

Prologue

This is the story of Andrew Atchison, who was born and spent his childhood on a farm near Zanesville, Ohio, in the pre-Civil-War years. Orphaned at twelve, Andrew went to live with his much older sister Sarah, who was married to Thomas Fisher. With four other Atchison brothers and their families, they emigrated to virgin farm land in the prairie near Berea, later Richmond, Kansas, after the Civil War.

Andrew obtained a high school education by entering the preparatory course at the then seven-year-old University of Kansas. During that time he adopted a motto for his personal stationery, *To the Stars over Rough Roads*, which was his free translation of the Latin motto of Kansas, *Ad Astra per Aspera*. It was an apt choice expressing his youthful idealism with a realistic view of difficulties that lay ahead. After two years of the preparatory courses and four years of college courses, he obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree, the first of his family to do so, and embarked on a life-long teaching career. That took him from Kansas to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), New Mexico (then a territory), Illinois, Missouri, New Mexico again, Texas, Louisiana, Michigan, and Panama and Costa Rica before retiring to California, Michigan, and finally Panama.

But Andrew was always more than a teacher: He was driven by his religious beliefs and commitment to helping less fortunate people. Though he never had an appointment as one, he was by nature a missionary. As a young man, he described his life's purpose: "I have not devoted my entire time to labors among the poorest of the poor from mere impulse but because I believe this is my *calling* in which I can best serve my Master and my fellows." He founded, managed, taught in, and raised the funds for the Kansas Freedmen's Academy for freed slaves and their children in response to the Exodus from the South in 1879 that resulted from the end of Reconstruction. Later he was principal and teacher at the Haskell Institute, a federal multi-tribe, off-reservation Indian school in Lawrence, Kansas. From there he was appointed successively as principal of the boarding school on the Quapaw Reservation in Indian Territory and the Mescalero Apache Reservation in New Mexico.

Disappointments in working in the federal Indian affairs bureaucracy led Andrew to return to school. He obtained advanced teacher training and took a postgraduate course in English literature and American history at the Cook County Normal School in Chicago, a nationally recognized school of education at the time. This prepared him for a teaching position at Park College, a strongly

Christian institution, in Parkville, Missouri. After two years there, however, his health failed, and it was recommended that he recuperate in a warmer climate. Two years in southern New Mexico returned him to good health, whereupon he founded The El Paso Normal and Commercial College in nearby, booming El Paso, Texas.

Unable to sustain the college until it attained financial viability, Andrew sold the college and accepted a professorship of pedagogy and mental science at Louisiana State Normal in Natchitoches. Though his performance there was excellent and particularly gratifying to himself, he was abruptly fired when he was found to be tutoring African American children in his free time, unacceptable behavior in Louisiana of 1903. Unable to find another academic position, he became an agent for the International Correspondence Schools, the originator of distance learning, first in Michigan and then in Panama at the time of the canal construction. While this position was necessary for him to support his family, it did not offer either classroom work or service to the neediest. So it was natural for him to look for an outlet for his humanitarian instincts. He taught West Indian Negro children on Sundays at a missionary school in nearby Guachapali, a slum of Panama City. Later, with the cooperation of the Chinese Embassy, he founded a night school for young immigrant Chinese men, the Yook Choy School of English. He taught in it four nights a week gratis for several years, always including Christianity in the curriculum.

In time, Andrew became, in effect, a one-man, volunteer social service agency of Panama City, a “personal missionary” as he called himself. He was ready to help needy persons learn a trade, such as beekeeping which he introduced in Panama, or become proficient in English to hold a job. He taught the Bible privately to individuals — gratis, of course. On several occasions, he took into his apartment young, indigent, male students. Twice he was successful in preventing suicides. On his own initiative, he convinced four common-law couples to marry. And he spent years working to lead wayward young women into a Christian way of life — notably successful in at least three cases who corresponded with him the rest of his life.

He never made much more than a subsistence income and never owned his own home. His attempt to obtain economic security for his family through an entrepreneurial venture in a banana plantation in Honduras — a heart-breaking story in itself — failed after a several-year ordeal from a combination of business miscalculations, sickness, natural disasters, and monopolistic practices of the shipper. Having followed the Biblical injunction “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me,” for many years in Panama, he did not have enough money, when he retired, for a steamship ticket home to the United States. An admiring oil tanker captain gave him a free passage to California (and ordered his crew never to use profanity in Atchison’s presence!). Though he obtained neither fame nor fortune in society’s eyes, the riches he sought were awarded only by his Maker. He remained throughout the many trials of his life unshaken in faith, committed to his beliefs, and optimistic to the end. His success in this life was in setting an example for his three children of

Christian virtue, devotion to family, advanced education as a preparation for one's lifework, and hard, unswerving effort toward one's goal. Yes, his roads had been rough, but he kept his eyes on the stars — Heaven, where his reward, he knew, awaited.

This is also the story of Andrew's wife, Florence Esther (Robinson) Atchison, who grew up on a farm near Weedsport, New York. After graduating from high school and teaching for a time, she accepted an invitation from her Uncle David Robinson, the first professor of ancient languages at the University of Kansas, to take a year of courses there and live with his family in Lawrence, Kansas. There she met Andrew and knew from the start that he would be her husband. But the uncertainty of Andrew's income as he founded and managed the Kansas Freedmen's Academy postponed their marriage for ten years. In the meantime, she taught at four different schools in New York and in Michigan after her family immigrated there. After their marriage in 1886, Florence assisted Andrew as teacher and matron in several of his positions. She shared his Christian commitment to helping the less fortunate and the disappointments that he endured. In a letter from the Mescalero Apache Reservation in New Mexico, she expressed her attitude well: "I find every day many opportunities to act for Christ. And with God's blessing the little acts will tell for eternity." One of many "little acts" of Florence — that lasted for several years — was teaching not just the Bible but the English language and American customs to a class of newly immigrated Syrian young men at her church in Lansing, Michigan, an activity that brought her lasting appreciation from them. Florence was a devoted mother to her three children and a bright intellect as evidenced by several of her writings.

The warmth of her personality is best expressed in her own words when she described some of her duties as matron of the boarding school girls on the Mescalero Reservation in a talk to her church group many years later:

As we had about twenty girls, I gave them all about the same care that I gave my own children. I nursed them when sick, directed their work, and read and sang with them. I always went with them to bed and this was the sweetest hour of each day to them and to me. We always sang and prayed, told a Bible story or recited a Bible verse. Often when they were robed in their clean white gowns and tucked snug in bed, I would hear: "Mrs. Atchison, let us sing *Jesus loves me* or *God is a present help, He is always near.*"

Florence's much younger sister Nina summed up Florence's life: "I never saw such unselfishness in my life." It was that unselfishness that led her to travel to Ithaca, New York, to care for her very ill, other younger sister Ernestine, when her own health was more precarious than she would let on. The stress of that activity caused Florence to predecease Ernestine. Andrew never considered remarriage as he carried on without his helpmate for another twenty years, fully expecting to be with her again.