Historical Musings

Reconstructing Alice: A Meditation on the Historian's Craft

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During the past two years, I have had the good fortune to edit the courtship letters of Alice Bower and Joseph Gossage, who conducted their premarital relationship almost entirely by letter in Dakota Territory in 1881–1882. He was the founder and publisher of the *Black Hills Journal,* now the *Rapid City Journal;* she was a typesetter for two Vermillion newspapers and did much of the work necessary to care for her seven boisterous siblings, her often ill mother, her authoritarian (at least by Alice's standards) father, and two or more boarders. After their marriage, Alice Gossage was a homemaker for two or three years but by the mid-1880s began typesetting at the *Journal* office at busy times, and, as Joe's health deteriorated late in the decade and into the 1890s, she took over the management, editing, bookkeeping, and much of the writing for the paper. In editing the letters of these two individuals for readers in the twenty-first century, I have had to reconstruct their lives, an exercise I did not undertake lightly.

Joe Gossage, a man of ambition and vision, had begun publishing a daily paper in 1886 when the telegraph first reached Rapid City. It was an unusual step to start a daily, given the size of the town, and it would be difficult to maintain the frequency during the hard times, drought, and depopulation of the 1890s. Alice, the practical one in the marriage, kept Joe's dreams alive through hard work and self-sacrifice. Although Alice's work at the *Journal* consumed most of her time, her

The author originally presented this article at the thirty-ninth annual Northern Great Plains History Conference, held 27–30 October 2004 in Bismarck, North Dakota.

commitment to church, temperance, and social service provided a virtual second career. Her care and concern for the poor or disadvantaged endeared her to the community. Her "Sunshine Room" at the *Journal* office helped supply clothing, shoes, furniture, and other necessary goods to those in need. Country girls who needed places to board in Rapid City in order to attend high school contacted Alice, who trained them in her own home before placing them in families who were happy to get domestic help in exchange for room and board. At her death in 1929, Rapid City, the Black Hills, and the immediate West River area mourned the loss of the community's "mother." A monument to her life of altruism and love still stands on Skyline Drive in Rapid City.[1]

The primary sources for the forthcoming book of Alice and Joe's correspondence, which the South Dakota Historical Society Press will publish in 2006 under the title *Sunshine Always: The Courtship Letters of Alice Bower and Joseph B. Gossage in Dakota Territory, 1881–1882*, are the courtship letters themselves; Alice's diary, which she kept, although increasingly sporadically, from 1877 to November 1883; other family letters; and Alice's short stories, one of which was published in a Yankton newspaper, the *Dakota Herald*, in 1879. Except for the short stories, which Alice, who aspired to a literary career, hoped to publish, none of these materials was written for public consumption. Although Alice wrote to her closest friend, Jane Van Meter, about her relationship with Joe and shared some of his letters with her, the letters and Alice's diary were essentially private places in which Alice could express her "true self." To work with these documents and bring them into broad circulation represents for me a sacred trust, one that creates special obligations to Alice and Joe and to the book's readers.

What do I, as historian, conceive these obligations to be? First, I must understand that Alice Gossage's world had an intrinsic meaning

1. The material in this essay about Alice Bower and Joe Gossage is based on my own research into the Bower and Gossage families for my forthcoming collection of their courtship letters and on a manuscript of several hundred pages written and compiled by Alice's nephew Maxwell Van Nuys that includes obituaries, article clippings, family memories, photographs, and other assorted documents. (Many of these items do not include dates or other citation material).

Alice Bower Gossage, pictured here during her early years in Rapid City, was devoted to her family, career, and community.

of its own, independent of our time, and that her documents are not mere texts to be deconstructed but are her expression of her individual existence in a certain place and time. Through her writings, she reaches out to me as a fellow human being and shares the joys and sorrows of life. Although her circumstances were different from those of our world, we hold in common the mysteries of our human condition.

Second, I have an obligation to recognize and strip away the accretions of the twentieth-century world and to inhabit hers, to become a nineteenth-century person, at least for awhile. This transition was not difficult for me. In 1979, a prominent historian of women had labeled me a nineteenth-century person at a small dinner party in Iowa City. She was visiting the University of Iowa campus to speak and hold

seminars on her research at that time, which centered on the alienation between mothers and daughters that she saw as a hallmark of the twentieth century. I begged to differ with her, citing my own experience and the experience of many families that I knew in the rural Midwest. My "nineteenth centuryness" was reinforced when I began work with Alice Gossage's letters and discovered the centrality of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Psalm of Life" (1838) to both Alice and Joe's philosophies of life. That poem has always been my mother's lodestone. Several times a day, she will stop her work around the house to enjoy a cup of coffee in the kitchen. After a short, almost dreamy pause from her routine, she jumps from her chair, chants "Let us, then, be up and doing,/ With a heart for any fate," lines that appear near the end of the Longfellow poem, and charges off to resume her labors.[2] To many modern ears, accustomed to cynicism and irony, the poem's earnestness and faith in human agency jangles, but it spoke truth to the striving class that Alice and Joe inhabited. And it has always spoken truth to me.

Third, I have an obligation to take *place* seriously. Real people lived in real places, and those places had some impact on their lives and choices. Some years ago, a scholar interested in writing a book about the lead-mining district of southwestern Wisconsin stopped me at a conference to ask for my help in obtaining lodging and other necessities. I enthusiastically agreed, promoted our wonderful Southwest Wisconsin room in our university library, and offered to make connections with a colleague of mine at the time who had taught at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville for thirty-five years. This colleague, I enthused, could take the scholar to the mining towns of the region, to old mines themselves, some of which are now open for tours, to the ruins of roasters, roaster piles, and all of the other remnants of a time long gone but still visible to those who look. "I am doing race, class, and gender," the historian said, "so that wouldn't interest me."

Unlike that scholar, I believe that place, and the physical world of our subjects generally, should always interest us. Alice Bower was

2. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Psalm of Life" is available in most Longfellow poetry collections as well as on Web sites, such as *Thomson Gale Litfinder*, www.litfinder.com.

born on a farm in Dane County, Wisconsin, in 1861. When she was five, her family moved into the nearby small town of Lodi, where they remained until they loaded their covered wagon and departed for Vermillion, Dakota Territory, either in late 1869 or early 1870.[3] In her journal and her letters to Joe, Alice complained about her father's inability to support his family properly and suggested that he had an aversion to work that was not up to his standards of importance. From the tax rolls of Dane County for the years that the Bower family lived in the area, I knew that John Calvin ("Cal") Bower owned seventy-seven acres of farmland and enough personal property to pay taxes on it. The records provided the legal description for Bower's land and for land owned by both sets of Alice's grandparents, so I went in search of her original home. I wanted to find out if the land was so rough that it was unfarmable, or if the location was so poor that access to trading towns was difficult. Alice's Bower grandfather had arrived with his family a few years before Wisconsin's statehood and had had his choice of lands, but the needs of a family in the 1840s were different than those of the 1860s, and perhaps his choices had not stood the test of time.[4]

Visiting a site cannot "prove" anything, of course, but it can fire the imagination and help clarify ideas. What my visit to the Dane Township, Dane County, lands of Alice's parents and grandparents confirmed for me was that the Bower family's urge to move to Lodi and then to migrate to Vermillion had not been the fault of the land. Cal Bower had owned a gently undulating sweep of land on the southern lap of a large hill, which would have sheltered the farmyard from harsh winter winds. Wood and water were close by, even today, and

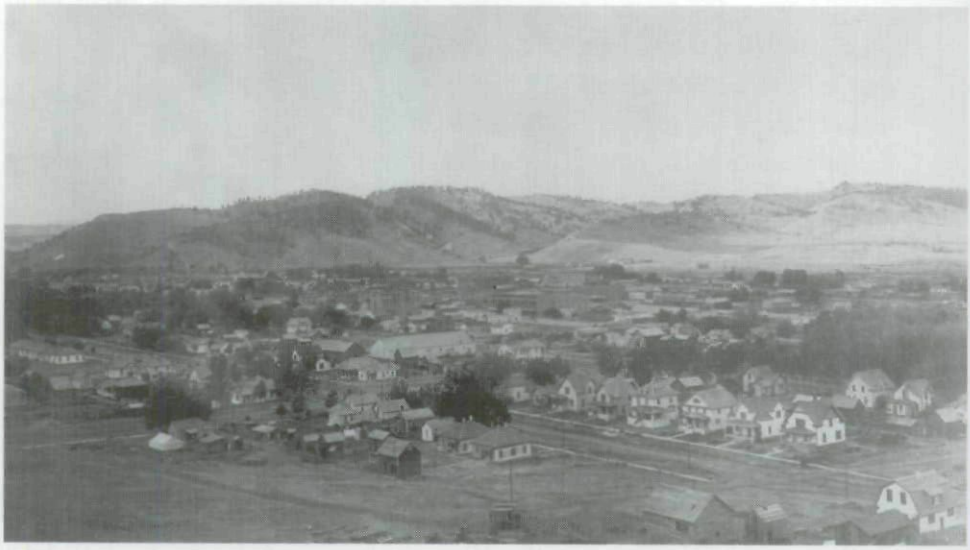
3. The sources disagree, and the family was in Vermillion when the 1870 census was taken on 14 June 1870. Jane Van Meter Waldron, who was Alice's closest friend, wrote that the Bower family moved to Vermillion in 1869. Her writings are included in the Maxwell Van Nuys manuscript. Laura Bower Van Nuys, in her autobiography, *The Family Band: From the Missouri to the Black Hills, 1881–1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. xviii, gives 27 April 1870 as the date the family departed from Wisconsin. National Archives Microfilm Publication T9, Reel 111, records the Bower family's residence in Vermillion. U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States*, 1880, Schedule no. 1, Population (for Clay County, Dakota Territory).

4. Assessment Roles, Dane Township, Dane County, Wis., Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison. The earliest available records begin in 1854; I looked at all records for the township from 1854 to 1865, microfilm reel numbers 16, 19, 22, 25, 29, 32, 36.

the scenery is commanding, with the rougher lands nearer the Wisconsin River to the north and west and gentler hills and dales to the east and south. The farm is still in cultivation, as are the farms of both sets of Alice's grandparents. The town of Lodi is strikingly located in the hilly lands of the river valley and still lives up to an 1870 comparison of it to a New England village. Lodi had no railroad while the Bowers resided in the area, however, and struggled for years to attract one. A contemporary observer noted in 1870, "For several years past, Lodi seemed to lose ground instead of gaining ground."[5] Perhaps, the Bowers had not waited for the region's fortunes to turn and left for Dakota Territory. The Bower grandparents followed within four years, and the Huntington grandparents also left the area, although they chose Iowa for their new home.

I have tried to remain connected to Alice Gossage's physical world in other ways, as well. The Rapid City weather forecast is still the first thing that pops up on my laptop computer at home when I turn it on. I continue to read the *Rapid City Journal* online, as if the title and the processes of newspapering can tie me to her and her work, even though the technology and the times are so different. And every day I click on the link to the KOTA television station's web cam view of the Black Hills. The Alex Johnson Hotel to the left of the camera view is located close to the lot where Alice and Joe's home for forty-five years stood. The view of the Hills that KOTA records is much the same view that Alice saw as she walked or rode about the town. I have studied photographs of Rapid City, its streets and buildings, with a magnifying glass, trying in a feeble way to see it as she did. In my mind's eye, I have brought those photographs to life, animating the people, horses, vehicles, and pets frozen onto the paper, allowing them to resume the action that engaged them before the camera's eye caught the moment for posterity. Alice's home places provided the great stage upon which she lived her life, and in some circumstances, especially the drought and depression years of the 1890s, her locale shaped her experiences in critical ways. Thus, I believe that I am obligated to study her places well.

5. *Lodi Journal*, 24 Nov. 1870.



This 1908 view of downtown Rapid City shows the area in which the Gossages lived and worked.

Next, I have an obligation to allow Alice and her world the same complexities, subtleties, and inconsistencies that we allow ourselves and our times. We live in a world where scholars, unfortunately, too often substitute labels, categories, and harsh judgments for true, complex evaluations of their subjects. It would be easy to label Alice and, therefore, to misunderstand her life and significance. What could we call her? She was an evangelical, certainly, and in some quarters today that automatically consigns her to the ranks of the narrow minded and intellectually stunted. She was an ardent worker for temperance, and we might therefore assume that her primary interest was conformity and social control. A Victorian woman with middle-class values, Alice was a dutiful daughter and loving wife, who we might assume was thus repressed and limited. But who was Alice really? Was she a narrow-minded and intellectually-stunted conformist with a need to rein in people's exuberant freedom, a woman repressed and limited by her values and her family obligations? No, she was none of those things.

Alice Bower Gossage was an active, committed Congregationalist, who united with the church at age eleven in an era when church membership required testimony of a religious-conversion experience. In Vermillion, she played the organ for the church, led the children's group called the Ready Hands, and taught Sunday School. In Rapid City, she taught Sunday School for forty years and entertained the church women's group at her home, along with other social groups, although she often had to leave the gathering midway through to return to the newspaper office to work. She prayed frequently for strength and inner peace, commended those she loved to God's hands, and felt the living presence of the Lord in all aspects of her life. Yet, she read "the Great Agnostic" Robert Ingersoll's writings, told Joe that she was by no means orthodox in her religious views, and questioned God's plan for the world, given the sorrow and sufferings of most of humankind. After her best friend Jane Van Meter, a mixed-blood girl who spoke her mother's Dakota tongue fluently, moved away from Vermillion, Sarah McIlvaney, a Catholic, became her closest friend and stood up for Alice at her wedding to Joe in June 1882. She attended church with Sarah and was greatly impressed with the Catholic service. Alice was never a religious ideologue. Joe, who was raised a "shouting Methodist," was not a church member at all, but named the Odd Fellows creed, "Friendship, Love and Truth," as his religion. He was proud of his wife's church membership, however, and professed that attending services and associating with active Christians elevated the tone of his life.

Alice Gossage was deeply committed to temperance, as were her parents, but to say that her goals were to inhibit individual freedom or to convert happy unreconstructed drinkers to rigid bourgeois forms of morality is to misunderstand the dynamics of her times. Temperance advocates certainly did value order over disorder, but they lived in a world where order was not easy to maintain. Commitment to the ideal of private property made it difficult for government at any level to limit hours of taverns or restrict the ages of those who could buy liquor. Informal policing in most communities made the management of those who became drunk and disorderly sporadic and ineffectual. While there were many who managed their own liquor con-

sumption without lapsing into excess, indulgence in her times too often brought personal ruin.[6] The story of Alice's own minister in Vermillion provided a cautionary tale. The minister's little daughter had fallen into the cistern and drowned. Reverend Walker's grief was so intense he turned to the bottle and lost control of himself for some weeks. While under the influence, he visited the bordello district in Yankton. His public fall from grace was so drastic and scandalous that his church fired him from his pastorate. His loyal wife stood by him, but he could not get another church, and they had almost nothing to live on. Alice maintained her friendship with Mrs. Walker, although she wrote Joe that she did not know if she could remain as loyal to a fallen husband as Mrs. Walker had and worried that the family would never again find a church.

Alice, who had been engaged twice before she married Joe, had other direct experiences with men and liquor. Her first fiancé was a dashing writer and lawyer from Yankton who took the pledge and swore to her that he no longer drank, but he lied. (He also lied to her about his marital status: he had a wife in the East, although he claimed to be unmarried). When a relative of Alice's saw him passing a flask to friends on the streets of Fort Pierre, Alice ended the engagement, although it broke her heart to do so. The man died a suicide in 1904 after many years of total alcoholic dissolution. Her second fiancé, physician John Parson, spent time in the penitentiary for a crime committed while drinking. He told her of his troubled past early in their courtship, and she faithfully recorded it in her journal, promising to write more of the details later, although she never did.[7]

The world of the late nineteenth century was not only a place of light-hearted male camaraderie, with men tossing down whiskey in well-appointed bars, but a world of drunks lying in the streets at all

6. For more on the world of the 1880s and women's reactions to it, *see* Ellen Carol DuBois, *Woman Suffrage and Women's Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

7. According to the *Canton* (Dakota Territory) *Advocate*, 22, 24 Apr. 1879, John Parson was arrested for his attempt to rob a mail stage near Stewart in Turner County, Dakota Territory. He pled guilty, and the judge sentenced him to two years in a federal penitentiary and levied a one-thousand-dollar fine. A United States marshal and a deputy took the doctor to the Detroit penitentiary in May.

Joe Gossage, shown here in his later years, depended on his wife to manage their newspaper business and supported her causes.

times of the day or night, creating a world of humiliated, dependent wives and hungry children with little hope for the future and unsure of their next meal. In another Dakota Territory town, Canton, it became impossible for women and children to get to the post office for the mail because men from the bar blocked the sidewalks and harassed passersby.[8] Alice loathed the degradation that so many

8. William Allen White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1946), p. 33, recalls a drunk lying in the main street at midday in Eldorado, Kansas, in the early 1870s. The *Sioux Valley News* of Canton reported, on 10 April 1885, a drunk asleep in a packing box early one morning. The post-office problem appears in the issue of 13 January 1882.

drinkers and their dependents suffered. Joe Gossage shared her ideals. His younger brother, Alvin, had gone through a period of heavy drinking that nearly wrecked his life. As a result, Joe never drank, although he employed men who did. Alice worked with drinkers throughout her career in newspapers and, in her role as chief social welfare agent for Rapid City, assisted many of them and their families. She forgave the individual sinner while working vigorously against the agent of his fall. Although Alice was the editor for many years of the statewide Woman's Christian Temperance Union publication, *The White Ribbon*, "she was not a radical," at least according to a long-time employee who had had his own struggles with alcohol in the early years at the *Rapid City Journal*.[9]

Alice Gossage was a Victorian with middle-class values who strove mightily to achieve a middle-class economic status to match. What does it mean to be Victorian? Alice held values of hard work, thrift, upward mobility, self-control, self-denial, order, progress, modesty, domesticity and the importance of home, good manners, and the power of romantic love. She also understood, as Victorians did, the difference between the private self and the public self. In her world, middle-class people recognized that certain behaviors, certain subjects of discussion, certain functions, and certain hard truths about human existence were kept behind closed doors. One's public face was composed, mannerly, positive, and carefully controlled. In our world, a public/private distinction of this sort is often labeled hypocrisy, but it served an important function. When people "put their best foot forward," as the saying goes, they created a much more civil public life. The veil of privacy that shielded the home allowed a diversity of behaviors and personalities to flourish there, away from the eyes of the community. In Alice and Joe Gossage's life, the key example is their decision not to have children.

Alice had learned early that childbearing and childrearing were all-consuming tasks. Her parents took her out of school frequently to help care for their growing brood. She left school for good after eighth grade to help earn money for the family, but she had to leave a type-

9. Quoted in Alice Gossage obituary, clipping included in Maxwell Van Nuys compilation.

setting job in Parker to care for her mother after the birth of her eighth and final child in 1880. Alice recognized that her mother's poor health came from repeated childbearing and resented her parents for their inability to control their behavior when there was so little money to support the children already born. Alice loved Joe and was glad to accept his proposal of marriage but was absolutely overjoyed when, three days after their engagement, he told her that he did not want to have children. Alice loved her siblings and took a special interest in small children generally, but she wanted none of her own. Yet, the public believed that she and Joe had wanted children but had never been blessed with any. She did not correct them, which some today might say was dishonest, but it allowed her to function happily in the social world of Rapid City, where marriage with children was the common pattern, while living her life as she chose.

In many other ways, Alice upheld convention while breaking convention. Her regular columns in the *Rapid City Journal* often had such domestic-sounding titles as "Hanging Curtains" and were signed "A.G." Her name never appeared on the masthead of the paper, al-

Alice and Joe Gossage operated the *Rapid City Journal* from this modest office from 1886 to 1924.

though the operation was in effect hers from the mid-1890s until the Gossages sold it in 1924. Officially, however, it was Joe's work. Alice kept a boarder or two at home to justify having hired help and to pay the worker's salary. She joined and even led several women's organizations in Rapid City and took women's roles, both inside the home and out, very seriously. She never cut her hair, wore make-up, or shortened her skirts to meet the styles of the 1920s. But Alice Gossage was a woman ahead of her time in so many other ways and truly flourished in the world of newspaper work.[10]

As historians, we have to generalize and describe. We cannot examine in detail every individual involved in every subject that we study. We can, however, remember as we work that nothing and no one is ever simple. At the 2003 Northern Great Plains History Conference, I participated in a panel on women in the historical profession, during which I described my devotion to mottoes. I collect them as examples of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century domestic arts, and I absorb their lessons as keys to the meaning of life. For me, the most important of those mottoes, for my daily life and for my professional life, is the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." It reminds me of my subjects' essential humanity and of my obligation to approach them with humility and respect.

10. Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 3, 10, 17–18, 20–21, 125–26, emphasizes the importance of the public/private distinction in Victorian life. She also explores the ways in which Victorians solved issues of gender roles by paying lip service to convention while negotiating alternative patterns of behavior, a process she refers to as "reframing" (pp. 121–56).

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