the insane were cleaned up and heat provided.

Dorothea had found her life's work.

Researching the methods of handling the insane, she found execrable conditions everywhere. The current attitude toward the insane had not changed much since Medieval days when the ailment was considered possession by the devil. In fact, it had only changed to one in which the victim was regarded as a brute and therefore was treated accordingly.

If ever an avenging angel were needed to bring the mess to the attention of God-fearing men, it was now.

Dorothea began an 18-month invasion of every jail and house of correction in Massachusetts. Everywhere she found the same squalid conditions of neglect and unspeakable cruelty.

Her campaign was greatly influenced by Dr. Channing, whose immense compassion could not deny any human being, however degraded he might be, the right to spiritual development and protection. This premise became the driving force of her work.

She took her report, "The Memorial to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts," to the 1843 State Legislature. It was to become one of the famous documents in American history.

The senators groaned in horror at the report. After weeks of debate, with Horace Mann, Howe and Charles Sumner backing her case, the legislature finally allotted funds to improve the condition of mental inmates.

Inspired by her success Dorothea Dix moved to nearby states to further her cause. In 1844, she charged into New Jersey and, despite bitter opposition, influenced the building of a mental hospital, the state's first, in Trenton. Helping design the building herself, she

christened it "my first-born child."

However ill—at middle age her lungs were shattered and she had developed a susceptibility to malaria—she traveled everywhere by steamship, railroad, buckboard and stagecoach.

In 1845 she estimated that she had covered 10,000 miles in three years. "I have visited 18 state penitentiaries, 300 county jails and houses of correction, more than 500 almshouses and other institutions, besides hospitals and houses of refuge."

Wherever she went, her routine was the same. She invaded jails and poorhouses, took notes, presented her papers to the state legislature and the local newspapers, and tried to recruit men of influence in the community to back her work.

Successful in all the states she attacked, in 1848 she proposed going after the Federal Government itself. Why not, she suggested, put some public land up for sale and put the money into a trust to care for the insane?

Senator John A. Dix of New York presented her paper asking Congress to put aside 5 million

(later expanded to 12 million) acres for such a goal. Periodically during the next six years, she would visit Washington and push for enactment of the proposal.

She petitioned Congress:

"I have myself seen more than nine thousand idiots, epileptics and insane in these United States destitute of appropriate care and protection; and of this vast and most miserable company, sought out in jailhouses, in poorhouses and in private dwellings, there have been hundreds, nay rather thousands—bound with galling chains, bowed beneath fetters and heavy iron balls attached to drag chains, lacerated with ropes, scourged with rods and terrified beneath storms of profane execrations and cruel blows, now subject to gibes and scorn and torturing tricks, now abandoned to the most loathsome necessities, or subject to the vilest and most outrageous violations. These are strong terms, but language fails to convey the astonishing truths."

Each time the motion was introduced, it failed. Finally, in 1854, it was approved by both houses of Congress—only to have President

For almost half a century she ignored own poor health to wage winning battle for rights of mentally ill.

Maine Historical Society





Dorothea Dix *continued*

Franklin Pierce veto the action.

If America would spurn her, Dorothea Dix would go abroad. Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Toronto founded hospitals under her instigation. She invaded France, Russia, Turkey, Germany, Austria, Greece, Holland, Belgium and Scandinavia.

In England Queen Victoria ordered a royal commission to investigate the conditions of the insane in Scotland after Dorothea caused a furor. She also prompted the founding of a mental hospital on the tiny island of Jersey and one in Rome.

Other reformers sought to enlist her help in their projects. Disturbed by general prison life in 1845, she wrote "Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline in the U. S." Most of her ideas (e.g., separating different types of criminals and offering educational courses in prison) were adopted by later penologists.

In 1848 she helped establish a school for the blind in Illinois.

Although she sympathized with



Brown Brothers

In the Civil War, as superintendent of women nurses, she faced still more

battles as she tried to enforce high standards of care in Army hospitals.

women's causes of the day, as well as the bettering of education, she felt that she should husband her limited energy to use in her work in behalf of the insane.

When the Civil War erupted, Dorothea, at 59, volunteered her services and was appointed superintendent of women nurses. She set up emergency training programs, selected hospital sites, and processed and deployed nurses. This was to be the most frustrating and controversial phase of her long career.

After years of telling legislatures how to take care of their mentally ill, she was draconian now to work with.

She specifically weeded out those women whom she thought mere romantic adventurers and declared, "All nurses are required to be plain-looking women." She also rejected anyone under 30 and qualified nuns and other members of religious sisterhoods.

Louisa May Alcott wrote of her, "She is a kind old soul but very queer and arbitrary."

So arbitrary did she become that she would visit hospitals and demand the dismissal of volunteer nurses not appointed by her. She criticized hospital staffs if they did not meet her perfectionist standards. She antagonized the entire Medical Bureau, doctors in the field, and the U.S. Sanitary Commission. So intense was the conflict that the Secretary of War had to issue an edict curbing her powers. Yet she remained faithfully on her job until 1866.

After the war, Dorothea continued her efforts in hospitals and

prisons, principally in the South where so much damage had been wrought.

Her energy was lessening now and she confined her work to soliciting funds for public drinking fountains and clothing for the needy. Her last great gesture was working for the completion of the Washington Monument.

Always, she kept looking for some worthwhile cause. "Things could always be better," was her motto.

She worked up to her 80th year when she retired to her "first child," the hospital at Trenton, N.J. But she still wasn't ready to quit. "I think even lying in my bed I can still do something to help someone, somewhere."

Dorothea Dix died on July 17, 1887, at the age of 85 and was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Mass.

Because of her work, the attitude toward the insane and their treatment, and often rehabilitation, was changed over the entire Western world.

Although she knew nothing about psychiatric theories of treatment, her work in exposing the neglect of these unfortunates laid the groundwork for diagnosis and care.

Few people today know about this brave, dedicated woman. She never allowed any personal interview or publicity about herself. Nor would she allow any asylum to be named after her. But her tacit memorial survives in every corner of the land where decent treatment is afforded in the art of healing and caring for the mentally ill.

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