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Monograph from Stephen Return Riggs book, *Mary and I: Forty Years with the Sioux*, page 345-60.

MRS. NINA FOSTER RIGGS.

CORNELIA MARGARET, daughter of Hon. John B. Foster and Catharine McGaw Foster, was born in Bangor, Me., March 19, 1848. Very soon after she left us, on August 5, 1878, there appeared appreciative testimonials of her life and character in the *Advance*, in the *Iapi Oaye*, and in *Life and Light*. In preparing this monograph, the writer will make free use of all these materials.

Rev. R. B. Howard, while in the Theological Seminary at Bangor, knew her as Nina Foster, "a golden-haired, fair-cheeked, gracefully formed little Sabbath-school scholar of ten, at the Central Church. Her quick, laughing eye, her sensitive face reflecting every changing thought, her constant companionship of an only sister a little taller, her ready answers to all Sabbath-school questions, her intelligent appreciation of the sermons, and her sunshiny presence at school and at home, were among the impressions which her childhood gave.

"She lacked no means of cultivating the rare powers of mind which she early developed. Many things she seemed to learn intuitively. Her scholarship was bright, quick, accurate. Literature was her delight. Her mother's father, Judge McGaw, whose white locks and venerable presence then honored Bangor, was an interested and judicious guide in the home reading.

"In social life few shone more brilliantly, or were more admired and sought after. In those days, the beauty of person of the young lady was of a rare and noticeable type. Her conversational powers were fascinating. She had by nature genuine histrionic talent, and in conversation, reading, or reciting seemed to be completely the person she sought to represent. On one occasion, by a slight change of dress, voice, and manner, she appeared as an aged widow, pleading with a high officer of the government at Washington, to help her find her son, lost in the troublous times of the war."

The "only sister, a little taller," Mrs. Katie Foster Howard, thus testifies of Nina's early life:—

"When a little child, from eight to twelve years old, she and some of her companions formed 'a praying circle,' and had a little room in one of their homes which they called The House of Prayer. They met often in this room, and delighted to decorate it after their childish fashion.

"Another favorite occupation was the teaching of some poor children whom she and one or two friends brought out of their dreary homes to the church vestibule, and there taught to sew and read.

"When eleven years old she was examined by the pastor and church officers for admission to the church; they asked her how long she had loved Jesus, and she answered, 'Oh, a great many years.'"

Mrs. Howard speaks of her sister as “the little girl in the Eastern home, whose *spirituelle* face, with its halo of golden hair, seemed so much more of heaven than of earth as to cause the frequent, anxious comment that this world could not long detain her. An active, happy child among her playmates, her thoughts were often upon heavenly things, and her desire was to turn theirs thitherward, yet without anything morbid or unchildlike in her ways.

“As she grew to womanhood, she was the delight of the home which so tenderly shielded her from every rude blast, and of a large circle of attached friends. She possessed those charms of person and manners and qualities of mind which won admiration, and peculiarly fitted her to enjoy and adorn society. So when the time came for her to change this for a secluded life, many regretted that the fine gold should be sent where baser metal, as they thought, would do as well; that the noble woman, so eminently fitted for usefulness in circles of refinement, should spend her life among the degraded and unappreciative savages. But the event has proved that only such a nature, abounding in resources, could be the animating spirit of a model home in the wilderness; which should be an object-lesson of Christian culture not only to the Indian but to the army people, who were her only white neighbors, and who for her sake could look with interest on a work too often an object of contempt. And thus the reflex influence upon those who missed her from their number, or met her as she journeyed to her field of labor, has been in proportion to the grace of her refinement and the depth and breadth of her character. God, who spared not his own Son, still gives his choicest ones to the salvation of men.”

While on a visit to Chicago, in the family of her sister, she first became acquainted with Thomas L. Riggs, then a student in the theological seminary. Their mutual love soon compelled her to consider what it would be to share in his life-work. She recognized its hardships and deprivations as could hardly have been expected in one so inexperienced in life's trials. She afterward often playfully said she was “not a missionary, only a missionary's wife.” But it was a double consecration, joyous and entire, to the life of wife and missionary.

Thomas and Nina were married at her home in Bangor, December 26, 1872. It is said, “Christian people, and even Christian ministers, were inclined to say, ‘Why this waste?’” Some did say it. Some spoke in bitter and almost angry condemnation of her course. That this beautiful and accomplished girl, eminently fitted to adorn any society, should devote herself to a missionary life, occasioned much comment in the social circle in which she had been prominent. What could she do for the coarse, degraded Indian women, that might not be better done by a less refined, sensitive, and elevated nature? Why shut up her beauty and talents in the log cabin of an Indian missionary? It was a shock to some who had preached self-sacrifice, and a painful surprise to many who had been praying the Lord of the harvest to send laborers. But none of these things moved her. There has seldom been a sweeter and more lovely bride. The parents too made the consecration, while they wrestled in spirit. The father writes: “I gave her up when she left us on that winter's night. It was a hard struggle, but I think I gave her unconditionally to God, to whom she so cheerfully gave herself.”

At this season of the year, it was not possible for Nina to accompany her husband to Fort Sully, and so he left her at Gen. C. H. Howard's, near Chicago, to come on in the early spring. This was my first opportunity of becoming acquainted with “Mitakosh Washta,” as I soon learned to call her. General Howard accompanied her to Sioux City, and then I became her escort by railroad and stage to Santee agency, and thence by steamboat to Sully. The boat was nearly two weeks on the way, and we took on two companies of United States troops at Fort Randall. The officers soon manifested a marked admiration for the beauty and culture of the Bangor lady; so

that afterward, in alluding to this little episode, I used playfully to say to Nina that I was rejoiced when Thomas, coming down the Missouri in his skiff, met us and took charge of his bride.

We had but a few weeks to spend at Fort Sully, until we should start down to the meeting of our annual Conference, which was held in June that year, at the Yankton agency. But those weeks were full of pleasure to Nina. Everything was new and strange. She was devoid of fear when she sat in the iron skiff, and crossed the Big Muddy with her husband at the helm. The time came to go down. It was nearly noon on Monday when we were ready to start; but, by hard driving, we were able to reach Rev. John P. Williamson's—more than 200 miles—by the afternoon of Thursday. Secretary S. J. Humphrey, from Chicago, was there, and afterward wrote that for T. L. Riggs and the father, who were accustomed to hard traveling and sleeping on the ground, it was nothing very strange; but for one reared as Nina had been, it was simply wonderful.

This was the first meeting of Martha Riggs Morris with her new sister. When the latter had gone beyond our ken, Martha wrote an appreciative article for the *Word Carrier*: "Let me give something," she wrote, "of the little glimpses I have had of her brave, cheery life. I may first go back to the time when we first heard of Nina Foster—who thought enough of T. L. Riggs and the Indian work to help him in it. That was in the spring-time. A few months later, Thomas had a hard ride across from Fort Sully to Sisseton on horseback, accompanied by a soldier for guard and an Indian for guide. He came to attend the annual Conference of the Dakota churches, and he showed us a picture of the young lady herself. A beautiful face, we all thought it was. And from what we heard of Nina Foster, we were all prepared to take her into our hearts, as we did when we saw her afterward.

"It was in June of the year following that I had my first glimpse of her. I had myself taken a tedious journey of some three hundred miles, and the years as well as the journey had worn upon me. So I felt some trepidation about meeting the blooming bride. But, on seeing her, that soon vanished, and I had nothing left but admiration for the beautiful sister. She told so merrily how they had strapped her in, to keep her from falling out of the wagon, and other incidents of her unaccustomed journey. There was an evident determination to make the best of every experience."

A little while after this Mrs. Morris was called to lay away her blue-eyed boy out of sight. Then Nina's letter was very comforting. "I have wept," she says, "with you for the dear little baby form laid away from your arms to its last sleep; and I think of your words, 'Nothing to do any more.' Ah! my dear sister, He will not so leave you comfortless. He who forgot not, in the last hours of his earthly life, to give to the aching mother-heart a new care and love, will not forget, I think, to bestow on your emptied hands some new duty which shall grow to be a joy."

At the meeting of the American Board at Minneapolis in the autumn of 1873, Mrs. Nina Riggs was present, and addressed the ladies of the Woman's Board, asking for a young lady companion in her far-off field. To this call Miss Lizzie Bishop of Northfield responded, and gave the remainder of her bright, true life to help on the work at Fort Sully. Nina visited her sister in Chicago, and charmed them all by reciting her strange experiences of the summer. "Her buoyant spirits and faculty for seeing the droll side of everything helped to make the sketch a bright one. Her sense of humor and keen wit has lightened many a load for herself and others; the more forlorn and hopeless the situation, the more elastic her spirits. How often have those of her own household, wearied with severe labor and weighed down with care, been compelled to laugh, almost against their will, by her irresistible drollery, and thus the current of thought was turned and the burden half thrown aside."

In the summer of 1874 baby Theodore was born, and none from Fort Sully came to our annual meeting. On my way from a visit to Fort Berthold, down the Missouri River, I stopped off for a few days. They were then occupying Hope Station, across the river from the fort. Both Miss Bishop and Mrs. Nina Riggs I found very enthusiastic over their work for the Teeton women.

When another year had been completed, Lizzie Bishop had gone home to die, and Nina Riggs made a visit to her friends in the East. The Board met in Chicago that autumn, and Mrs. Riggs again addressed the ladies. "Two years ago," she said, "at a meeting in Minneapolis, I made a request which was promptly answered. I asked for a young lady to go back with me to the mission work. I find her name is not on the rolls. But if ever a brave life should be recorded, and the name of an earnest woman be loved and remembered by all, it is that of Miss Lizzie Bishop of Northfield, Minn. We had hoped that she might return, but the Lord has not seen fit to allow that. He calls her to himself soon. For the past two years I have been at different stations. I was at Hope Station, on the west side of the Missouri. Now I am at Bogue Station, fifteen miles below Fort Sully, on the east side. Since I have been there, I have met a great many women. At first they all seemed to me very degraded; but I have come not only to feel interested in many of them, but to love some of them with a very deep love." So spake Nina; and when she sat down, a telegram was read that the good and brave Lizzie Bishop had already entered in through the gates of pearl, into "Jerusalem the golden."

Two others, Miss Mary C. Collins and Miss Emmaretta Whipple, were ready to start back with Mrs. Riggs. So the vacant place was more than filled, and they all girded themselves for a hard winter's work.

A little before this time, Nina sent to the *Word Carrier* a short bit of poetry, which seems to embody her own wrestling with doubt in others. The last stanza reads:—

"With daring heart, I too have tried
To know the height and depth of God above;
And can I wonder that I too walked blind,
And felt stern Justice in the place of Love?
Above the child, the sun shines on;
Above me too One reigns I cannot see;
Yet all around I feel both warmth and power;
If God is not, whence can their coming be?"

In September, 1876, the great gathering of the Dakota mission was held in the new Ascension church, on the Sisseton reservation. Mrs. Morris writes: "We looked out eagerly for the travelers from Fort Sully way. We hoped they would come a few days beforehand, so that we might have more of their companionship. But they did not come. And as we had to be on hand in the Ascension neighborhood, ten miles away, to entertain the missionaries that might come, we shut up our house, and went on without the Fort Sully friends. It was Friday noon when they arrived, and received a glad welcome from all."

Thomas and Nina and their little lad Theodore, now two years old, who amused every one with his quaint sayings, together with Miss Collins and Miss Whipple, with all their personal and camping baggage, had been packed for eight days into a small two-horse buggy. The journey of 250 miles, the way they traveled, over a country uninhabited, was not without its romance. "Not the least of the enjoyment of this 'feast of days,' were the bits of talk sandwiched in here and there between meetings, and caring for the children and providing for the guests. As we baked the bread and watched over the two cousins, Theodore and Mary Theodora, so nearly of an age, we had

many a pleasant chat—Nina and I. She gave me an insight into their happy home-life, and I longed to know more. She told, too, of her special work in visiting the homes of the Teetons, and prescribing for the sick. At the special meeting held for the women, Nina made a few remarks, winning all hearts by her grace of manners, as well as by her lovely face. Now that she is gone, the Dakota women speak of her as ‘the beautiful woman who spoke so well.’”

“To all who come I wish my home to seem a pleasant home,” is a remark which Miss Collins accredits to Nina. So indeed we found it in the months of August and September of 1877. The dear Miss Whipple had just stepped into the boat at Chicago which carried her to the farther shore. Miss Collins was mourning over her departed comrade while making out the visit to her friends. By appointment I met on the way, Gen. Charles H. Howard of the *Advance*, who, with his family, was bound for Fort Sully. We were prospered in our journey up the Missouri, and gladly welcomed into the mission home on Peoria bottom. The two sisters met and passed some happy weeks in the home of the younger one. Mrs. Howard thus describes that home in those August days: “Its treeless waste lay under a scorching sun. Beneath a bluff which overlooks the river lowlands, nestled a solitary green enclosure around a long, low dwelling, whose aspect was of comfort and of home. The sunshine which withered the surrounding country was not the gentle power under which had sprung up this oasis in the desert. The light within the house, whose sweet radiance beautified the humble dwelling, and shone forth upon the wilderness around, was the fair soul, whose heaven-reflected glory touched all who came within its ray.”

To the same effect is Miss Collins’ testimony: “I think no one ever entered her home without feeling that the very house was purified by her presence. I remember well just how she studied our different tastes. She knew every member of the family thoroughly; and our happiness was consulted in all things.” So we all thought. Nina presided in her own home, albeit that home was in Dakota land, with a queenly grace.

About the middle of that September our annual Conference met in their new and not yet finished chapel, on Peoria bottom. Miss Collins did not get back until the close of the meeting. Besides her guests, Mrs. Nina Riggs had a good deal of company from Fort Sully and the agency. But it was all entertained with the same quiet dignity. Of this visit to her sister, Mrs. Howard wrote afterward: “I do not know how to be grateful enough that we spent last summer (1877) together; it is a season of blessed memory.”

To this I add: I too have one last picture of Nina in my memory. I was to return to Sisseton with the Indians who had come over to our annual Conference. They went up on Monday to Cheyenne agency to get rations for the journey. On Tuesday afternoon Thomas arranged to take me out fifteen miles to meet them. Thinking they would go out and return that evening a party was made up. The two sisters, Mrs. Howard and Nina, and little Theodore and Thomas and myself in a buggy, and Gen. C. H. Howard and “Mack” on ponies, we had a pleasant ride out. But it was too late for them to return. The Dakota friends gave us of their fresh meat, and with the provisions Nina had bountifully supplied for my journey, we all made a good supper and breakfast, and had an abundance left. The next morning we separated. That was my last sight of Nina.

In midsummer of 1878, the time for her departure came. She seemed to have a premonition of its coming. Miss Collins writes: “The last summer of her precious life seemed a very fitting one for the last. She labored earnestly for the conversion of her boy, and said: ‘If I should die and leave my boy, I should feel so much better satisfied to go if he had that stronghold.’”

In the *Word Carrier* for September appeared this notice: “Our beloved Nina Foster Riggs, wife of Rev. T. L. Riggs of Bogue Station, near Fort Sully, has heard the Master’s call, and gone

up higher. She was taken away in child-birth, on the 5th of August. Hers was a beautiful life, blossoming out into what we supposed would be a grand fruitage of blessing to the Dakotas. It is cut off suddenly! 'Even so, Father, for so it seemeth good in thy sight.' *We are dumb, because thou didst it!*"

Two days after her death, Thomas wrote: "Dear Father—Mitakosh Washta has been taken from us. My good Nina has gone. She was taken sick Saturday night. Before the light of the Sabbath, violent convulsions had set in. We got the post surgeon and Mrs. Crocker here as soon as possible; but, though every effort was made, the spasms could not be prevented, and our dear one sank gradually out of reach. Early Monday morning, after child-birth, the mother seemed to brighten a bit; but soon our gladness was turned to sadness, for she did not rally. God took her. She was his. We buried the body—the beautiful house of the more beautiful spirit—in the yard near her window, yesterday. May God help us."

Only a few days before, a kind Providence had guided Arther H. Day, a cousin of Nina's, from his work in the office of the *Advance*, in Chicago, and Robert B. Riggs from his teaching in Beloit College, up to Peoria bottom, for a little rest. And so they were there to help and give sympathy. Of this event Mr. Day wrote: "Rarely is it the lot of one so blessed with loving relatives and friends to pass away surrounded by so few to sympathize, and to be buried with so few to weep. Three relatives and nine other white friends stood alone by her grave, and the many hundreds in the far East knew not of the scene. I say *white* friends, because I would not ignore the presence of those many dusky faces which looked on in sorrow, because *their friend* was dead.

"About noon on Tuesday, August 6, the funeral service was conducted by Chaplain Crocker. The same hymn was sung that, by Nina's own choice, had been sung at her wedding:—

"Guide me, O thou great Jehovah."

One room of the house was filled with Indians, and the service was partly in the native language. Her grave was made near the window of her room, where she so often had beheld the sunset; and as kindly hands laid her body there, surrounded by beautiful flowers, the chaplain said: 'Never was more precious dust laid in Dakota soil—never more hopeful seed planted for a spiritual harvest among the Dakota people.'"

This beautiful summing-up of her character appeared as an editorial in the *Advance*, by Rev. Simeon Gilbert:—

"Here was a young woman of extraordinary beauty of person, of still more noticeable symmetry and completeness of mental endowment, sweetness and nobility of disposition, brightness and elasticity of temperament; quickly, keenly sympathetic with others' joys and sorrows—but who had never known a grief of her own; converted in infancy, reared in one of the happiest of earnest Christian homes, and favored with as fine social and educational advantages as the country affords; with too much sense to be affected by mere 'romance,' yet deeply alive to all the poetry alike in literature and in real life; and withal, from early childhood, with a spiritual imagination exquisitely alive to the realness and the nearness of unseen things, and the all-controlling sweep of the motives springing therefrom;—rarely does one meet a young person better fitted at once to enjoy and to adorn what is best in American Christian homes. At the age of twenty-four she marries a young man just out of the seminary, and goes forth with him beyond the frontiers of civilization, into the very heart of savage Indian tribes. What a sacrifice; what a venture; what certain-coming solitudes, perils, cares, deprivations, hardships, loneliness, and mountainous discouragements! And there for the short period of less than five years she lives, when suddenly

the young missionary is left alone, longing for the ‘touch of a vanished hand and the sound of a voice that is still.’

“Now, a case like this must set one to studying over again what, after all, is the true philosophy of life, and what, on the whole, is the wisest economy of personal forces in the church’s work of Christianizing the world. As helping to a right answer, let us note a few facts:—

“1. It costs to save a lost world; and nothing is wasted that serves well that end. God himself has given for this purpose the choicest, the highest, and the best which it was possible for even him to give.

“2. Heathen people, even savages, as we call them, are not insensible to the unique fascination, and power to subdue and inspire, which belong to what is really most beautiful in aspect, manner, mind, and character. Often it is to them as if they had seen a vision, or dreamed a startling dream of possibilities of which they had known nothing, and could have known nothing, until they *saw* it, and the sight awakened into being and action the diviner elements of their own hidden nature. The Word of God is one form of revelation, but the work of God in a peculiarly complete and lovely character is another revelation, and one that unmistakably interprets itself. There is as much need of the one as there is of the other. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ must, in most cases at least, first be seen reflected ‘in the face’ of some of his disciples. The more dense the darkness, the more intense must be the shining of the love and the beauty of the truth which are to enlighten, captivate, lead forth, and refine. Among all the teepees and huts of that Indian reservation, as also throughout the barracks and quarters of the military post at Fort Sully, Mrs. Riggs was known, and the potent charm of her personal influence and home-life was deeply felt. It is largely due to such persons that the cause of missions, even among the most degraded, commands the respect, if not the veneration, of those who otherwise might have looked on derisively.

“3. Nor, again, are the lives of such persons wasted as regards their influence upon those who knew them, or shall come to know of them; at home. ‘How far that little candle throws its beams; so shines a good example’; and in instances like these it shines more effectively than, perhaps, in any other circumstances would have been possible. If one were to mention a score of American women who have exerted most influence in determining the best characteristics of American women, half of them, we suspect, would be names of the women who, leaving home and country, went far forth seeking to multiply similar homes in other countries.

“4. Nor, again, is the strangely beautiful life wasted because cut short so early in its course. The ointment most precious was never more so than when its box was broken and the odor of it filled all the house. This that this young missionary has done, animated by the love of the Master and a sacred passion for lifting up the lowly, will be spoken of as a memorial of her in all the churches; and in not a few homes, of the rich as of the poor, will be felt the sweet constraint of her beautiful, joyous, consecrated life. She was not alone; there are many more like her; and, best of all, there are to be vastly more yet, who will not be deaf to ‘the high calling.’ The Master has need of them. The way, on the whole, is infinitely attractive. Thanks for the life of this woman who did so much, from first to last, to make it appear so!

“And thanks too for such a death, which, coming in the sweetest and completest blooming of life’s beauty, when not a fault had stayed to mar it, and no wasting had ever touched it—an ending which transfigures all that came before it, and which now, in the mingling of retrospect and prospect, helps those who knew her to a deeply surprised sense of the fact that,

‘To Death it is given,

To see how this world is embosomed in heaven.””

To us, who are blind and cannot see afar off, it is impossible to perceive, and difficult to believe, that the taking away in the vigor of womanhood of one who was showing such a capacity and adaptability for the work of elevating the Teetons can be made to subserve the furtherance of the cause of Christ. But we must believe that God, who sees the end from the beginning, and who makes no mistakes, will bring out of this sore bereavement a harvest of joy; and that that grave under the window of the mission house in Peoria bottom will be a testimony to the love of Jesus and the power of his Gospel, that will thrill and uplift many hearts from Bangor to Fort Sully. It was a beautiful life of faith and service; and it has only gone to be perfected in the shadow of the Tree of Life.

S. R. R.