



The Beginning of The Salvation Army

Florence Booth

Florence Eleanor Soper was born in the mining town of Blaina in the South Wales valleys in September 1861, the eldest daughter of an English doctor and his wife. Her mother died when she was only nine years old, and she went to live with two aunts until her father's remarriage. She was a gifted girl and harboured an ambition to follow her father into medicine. Much of her childhood was spent roaming the mountains around Blaina, riding ponies and skating.

Florence had passed her last school examination and was visiting her aunts in London when she was converted at a Salvation Army meeting. She made a decision to follow Christ and to learn more about The Salvation Army, but neither her aunts nor her father were too pleased that she had taken up with the relatively unknown movement, associating with converted drunkards and others who had led a life of vice. They felt that it was just not respectable.

She became friendly with the Booth family including their son Bramwell, and after making the decision to become an officer in The Salvation Army she went with the Booths' eldest daughter Catherine to begin the Army's work in France. It was at this time that Bramwell asked her to marry him, but her father was against the marriage.

Finally, shortly after her 21st birthday, Captain Florence Soper married Chief of the Staff Commissioner Bramwell Booth at Clapton Congress Hall. A congregation of 6,000 were charged a shilling each to attend, the money being used to purchase the notorious Eagle Tavern public house and the neighbouring Grecian Theatre on City Road, later to be used as a Salvation Army hall. The wedding ceremony was performed by General William Booth.

Poverty and hardship were rife in the East End of London; jobs were scarce, and many women turned to prostitution as a way of surviving. Girls as young as 12 were selling themselves or being sold for money. In 1881, Mrs Elizabeth Cottrill, a Salvationist at Whitechapel Corps, opened her home in Christian Street to young women who had been working as prostitutes. The women were coming to meetings and finding salvation but then had nowhere to live but the brothel. This marked the unofficial beginning of The Salvation Army's rescue work.



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Three years later the Women's Social Work (WSW) of The Salvation Army started, with a small house in Hanbury Street, Whitechapel. The Founder said, 'Flo had better go down and see what she can do in her spare time. Let her superintend.' This was just two days before her first child turned one, and by the time she relinquished leadership of the WSW in 1912, this 'spare time' ministry of a single rescue home had expanded to more than 40 social work centres of varying types, spread across the country.

Florence continued to lead this pioneering aspect of The Salvation Army's work for the next 28 years. When William Booth died and Bramwell became General, Florence as Mrs General Booth had to move on to other duties. Florence and Bramwell were married for 47 years and had seven children. When she died in 1957, Florence was buried alongside Bramwell at Abney Park Cemetery in Stoke Newington.

Text provided by the International Heritage Centre

Discussion Questions

- Why were Florence's family concerned about her joining The Salvation Army?
- Why do you think Florence wanted to become a Salvation Army Officer?
- Why do you think Florence gave up her spare time to help young girls in the East End of London?
- What questions would you like to ask Florence Booth if she was alive today?