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Western Women

Western Women: Frances Warren dedicated life to teaching Tucson students

By Jan Cleere Special to the Arizona Daily Star

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Frances Warren arrived in Tucson in 1881. She died in 1928.

Courtesy of family

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Frances Warren rarely let anyone, or anything, stand in her way. When she arrived in Tucson in 1881, she had already buried her husband and had a child to support. Within days, she was teaching school and is considered the first woman to run for public office in the Arizona Territory.

Born June 24, 1840, in Willow Springs, Wisconsin, Frances Jane Pilling was the ninth of 11 children born to English immigrants Elias and Elizabeth Pilling. By age 17, she was teaching school. At age 20, she married dentist Joseph F. Warren, who practiced in Terre Haute, Indiana. The Warrens had one child, Bessie, born in Terre Haute in 1861. Three years later, Joseph died. Frances and Bessie returned to Wisconsin, where Frances taught for the next 10 years.

Warren family history says Frances and Bessie left their Wisconsin home in 1874 and traveled by covered wagon to northwestern California, settling in Trinity County, established in 1850 as one of the original California counties. Within a few years, mother and daughter were on their way across the desert into the Arizona Territory.

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Years later, when asked about coming to Tucson, Frances said, “I was never homesick for a moment after my arrival. ... (W)e settled ourselves in one room, where we prepared our meals. We were very happy there.”

She began substitute teaching at the Congress Street School, the first publicly constructed school in Tucson District 1. The three-room schoolhouse was funded through cake sales, socials and the sale of a goat.

Frances loved her job and would often forgo social gatherings if asked to substitute for another teacher. Students, however, were not always thrilled to spend their days cooped up inside when the promise of constant sunshine and a wealth of activities beckoned just beyond the schoolhouse door.

Frances' great-great-grandson, Bruce Grossetta, recalls the time Frances kept Emmanuel Drachman (who later brought the first motion picture projector into Arizona) after school because he had not completed his homework. Emmanuel broke into tears, telling his teacher he must go home and fetch wood for the stove so his mother could cook supper. Understanding the plight of her young student, Frances insisted the youngster finish his homework but that she would take him home and help with his wood-cutting chores after he completed his assignment. She kept her promise, and Mrs. Drachman had plenty of wood for her stove that night.

Frances became principal of the Congress Street School. She went on to teach at Safford School, again serving as principal. She taught at a school near the Grossetta Ranch just north of the city and even tutored cowboys at the ranch, particularly after daughter Bessie married Anthony (A.V.) Grossetta in 1884.

Frances found her new son-in-law an intelligent, enterprising businessman, and she became a silent partner in many of A.V.'s business ventures, including the Tucson Hardware Co. and possibly the Tucson Opera House on Congress Street.

Shortly after arriving in Tucson, Frances and another schoolteacher, Eliza "Lizzie" Royce, may have pooled their scant salaries (teachers made between \$65 and \$75 a month at this time) to build three apartment buildings on the corner of Ash Alley and West Council Street. The adobe buildings had mud ceilings, small kitchens, a saguaro-ribbed fence and a low adobe wall surrounding the patio area. Frances lived there for a short time, but the two women continued to rent the property until Lizzie's death in 1921. The buildings, which were later called the Pink Adobe Shops, were demolished in 1964.

Throughout the 1890s, Frances was deeply involved in the running of Tucson schools. She was part of a team that developed a course of study for all grades and, through connections with her son-in-law, may have had a hand in the first formal commencement that was held at the Tucson Opera House in 1899.

In 1895, the first female school superintendent was appointed for the Tucson School District. Lizzie Borton only served a few weeks before resigning due to poor health. Taking her place, Frances was more than capable of handling the job, although one board member hotly disputed “the election of any lady to fill the responsible positions of principal of the schools of this District on the grounds that the duties and responsibilities of the position are too arduous to be properly fulfilled by a lady teacher and the schools will suffer.”

Stepping down after one year, three superintendents succeeded Frances, each lasting about a month.

Running for school trustee in 1905, Frances distinguished herself as the first woman to run for public office in the territory. Losing by less than 50 votes, newspapers reported that if the polls had remained open even one more hour, the results would have favored Frances.

In 1907, having taught for over 25 years, Frances retired from full-time teaching but continued to substitute whenever she was needed.

She was involved in numerous social organizations, including charter membership in the Tucson Women’s Club and the Saturday Morning Musical Club.

She headed the culinary department for the 1912 Southern Arizona Fair and still liked to “cut a rug” with the best of the dancers.

“Dancing in my day was quite different,” she said in 1921. “There were no graceful tangos or jolly foxtrots, but there was the cotillion, the dance of the gallants, which I think we enjoyed more than your new dances. I love those dances yet, and I think if I should hear ‘The Money Musk,’ ‘Pop Goes the Weasel’ or ‘The Irish Washerwoman,’ my feet would forget that eighty-one will soon be upon me.”

On Dec. 26, 1928, Frances died at age 88 and is buried at Evergreen Memorial Park.

In 1975, Tucson dedicated the south-side Warren Elementary School to the woman who devoted her life to educating Tucson's children. In 2011, her family honored her with placement of a lamppost in the University of Arizona Women's Plaza of Honor.

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