

Leila W. Anderson,  
Pilgrim Circuit Rider/  
Conductora del Circuito Peregrino



1. Getting to Know You/Aprendiendo a conocerte

Name/Nombre: Leila Waite Anderson  
A.B. Recipient/A.B. honor: 1981 (posthumous/póstumo)<sup>1</sup>  
Career/Carrera: Christian Educator/Educadora Cristiana  
Place of Birth/Lugar de nacimiento:  
Illinois  
Favorite Subject/Asignatura favorita:  
History/Historia  
Brothers or Sisters/Hermanos or hermanas:  
Older brother/Un hermano mayor  
I looked up to/Admiro a: My mother/Mi madre

*As we move into the future the task of Christian education is to  
remove groundless temporary fears by centering . . . life on eternal*

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<sup>1</sup> A note from Marilyn Breitling: I attended Leila's funeral, which was held in Princeton, Illinois, and personally announced to her and a room full of women fans, her selection as the Antoinette Brown Award recipient at a women's event in Illinois early in 1981.

*values; to help individuals overcome hatreds by strengthening their power to love; to erase the concepts of foreigner by substituting the reality of brother [and sister]; and to anchor every life in God.<sup>2</sup>*

## 2. The Early Years

The early world of Leila Anderson was a twelve-mile square. She was born and raised on a farm out in the open country near LaMoille in northern Illinois. As her shy father had no interest in church, Leila learned only the parts of the Bible that were covered in December and January classes when she could get to Sunday school. Those winter months she, her older brother Louis, and the five neighbor children rode to church in the Petersen's bobsled.

"I developed a grim determination to marry a minister so I could go to church every Sunday of the year," Leila said (8). She also seemed to have been born with a desire to teach and yearned to become a missionary. Her mother, a happy and encouraging woman, was a strong influence on her life. Most of all, Leila said, her mother loved people.

Leila was born with a double curvature of the spine that caused both discomfort and embarrassment. When the family doctor said Leila would not live to be seventeen, Leila said, "I stamped both my physical and emotional feet and said, 'I *will* live!' And I meant it, even if life was to be continual pain" (15). Only years later when a gym teacher at Monmouth College directed her to proper medical care would her back gradually straighten and her higher shoulder lower.

In high school, her self-confidence was so tender that, upon learning she might be valedictorian and have to give an oration, she said, "I studied slightly less than was my habit and completed the year with a grade average a fraction of a point below that of my present competitor" (17).

When she headed back to the farm after graduation, she told herself she would stay there forever:

*Had I known then that I would drive 25,000 miles in a station wagon (still unknown in those days) and fly another 10,000 miles (a means of travel then in its infancy) in addition to covering a few thousand miles by train, I am positive that I would have been too burdened with anxiety to want to face such a future (18).*

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<sup>2</sup> Leila W. Anderson in collaboration with Harriet Harmon Dexter. *Pilgrim Circuit Rider* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1960), 200. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from her memoir and reflection.

### 3. Camp Miniwanca

In 1926 after her fourth year as a high school teacher, Leila received a Danforth Scholarship<sup>3</sup> to be a counselor to youths at an American Youth Foundation Camp in Michigan. A Camp Miniwanca leader, "Dad" Waite, made such an impression on her that she took the Waite name as her second name.

After a group discussion he led about the development of Christian personality, Leila said:

*I began to see that discipleship entailed personal conviction and dedication, not mere mental assent to the teachings of the Bible. Further, I began to realize that when the teachings of Jesus are applied to the world in which we live some startling changes take place in the social order" (27).*

She returned to camp the next year. It was 1929. While walking across the campgrounds she met Dr. G. Byron Smith, president of Iberia Junior College. Their conversation began with a question – "And what do you do?" That query resulted in an invitation to teach at the mission school in the Ozarks of Missouri.

### 4. *At last I was a home missionary.*

Iberia Junior College, located fifty-five miles south of St. Louis, was the only school in the Ozarks. Leila remained at Iberia eight years then returned to Illinois to care for her mother.

Truman B. Douglass, an executive in the Congregational Christian Churches in the 1950s, first knew Leila when he was a member of the board of trustees of the missionary college:

*During meetings of the board Julia scurried about in the background performing the duties incident to the care and feeding of trustees. Few of us suspected that her somewhat monotone exterior concealed a fierce and leonine heart (ix).*

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<sup>3</sup> William H. Danforth, owner of Ralston Purina Mills and one of the men responsible for the establishment of the camp, would reappear throughout Leila's life when she required funds.

"At last I was a home missionary," Leila said. She taught some academic classes but also was the college bookkeeper. It was a difficult position with many students in the poverty of the Great Depression Era:

*If my years at Iberia Junior College appear to have been a series of problems, the picture is accurate. But problem is merely another name for possibility and at Iberia there were as many possibilities as there were students enrolled (35).*

## 5. The Brooker Boys

Leila brought several youths to the college. She recognized the latent intellectual gifts in the three Brooker boys. She arranged for work study positions as a means to pay their tuition.

"Leila gave this homebody independence," Donald Brooker said in a recent phone visit.<sup>4</sup> His work assignment the first year was to milk two cows. The second year he was to paint the inside of the chemistry lab. "Leila came in there one day while I was painting," he said. "Then she stopped me from painting any more."

To make ends meet, reported Rebecca Blair, Leila paid for costs of incidentals, transportation and other necessary expenses.<sup>5</sup>

[Robert] Brooker notes that "she told us that we were among the few that had paid back their debt," and his brother, Donald, commented to Anderson in reply, "We did pay you back the money, but we will never repay the debt" (*Charting the Elements*, 132).

"We did not get a receipt," Donald said, "but we got her good will and that was the main thing."

Leila wanted Donald to become a minister. Instead, he became a professor of agricultural engineering at the University of Missouri. He had fallen in love with teaching while earning two separate master's degrees.

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<sup>4</sup> June 2, 2008

<sup>5</sup> As quoted from Rebecca Blair, "Elemental Service: Robert Brooker" (Honorary Alumnus 1981) from his published memoirs, *Charting the Elements: My Life and Times* (Ames, IA: Prairie Harvest Press, 1997) and *What I Know Now: Reflections on Living a Long Time* (ed. Russell Brooker and privately published after his death in 2000). Visit [http://eip.indy.edu/profiles/brooker138\\_141.pdf](http://eip.indy.edu/profiles/brooker138_141.pdf). These stories were provided through the kindness of Christine H. Guyonneau, Archivist at the Frederick D. Hill Archives, University of Indianapolis. The photo was shared with the permission of Roberta Brooker, daughter of Robert Brooker.

Francis became the first and the chief chemist at Grapette Soda Company, remaining there thirty-one years.

Robert became chair of the chemistry department at the University of Indianapolis. Dr. Brooker established the Leila Anderson Christian Service Award in 1982 in celebration of the woman who made it possible for the brothers to further their education.<sup>6</sup>

The Brookers first met "Andy" as the founder and teacher of the "Young People's Class" at the church in Arlington, Illinois.

By coupling Biblical example with situations in daily life, Anderson [had] led members of the class to reflect upon and construct meaningful responses to human need within a larger Christian context, to make theological precepts in human life. Her life ethos focused on the idea that one should attend to Christ's work on earth and, if one did so, the Lord would take care of the rest.

Anderson's functional, active care, and concern had impressed [Robert], but it was her modeling of a selfless, hospitable Christian ethos of service which marked his life most deeply.

In his memoir, he sketches this portrait of her:

Andy lived her religion and did not demand that you live as she did. She always practiced Christianity to everyone and made no demands in return. She accepted us for what we were, loved us with all our faults, and let us know it. Nobody could ask for more" (Charting, 133).

## 6. Another Important Question

In 1936, Leila furthered her own education. At the University of Chicago, she earned a master's degree in church history. Her studies were so energizing that she planned to continue until she had gained a PhD. Then she could teach Bible in a department of religion of a small college.

Dr. Ernest Colwell, dean of the Divinity School and her major professor, took her aside with the second important query about her life, "*Why do you want a doctor's degree?*"

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<sup>6</sup> The award is administered by the Lantz Center for Christian Vocations at the University of Indianapolis.

When she learned that openings only would be in an eastern girls' school or a university religion department, she said, "You can see that I'm a product of Midwest rural life" (39).

Even though she had a personal dislike for women in the pulpit, she enrolled in the Bachelor of Divinity program. Again, William Danforth stepped in:

You should be working with people instead of burying your nose in books. If you will undertake some project which will contribute to a better understanding of young people's spiritual values I will pay all of your expenses at the university for two years (40).

She accepted a valuable assignment in her home county as community counselor for the County Council of Churches. She also learned that positions of director of religious education were only available in the cities, and that

*I wanted to live where I could walk down the street and know all the people I met; where I could be concerned about Grandpa's Smith's rheumatism, about Mary's progress in school, and how Jack fared in his courtship of Jill. I wanted to get my finger, at least occasionally, into good black dirt, not city soot (41).*

## 7. Here was my job, and I knew it.

Then Dr. Samuel Keck, superintendent of the Congregational Churches in South Dakota, needed a staff worker to direct Christian education on a state-wide basis and to be available as occasional interim pastor. Leila was ordained.

First she served in the state office in Huron in 1941 where she worked with South Dakota churches the first six years. When she became field representative for the Division of Christian Education and began circuit ministry, her office moved to Yankton.

## 8. On the Dakotah Reservations

"I am sure," Leila said, "that if I had to choose one area of my work and confine myself to it, I would choose to work with the Dakotah Indians" (158).

In the twelve years that she lived and worked in South Dakota, she spent more time counseling with the Dakotah Indians than circuit riding could provide. She received as much from the Dakotahs as she gave. She appreciated both their plight and the richness of their culture.

*While learning the ways of the Dakotahs, I learned to sit, just sit. To be silent. I learned that the circuit of the sun, not the watch, measured a day's time. That there is a time for living and that living takes time. I learned that words are unnecessary for communication. That often silence is more eloquent (45).*

9. First, I needed to refill my spiritual reservoir.

As her circuit work developed, Leila had begun to carry an increasing amount of material in her Studebaker coupe. Calls from an ever-enlarging circle of churches came to the office. After seven years the idea of a circuit rider in Christian education was born.

On a memorable day in 1951, she received a letter from the national office. *If* the station wagon could be purchased, and *if* circuits could be worked out, would she accept the position of Pilgrim Circuit Rider?

*It did not take me long to make up my mind because it would seem to me that my entire life had been preparation for this kind of circuit riding.*

*Having made the decision to launch out into deep waters, or more accurately, to venture out onto new highways, I experienced a sudden sense of depletion. Too long I had been draining all my resources and now I needed to refill my spiritual reservoir (48).*

In 1953 she was granted a two-month leave of absence for further study and took that world trip to visit as many missionary sites as possible.

While traveling to Turkey, she was interviewed by a foreign correspondent for the *New York Times*. "So much of the time I write about discord and the tearing down processes that it's encouraging to find a story of someone who is building up," Jack Raymont said.

His article described her as

A cheery, chic person, who is circling the globe to prepare herself for a novel missionary project in the United States. . . . Now she is traveling around the world for three months as a prelude to taking up residence in a station wagon, in which she will tour from church to church offering advice and help.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Missionary Tours Globe as Training; She Will Shift to Station Wagon to Help Churches in U.S. – Visiting in Turkey Now." *New York Times*. March 3, 1953. Tuesday. Page 214. Dateline: Istanbul, Turkey, March 2.

10. I knew I had reached a turning point in my life.

When her plane landed in Seattle on June 2, 1953, Leila Anderson found a telegram waiting:

PICK UP PONTIAC STATION WAGON  
PONTIAC MICHIGAN JUNE 8.

A church member in South Hadley, Indiana, with a reputation of specializing in the impossible would design and construct the interior. "So," Leila said, "on June 19, 1953, I arrived at Eldon Kreig's home with, to me, the most beautiful Pontiac station wagon that the company had ever assembled" (60).

*In addition to accommodating projectors, screens, slides, films, record player and records, teaching materials and handicraft supplies, materials for mission study, for men's and women's fellowship groups, youth work, stewardship and evangelism, there had to be provision for storing my clothes and personal possessions, for cooking, resting, and working with my typewriter, Dictaphone and other office equipment (61-62).*

They measured, figured and fit their ideas into the sweep of Eldon Kreig's ingenuity and every fraction of an inch of space.

On each front door was painted a small sleek horse ridden by a man in flowing black robe, reminiscent of the old-time itinerant preachers. Above and beneath the symbol were the words:

PILGRIM CIRCUIT RIDER  
BOARD OF HOMELAND MISSIONS  
CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

11. The moment had arrived when the Pilgrim Circuit Rider became a reality.

From 1953 to 1959, Leila engaged in two three-year circuits and put two station wagons to full use. "This [first] station wagon carried me faithfully," she said, "as I clocked 73,000 miles over roads of every description from toll thruways to mountain passes; from the streets of our largest metropolises to tiny hamlets on the plains" (64).

Her first circuit would cover much of the United States. The Western Tour started with Illinois, Kansas and Montana. She traveled several hundreds of miles with solitude.

On one trip, she made a wrong decision after a gas station attendant told her about a fifty-mile shortcut across a seldom traveled mountain road. First the road narrowed then it deteriorated to sharp stones. Finally, it grew too steep for a 1500-pound load. Her car stalled.

*There was nothing left but to choose between two impossibles, and I chose to try to turn the car. After perhaps fifteen minutes of forward-backward edging I succeeded only in getting the car crosswise of the road and there it lodged, the front bumper scratching the solid rock cliff and the rear bumper looking straight down a gorge onto a frothing stream below. I was stuck (76).*

*I learned the meaning of desperate. Frantically I pried at the rocks, loosening little pieces which I pulled off with my bare hands, pried and pounded again over and over until at length I could move the car few inches. Here was no case of removing mountains by faith – this was a test of works.*

She acquired two companions. Susie, a brown rag doll made by women of Neosho, Missouri, listened from the sun visor.

Peter Piper perched at the top of the steering wheel and talked back to her. "We decided it would be better for you to have a man travel with you on those long cross-country jaunts," said a man from Lanett, Alabama (69).

Over the next four years, the sky blue-breasted parakeet learned more than four hundred words and was filled with surprises. "One time," Leila said, "over a prayer in a ministers' group, he was heard to say, 'Praise God.' 'Kiss me, kid!'" On another occasion, Peter Piper said, "I'm a missionary. Where's the money?" (70)

## 12. Station Wagon #2

On April 23, 1956, after wearing out the first station wagon, she received a replacement. She considered First Congregational Church at Elyria, Ohio, the godparents of the second car. Many people, including William Danforth, contributed to her project. He had his photo taken with the car. "Right then," Leila said, "he wrote a check for \$1,000" (67). After his death, the Danforth Foundation continued interest in this phase of Christian education.

*In 1953, on my first visit to Hawaii, I found that many churches I visited were composed of a single racial group, but in 1958 my*

*heart sang a continual Te Deum as I visited church after church in which racial backgrounds had been dissolved in Christian fellowship."*

After her second Hawaiian Islands visit, she reflected that the people "have not only learned to live together in racially mixed groups but who, in the process, have maintained a high regard for each race" (176).

Each year in South Dakota is an Indian Mission Meeting, a conclave that for a hundred years has brought together members of the Presbyterian and Congregational churches from four states. Leila gave leadership in 1957. That year Mary Ann Neevel was at Ponca Creek Church as a summer work camp youth volunteer. She described Leila as "the minister who drove her van around the country doing Christian education."<sup>8</sup>

Barbara McCall also remembered Leila with admiration. Leila had visited the tiny prairie churches that Barbara and her husband served in the Roundup area of Montana.<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes Leila wondered if she carried too many books and too much equipment. "But then," she said, "the eagerness of just one minister, sampling books with the abandon of a boy turned loose in a candy store, makes me feel repaid for the many times I load and unload the heavy black cases" (80).

Wherever she went, each church visit was by invitation only:

*Although my talking hours are many, my listening hours may be more important. The questions being raised are basic concerns of Christian education because they indicate people's spiritual needs. I think that I know the way many of the people feel because surely within my own mind I also have questions which I cannot answer and I puzzle over my own uncertainties" (189-190).*

At Corpus Christi, Texas, "a bright-eyed boy about ten years old made a beeline for the book display, picked up the largest book in the exhibit, and settled down in a comfortable chair with his head literally buried in The Historical Atlas of the Holy Land" (81).

When Leila invited him to take the atlas home, he proudly walked out of the church with it. The following night, he returned with the book and told her many things he had read.

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<sup>8</sup> See Brauning. "Mary Ann Walker Neevel: Talking Together" in *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice* at <http://www.ucc.org/women.org>.

<sup>9</sup> See Brauning. "Barbara M. McCall: In Her Own Words" in *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice* at <http://www.ucc.org/women>.

The boy's church was denominationally isolated in the southwestern outpost of the Convention of the South. This Convention (like a conference) was composed of black churches from Texas east to the Atlantic seaboard.

### 13. Franklinton-at-Bricks

*Out of many years of experience I would select the development of the training school at Bricks, North Carolina, as perhaps the most interesting venture in which I have participated (147).*

While working in the leadership training program among the Dakotah Indians, Leila also helped organize Franklinton-at-Bricks.<sup>10</sup> The original Bricks Center was a school for African-Americans established in 1895 by the American Missionary Association [AMA].<sup>11</sup> Later it became a meeting place offering guidance for families and groups. Among those groups were 175 African-American churches in the Conference of the South. Most Congregationalists in the southern tier of the country were members of that convention.

One Center program was a summer training school for church school teachers. Leila first became involved in the institute in 1948 when she suggested that the training school become an accredited program. Graduates of a three-year course would be given special recognition.

Nineteen of the 26 women in her first class in 1951 received full credit. When she returned the following summer, attendance was 91, representing twenty-three churches. More important than the increase in numbers was the growing spirit of pride in the work and the attitude evidence by the churches.

Some carloads had traveled more than 200 miles. The eldest student in that class was an 88-year-old minister. The youngest was a 15-year-old ninth grade girl.

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<sup>10</sup> This center, the 1953 merger of the (Congregational) Bricks Center and the Franklinton (Christian College) Center, is located at the site of a former slave plantation.

<sup>11</sup> The Protestant-based abolitionist group was formed in part to educate African-Americans. The AMA became most closely aligned with the Congregational Christian Churches.

14. "For her to say yes to God and to do this was intriguing to me."<sup>12</sup>

FIRST PERSON: Picture us rocking in two straw rocking chairs, Leila Anderson in one and me, Yvonne Delk, age fifteen, in the other.

Whenever Leila came to into our area of Norfolk, Mamma had her over to dinner. We sat on the front porch and we spoke for a long while. She is one of the first that I remember sitting down and having a civil conversation with. Most white people did not consider us equals. Ours was not a condescending conversation. Leila and I were two people who were on a mission.

She was much clearer than I. I picked her brain. I wanted to know more about her and her journey and why she was doing what she was doing.

She took me seriously. She had an acceptance and affirmation of people beyond boundaries – by the way she stopped and spoke. This allowed me to come up out of a negative stage and toward a positive state. She gave me the encouragement to continue considering.

For me she represented a white woman who had transcended the barriers that kept people apart. I have always celebrated that. She came right up into the African American community at that time.

Here she was, white and traveling by herself. When Leila came through, we were in the midst of the beginning of integration. In 1954, *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*<sup>13</sup> ended legal segregation in public schools. With segregation and racism – the boundaries; neighborhood, church, school – it was, "we" and "they."

She was bold enough and courageous enough at that time to take this ministry and move it around. She went to places where we would normally not have connected with our educational resources. Most Black churches used a conservative curriculum. She was willing to travel around the country as she did to help people look at ways to teach and to equip others with what it means to be the church community.

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<sup>12</sup> From phone visit with the Rev. Dr. Yvonne E. Delk on April 4, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.sociologyindex.com/brown\\_vs\\_topeka\\_board\\_of\\_education.htm](http://www.sociologyindex.com/brown_vs_topeka_board_of_education.htm) and <http://www.nps.gov/brvb/>.

Yvonne had taken a three-year course at the Franklinton Center with a certificate in Christian Education at the same time that she graduated from high school. She was working with the education program at Macedonia Congregational Church.

Leila had told her that when you prepare yourself, doors will open. It was her feeling that the denomination would lead those persons from other places to be part of their staff. True to her projection, in 1969, Yvonne Delk joined the national staff. She had become one of the first women of the South who had courage to go on to seminary.

15. *Whatever information I can pack into my saddlebags I use as I would a kit of tools* (102).

It was the era of the 1950s and the large church schools. Christian education was big business. Throughout the denominations, almost 40 million children and adults were enrolled.

Early in any conference with a group of teachers, Leila worked out with those attending a statement of philosophy that could guide them as they looked at specific issues. She was careful to show that as children grow physically, their personality and the spiritual side are also becoming. "So," she said, "we want an ever-deepening experience and an ever-expanding expression of the Christian religion" (106).

Whether conducting demonstration classes or working with individual teachers and leaders Leila found enthusiasm. Even a slight suggestion would start a teacher's own creative thinking. After an extended conversation with a church school superintendent in North Carolina, Leila said she hoped he would be able to try a few of her suggestions. "A few?" he repeated in a query. "What's to keep us from trying them all?"

Understanding that the process of arriving at the answers is the most important part of education, she asked another teacher, "Are you trying to teach right answers for Sunday morning or trying to help the students think so they can meet the tests of life?" (126)

Nobody will ever 'administer' Leila Anderson. With great good humor and all the outward signs of compliance she consults with the executive to whom she is responsible concerning her routes of travel and her methods of work – and then [she] goes where she thinks she is needed and does what she believes is called for by the immediate situation. The caution and common sense of the

administrators have never been equal to the resoluteness of this quietly determined woman. - Truman B. Douglass<sup>14</sup>

## 16. So What About You?

- Throughout Leila Anderson's life, several leaders took an interest in her life.

***Who are the people that you celebrate who saw potential in you, who recognized your gifts and encouraged talents waiting to be developed?***

***Why do you think Leila was led to help the Brooks brothers?***

- At least twice, Leila Anderson was asked a question that drew her to recognize a truth about what she could or could not do.

***How would you answer these questions: "What do you do? and What do you want to do? and Why do you want to do it?"***

***Who are the people in your life who listened to you or who talked straight with you when you might have missed an important dimension of your development or the lack of it?***

***What did they see in you that you had not seen?***

- Knowing who she was and who she was not, what she could do realistically and what she could not do, resulted in a solid integrity for Leila Anderson.

***Who, what, are you not?  
Who, what are you?***

- Throughout Leila's life, William Danforth appeared and reappeared as someone who cared about what she was doing with her life.

***When have you had a benevolent donor – a funding donor or a giver of encouragement?***

***How have you repaid or hope to repay your donor?***

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<sup>14</sup> Foreword to *Pilgrim Circuit Rider*, x

- Leila stepped over several barriers, some internal and others in society.

***Name some of these barriers.***

***What strengths did Leila have that enabled her to be a pilgrim circuit rider?***

***What barriers have you stepped over or hope to step over?***

## 17. Church Family Project

Invite several generations of church school teachers to visit with your class about their definition of Christian education for all ages. Ask them to tell what leadership resources they had or have as teachers. If Leila Anderson visited your church, ask the teachers to talk about the visit. Invite your class members to talk about what they really want to happen in a Sunday school class, what they want/need to learn to help them live as Christians.

## 18. Still Curious?

See II. The UCC and the African-American Churches

[http://1stcong.weblogger.com/stories/storyReader\\$1286](http://1stcong.weblogger.com/stories/storyReader$1286)

Franklinton Center. [Read more about Franklinton Center at

[www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/](http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/)

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(Dallas (Dee) A. Brauninger. *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice*, May 2008)