

Christina C. Van Raalte Gilmore



“I have loved the work I have been permitted
to do for Hope College.”
--Christina Van Raalte Gilmore

The motto for Christina Van Raalte Gilmore's life came from the book of Philippians: "For me to live is Christ," and by this axiom she lived her daily life. Born into the most eminent family in Holland, the Van Raaltes, Gilmore still had to make a way for herself in the world, enduring hardships and becoming active in God's work. As the first woman on the faculty at Hope College, her influence endures beyond her twenty-five important years of service at Hope.

Born Christina Catharina Van Raalte in the Netherlands in 1846, Christina was the fifth child of Albertus C. and Christina Van Raalte. Her father was a minister in the Netherlands, but he faced religious persecution at the hands of the Dutch government, and when Christina was only six months old, Albertus and Christina moved their family to the United States. Overseas travel was difficult at the time, and the voyage from the Netherlands to New York took six weeks. The family made the journey with five small children—Christina had three older brothers and one older sister.

Despite the harrowing journey, the entire family made it safely to America and after a time in New York, they continued their emigration to Detroit by train, and finally by following a trail to the site of Holland, where they ultimately settled. Christina's father led the group of Dutch immigrants to the colony, where he founded the present city of Holland.

Very little is known about Christina's early life in Michigan, other than the fact that the Van Raaltes welcomed two more daughters, Maria and Anna. Christina was close to her younger sisters, as well as older brothers Ben and Dirk, through most of her life. She also greatly admired her father. Family friends throughout her life noticed that Christina, of the seven children, was the most like him, "and she was proud of it too." The Van Raaltes enjoyed a high standing in Holland, since their father was the colony founder and main preacher to the area. Although they would not have been considered sophisticated by East Coast standards, the family did have a servant, which caused a biographer to speculate that Christina was "probably spoiled to a degree."



Christina Van Raalte's childhood home

The amount or type of education that Christina received is not documented. Contemporaries remembered that she "spoke flawless English," which she must have learned from someone other than a family member, since her father and mother did not learn the language as quickly. Her letters in Dutch, the language spoken at the Van Raalte home, show more errors in language and punctuation than her English writings. Gilmore's father founded the Holland Academy and students started enrolling in this school, which later became Hope College. However, Christina would not have had the opportunity to attend the Academy, as it accepted only men until 1878. She did enroll for three years at Olivet College in Olivet, Michigan, which had a women's department, but there is no record indicating that she graduated.

One form of education that was available to Christina was to become an apprentice. In 1862, with Ben and Dirk away fighting for the Union in the Civil War, she moved to Kalamazoo in order to learn the trade of a seamstress. She stayed there from November to February, experiencing the harsh Michigan winter on her own. Away from her family at age sixteen, Christina became homesick and wrote often to her family. She worried about her brothers and wished constantly for word that they were safe and healthy. "It is so peculiar these days

with the war,” she wrote, “there are so many soldiers here. They are such rough people; it is unpleasant to walk in the street at night.”

Nevertheless, Christina enjoyed her time in Kalamazoo. She loved her boarding house and appreciated the work of the sewing shop. Interested in fashion, she had the opportunity to learn how to make various pieces of clothing. “My cloak is as good as the latest fashion,” she wrote home, along with advice for the newest trends for girls of her sisters’ ages.

With the onset of winter, Christina had the chance to go sleighing and sledding, pastimes she enjoyed very much. She made friends in the shop and the boarding house, and wrote excitedly about a “molasses candy pull” she attended. Christina even had a positive outlook about the job itself, even if the day-to-day routine was tedious. “None of these are such major tasks,” she wrote about her work in the shop, “but I can really learn well from them.” She valued the opportunity to become educated about anything, and dedicated herself to improvement, quickly setting herself apart from the other shop employees.

After her time as a seamstress and the three years at Olivet, Christina returned to Holland to live with her family until her father decided to move to Virginia in order to start another Dutch church and colony there. Her father and mother, along with her two younger sisters, made relocation. Although the settlement attempt ultimately failed, it brought major changes to Gilmore’s life. The new town of Amelia Courthouse, Virginia was very different from Michigan. It was 1869, the Civil War was over, and former slaves and their families lived near to the Van Raaltes: Christina had the opportunity to meet African Americans for the first time and to observe their religious practices.

Her privileged childhood is evident in her surprise at such a different way of life. Michigan was still relatively undeveloped, but the Van Raaltes had a better home there than in the South during the Reconstruction. “Who would have thought that we would be walking on wooden floors here,” she wrote to her brother Ben, back in Michigan.

She eventually learned to enjoy her surroundings, even writing to her brothers about her discovery of cornbread, a treat she considered new and exciting. She summed up her experience as “well, we miss a lot of the conveniences which we had at home but it doesn’t make us feel discouraged because it is a beautiful country.”

Another important change took place for Christina during her stay in Virginia. In July of 1869, she married William Gilmore in a ceremony performed by her father. The two had probably known each other for quite some time, since William had attended the Holland Academy and Hope College, although he was eleven years her senior. He worked for a while as the instructor of vocal music at Hope before deciding to study theology and becoming ordained as a minister. After his graduation, he moved to Virginia along with the Van Raalte family. Respected by his congregants, William was known as a talented musician and an “active worker.” When Albertus and Christina Van Raalte moved back to Michigan, William took over the responsibility of managing the church they had planted for the next two years.

During their short time in Virginia, the Gilmores started a family with the arrival of two sons, Raalte and William. The young family was established in Amelia County, and employed a nurse, cook, and gardener. The Gilmores also housed Christina’s sisters, Maria and Anna. The household did not remain in Virginia very long, however. The Gilmore’s second son, William, did not survive to be a year old. Grieving the loss of their son, the Gilmores moved briefly back to Holland before settling in Manito, Illinois, where William became the pastor of the Manito First Reformed Church.

The couple had two more children, a son and a daughter, but both died in a diphtheria epidemic in 1883, eight days apart from each other. Other than this tragedy, Christina Gilmore’s life is not well-documented during this time. Her days would likely have been consumed with her work as a mother and a minister’s wife.

Friends remembered that she was “devoted and loving but stayed somewhat in the shadows of her much respected husband.” This arrangement changed with the sudden death of her husband in 1884, at the age of only forty-nine years. Gilmore, widowed and mourning, took her fourteen-year-old son, Raalte, and moved back to her familiar home of Holland.



Christina Gilmore with her son Raalte

After her husband’s death and her return to her hometown, Gilmore’s life completely changed, and she began to take on more active roles within the community. At the time, a widow may have been considered helpless, but Gilmore “rose above her troubles in the faith and with the courage of her father and mother, and started out upon that well-nigh fifty year career of Kingdom work.” One of her passions was for mission work and, in 1887, Gilmore joined the Women’s Board of Domestic Missions, and then organized and became the President of the Women’s Union Missionary Conference.

Gilmore also founded and presided over the Federation of Women’s Societies in Holland. This organization brought together women of all churches and denominations in the Holland area to work together on mission projects. Starting with only twenty-four women at a meeting in Gilmore’s home, the Federation grew to include more than four hundred regional women working in cooperation.

The goal of all of these organizations was to help women become more active in church work. Women were only just beginning to become involved in domestic and foreign missions, so Gilmore was at the forefront of the movement. A biographer notes that she was “notable as an organizer in the days when women’s work was new and less understood.” Gilmore was a talented public speaker and was able to bring people together and motivate them to action.

One such cause that Gilmore supported was the work of doctors and missionaries in leper colonies in Africa. Gilmore brought Dr. C. J. Stauffacher to speak to her Federation. Stauffacher worked with people who had leprosy in Inhambone, East Africa, in modern-day Mozambique. The colony offered a place for people with leprosy, who were considered outcasts by the rest of society, to live and receive treatment for their illness. During the meeting, the women of the Federation decided to raise enough money to help fund the leper colony in which Stauffacher worked.

The main need of the colony, according to Dr. Stauffacher, was a stone house where people could live and receive treatment, since stone was the only material that could fully withstand the area’s weather. Gilmore and the women of the Federation quickly set about raising enough money for the land and a stone house. The building was constructed and later named “The Christine Van Raalte Gilmore Home for Lepers.” The colony grew to include twenty-three houses for the inhabitants, in addition to a church, kitchen, school, and hospital, as well as the original stone building and land on which to grow crops. It remained in operation until the 1940s, providing services for as many as eighty patients at a time.

Besides her mission work, Gilmore began her official affiliation with Hope College. In the time since she was a student at Olivet, women had come to be members of the student body at Hope. In 1887, the council realized

that the female students needed a female role model. The men of the council were also worried about the “peculiar phases and delicate questions of discipline” that came along with co-education.

Therefore, Gilmore was approached by Hope to become a part of the faculty of the grammar school located on Hope’s campus. Her position was called the “Lady Assistant and Matron” of the school and eventually the “Lady Principal.” Hiring Gilmore was a major change for the college, as “there had never before been any women in the administration or faculty.”

Gilmore was happy to start work at the school, writing to the council of the college: “I believe . . . that it afforded an opportunity for doing good and performing excellent work. I have not sought the position, therefore, I feel it is from the Lord.”



Gilmore with the Hope College faculty in 1901

Gilmore followed her calling and began her work at the school. There were only about six women in the college when Gilmore arrived, but many more in the preparatory division. Gilmore held the position of a lecturer, giving instruction to the female students about “Good Morals and Gentle Manners.” She met with all of the young girls twice a week and the council noticed marked improvement in their behavior because of Gilmore’s presence.

The students themselves felt that she was a positive influence, both through her lectures and “her own beautiful culture and rare tact.” She interacted with the women at every level of the school and the women students, who called themselves “her girls,” felt that “her home [was] always open to them, and they [did] not hesitate to consult her in regard to any difficulty.”



Mrs. Gilmore with “her girls”

The year 1907 completely transformed Gilmore's employment at Hope. In that year, Voorhees Hall was constructed as the first dormitory for women on Hope's campus, funded by patrons in the East who supported women's education. The council of Hope College knew that in order to remain competitive with other schools in the area, they would have to provide the college-age women "the advantages of refined, Christian homes or see them leave for other institutions." Female students, who previously had to be native to the Holland area or live in local boarding houses or private rented rooms, could now come from further regions and live directly on campus.

Voorhees dramatically changed the opportunities for women at Hope and led to a new title for Gilmore. In order to operate a women's dormitory, Hope would need "a scholarly, yet matronly lady manager" to govern the building. Gilmore's job description changed from "Lady Principal" to "Dean of Women." She moved into Voorhees Hall and encouraged students to do the same, and she took on a more active role by living among the college-level women. The hall residents had the opportunity to discuss the rules for the dorm and Gilmore believed that "individual responsibility and community co-operation" would help the women to respect each other and feel at home in Voorhees.



Voorhees Hall when it was completed in 1907

Gilmore left a strong impression upon her students and on the Hope community in general. As the last surviving child of the Van Raalte family, Gilmore was a figurehead in Holland. Gilmore was always neatly dressed and she was composed and sophisticated in her life in general. Scandal touched her only once, in the form of a rumor that she had kissed Dr. Henry Dosker under the mistletoe at a Christmas party.

A niece remembered her propriety at every family gathering: "she always wanted to sit in her father's chair and she was rigid. No crossing of knees!" She had pride in her heritage and valued the traditions of her family, loving to share stories about their time in the Netherlands and the early years in Michigan, but she was also quite an individual. "She had much to say," the same relative wrote, "she was a strong character."

Gilmore had a profound impact upon Hope College. She did not have a full college education and her duties as the Lady Principal and Dean of Women were reflective of the view of women in her time. However, Gilmore's appointment as the first woman on the faculty was groundbreaking. She helped the women of Hope to achieve the education and campus experience that were not available to her as a student. In addition, Gilmore's character itself is an enduring lesson, even today. Gilmore did not depend upon her family name for her status, as would have been possible in the Holland community.

Instead, she left her home and her level of comfort to experience new horizons, and she spent the last fifty years of her life as a self-made woman, taking care of her home, family, and career. Her fortitude of character brought her through the horrible setbacks of losing her husband and three children to becoming a highly prominent Holland citizen and the Hope College Dean of Women. At the end of her time at Hope in 1909, her students were grateful for her dedication to them. They thanked her for the influence she had on their lives,

saying, “We shall never forget you and we trust that you never will forget us.” She was memorialized as having the “resoluteness, force of character and resourcefulness of the pioneer, together with clear imagination, perfect poise and the capacity for instant decision when needed, also a deeply religious and devotional nature.”

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Photographs courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College.

This project grew out of my own recognition that the Hope community could be enriched by an examination of the lives of notable persons in Hope’s history. Words like “Phelps,” “Dykstra,” and “Kollen” are in constant use around campus but often with little understanding of the people behind the names. A knowledge of the people whose names we use in everyday conversation can serve to reconnect us with our heritage, as well as acquainting us with past and present visions for Hope College. At the suggestion and encouragement of several members of the Hope community, my idea evolved into a study of the eleven residence hall “ancestors.”

This project was made possible by the generous support of both the Crossroads Project and the Office of Residential Life and Housing. Special thanks must also be extended to the Joint Archives of Holland for providing access to research materials as well as assisting in the research process. The Van Raalte Institute also provided significant logistical support, particularly Dr. Jacob E. Nyenhuis, who kindly offered an editorial critique of each booklet.

If you would like to learn more about all the individuals for whom the other ten residence halls have been named, visit www.hope.edu/student/residential/halls and click on each building. For more information about the history of Hope College, visit the Joint Archives of Holland at 9 East 10th St.

Laura Shears, August 2008