

# NARRATIVE TEXTS

## Martha McWhirter, Women's Advocate, 1827-1904

With staunch certitude Martha McWhirter founded a religion that inspired women to leave abusive husbands, join communal living, and run commercial enterprises. Raised as a Methodist, Martha moved to Texas from Tennessee with her husband and children in 1855. The McWhirter family settled in Belton, where Martha organized a women's prayer group at an interdenominational Sunday School. In 1866 she had a revelation: What she described as the voice of God urged her to re-examine her activities and subsequently "sanctified" her, filling her with purity and holiness. Martha encouraged members of her prayer group to seek a similar experience, and many succeeded.<sup>1</sup>



The Sanctificationists believed that a married woman should attempt to live celibately with her unsanctified spouse, but if he abandoned her or treated her badly, she need not take him back. The town of Belton soon swelled with refugees from alcoholic and tyrannical marriages. For mutual support Martha urged wives to sell surplus eggs and butter. The women did this and raised additional funds through menial chores: They hired out as maids and cooks, took in home laundry, and cut and peddled firewood.<sup>2</sup>

For a long while, George McWhirter tolerated strangers living under his roof and a celibate marriage, but he ultimately secured separate lodging. The Sanctificationists were moving closer to their goal of communal living. Women who inherited property donated it to the group. The team converted a home into a boardinghouse, operated a steam laundry, purchased three farms, and constructed a hotel that gained fame for its clean beds and fresh food. The women rotated the chores involved in running the hotel. They relied on dreams for guidance and reached decisions by consensus.<sup>3</sup>

In 1899 Martha and the Sanctificationists retired to a large house in Washington, D.C. The group remained chartered until its last member died in 1983.<sup>4</sup>

### Quotations

*God makes his revelations to me by his Spirit direct. . . . This Spirit makes us new creatures. I know that what we teach is right. We are perfect.*—Martha McWhirter<sup>5</sup>

*I have advised wives to live with their husbands when they could, but there is no sense in obeying a drunken husband.*—Martha McWhirter<sup>6</sup>

*Men are welcome if they are willing to do the work we do. But . . . it is in the nature of men to want to boss, and, well, they find they can't.*—Belton Sanctificationists to a reporter, 1902<sup>7</sup>

### Photo

ITC 79-101. Caption: "Belton Sanctificationists, c. 1895; Martha McWhirter is second from left." Margarita Spalding Gerry, "The Woman's Commonwealth of Washington," *Ainslee's*, September 1902.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Facts in this paragraph from Eleanor James, "The Sanctificationists of Belton," *America West*, summer 1965, pp. 66-68; Frieda Werden, "Martha White McWhirter and the Belton Sanctificationists," in Francis Edward Abernethy, ed., *Legendary Ladies of Texas* (Dallas: E-Heart Press, 1981), pp. 115-16; Joe Holley, "Sanctified Sisters," *Texas Co-op Power*, July 2004, p. 12, online <http://www.texas-ec.org/publications/texascoopower/documents/407-tcp.pdf> (July 26, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Eleanor James, "Martha White McWhirter (1827-1904)," in Evelyn M. Carrington, ed., *Women in Early Texas* (Austin: Pemberton Press, 1985), pp. 183-84; James, "The Sanctificationists of Belton," pp. 68-69; Werden, "Martha White McWhirter and the Belton Sanctificationists," pp. 116-19; Jayme A. Sokolow and Mary Ann Lamanna, "Women and Utopia: The Women's Commonwealth of Belton, Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 87:4 (April 1984), pp. 378-81.

<sup>3</sup> George Pierce Garrison, a history professor, stayed at the hotel and interviewed the Sanctificationists in summer 1892. He described their economic ventures and decision-making process in his article "A Women's Community in Texas," *Charities Review*, November 1893. For discussion of Garrison's report, see James, "The Sanctificationists of Belton," pp. 71-72; James, "Martha White McWhirter (1827-1904)," pp. 187-88; Sokolow and Lamanna, "Women and Utopia," pp. 383-85; Werden, "Martha White McWhirter and the Belton Sanctificationists," pp. 120-21. Information about Mr. McWhirter is from George W. Tyler, *The History of Bell County* (San Antonio: Naylor Co., 1936), p. 395.

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<sup>4</sup> Joe Holley, "Sanctified Sisters," *Texas Co-op Power*, July 2004, p. 16, online

<http://www.texas-ec.org/publications/texascooppower/documents/407-tcp.pdf> (July 26, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Belton *Journal*, February 26, 1880, quoted in James, "The Sanctificationists of Belton," p. 68, and in Sokolow and Lamanna, "Women and Utopia," p. 377.

<sup>6</sup> Belton *Journal*, February 26, 1880, quoted in James, "The Sanctificationists of Belton," p. 68, and in Sokolow and Lamanna, "Women and Utopia," p. 377.

<sup>7</sup> Margarita Spalding Gerry, "The Woman's Commonwealth of Washington," *Ainslee's Magazine* 10 (September 8, 1902), p. 139, cited in Sokolow and Lamanna, "Women and Utopia," p. 372, and in Holley, "Sanctified Sisters," p. 14.