

During her decades as a missionary in central South Dakota, Margaret Louisa Irvine Riggs exhibited a deep devotion to the Dakota Indians, whom she called "my people," winning their devotion in return.

Although she came to work in Dakota Territory well before non-Indian homesteaders arrived, the young woman was no stranger to the area. Known as Louisa, Irvine had been born 4 April 1859 in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Her girlhood home had been filled with books, music, and prayer. Frequently moving to be with her father, an army officer, the Irvine family stayed longest (1867-1872) at the frontier outpost of Fort Sully on the Missouri River in Dakota Territory. There she first met Thomas Lawrence Riggs, a vibrant young missionary to the Dakota Indians who impressed the adolescent Irvine with his cheerful countenance and Christian work.

After her stay in Dakota, Louisa Irvine attended schools in the East but decided to return to the frontier as a Presbyterian missionary following her education. In 1878, she took a position as a teacher and companion to Mary C. Collins at Riggs's Oahe Mission on Peoria Bottom, not far from the army post where she had lived as a child. In addition to Bible lessons, the missionaries taught reading and writing in the Dakota language and encouraged Indian self-sufficiency. Irvine quickly became fluent in Dakota under the tutelage of convert Elizabeth Winyan, who supervised the outstation on the Cheyenne River where Irvine spent her second winter. After five years at Oahe Mission, Irvine left to attend the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. In 1885, she returned to Oahe as the wife of Thomas Riggs, whose first wife, Nina Foster Riggs, had died seven years earlier.

Over the years, Louisa Irvine Riggs directed and taught at the mission boarding school, traveled east to raise funds, wrote articles for the Dakota mission newspaper the *Word Carrier*, and served as Oahe postmistress. In addition to hosting frequent mission visitors, she had four children whose care devolved entirely upon her during Thomas Riggs's long trips to various outstations.

Louisa Riggs lived at Oahe Mission until her death on 25 August 1951 at the age of ninety-two. The site of the mission and the family cemetery where she was buried now lie under the waters of Oahe Reservoir.

by Sara Hagen

Dakota Images



Margaret Louisa Irvine Riggs

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