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Autobiography of missionary Mary C. Collins available on South Dakota Digital Archives

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota State Historical Society-Archives recently added the “Autobiography of Mary C. Collins in her handwriting” to the South Dakota Digital Archives collections.

Collins, remembered for her mission work with Sioux American Indians in Dakota Territory, wrote the 116-page manuscript sometime after she left the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in 1910 and before her death in 1920.

To see the handwritten autobiography, visit the State Archives website at history.sd.gov/archives and scroll down on the right to “Mary C. Collins” under “In The News” or go to “SD Digital Archives” under “Archives Main Pages” and click on “Manuscript Collection.”

Born in Upper Alton, Illinois, on April 18, 1846, Collins and her family later moved to Keokuk, Iowa. She received a master’s degree from Ripon College in Ripon, Wis., and taught school in Keokuk for three years.

In 1875, Collins began her mission work in Dakota Territory with Rev. and Mrs. Thomas L. Riggs at the Oahe Mission near Fort Sully. She was both a teacher and social worker and quickly learned the Lakota dialect of the Sioux language.

Collins’ autobiography describes her inaugural journey through Dakota Territory and the difficulties that lie ahead concerning her missionary work.

“I began to realize the isolation and the loneliness which was possible for the years to bring,” she wrote. “But ‘I had put my hand to the plow.’ The first year for the Missionary is hardest to endure, adjusting oneself to such a different environment not only of people and things but the country, climate, and even one’s own room. If one is not thoroughly consecrated to the work with firm determination to give one’s life to it ‘for better or worse’ she should never allow her name to be given to the Missionary Board.”

In December 1885, Collins began her own mission work at Little Eagle on the Standing Rock Reservation. She was quickly admired by the population of Little Eagle, earning the Sioux name “Winona” which means “princess.” Her gifts as a preacher, teacher and doctor were invaluable on the reservation. Collins was known as a friend of the Indians.

The autobiography relates Collins’ first encounter with Sitting Bull, the famous Lakota Sioux Indian chief.

“One day Sitting Bull called at my home,” she wrote. “He stopped outside the gate and called me. I paid no attention to him and after calling several times he tied his great white horse, the historic white horse, to the fence and came to the door. I had seen him but did not know him yet. He said ‘Do you know who I am?’ ‘Yes’ I said ‘You are Sitting Bull.’ ‘Then,’ said he ‘Why did you not come out when I called?’ I replied, ‘You are a man and I am a woman. If a man wishes to speak to a woman it is his place to go to her. It is not the woman’s place to go to the man.’ He at once removed his hat and said ‘Ho, I did not know.’ So ever after when he came, he removed his hat and rapped at the door.”

A volunteer with the State Archives at the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre scanned the original documents and typed the transcript, both of which are viewable and searchable on the South Dakota Digital Archives.

The family of Mary Collins donated the autobiography and other historical archival materials to the South Dakota State Historical Society a number of years ago. A transcript of the autobiography was published in the South Dakota Historical Collections, Volume 41, 1982.

Prior to her death in 1920, Collins donated much of her artifact collection to the State Historical Society, including the Great Sioux Horse Effigy that now serves as the logo of the organization.

The South Dakota Digital Archives, an online resource launched in January 2012 by the South Dakota State Archives, provides researchers digital access to unique historical records.

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The South Dakota State Historical Society is a division of the Department of Education. The State Historical Society, an Affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, is headquartered at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The center houses the society’s world-class museum, the archives, and the historic preservation, publishing and administrative/development offices. Call (605) 773-3458 or visit www.history.sd.gov for more information. The society also has an archaeology office in Rapid City; call (605) 394-1936 for more information.