

Matron of Molasses

By Jeff Sauve

MISS MARTHA TURNER never suspected the sticky, infamous plot against her. Hired by St. Olaf in 1892 for the academic year, Miss Turner served as “matron” to the thirty-two preparatory boys who lived on the third floor in Old Main; thankfully for her, the college-age students lived off-campus. She lived on the first floor of the Main with her pampered lap dog, which she held and spoiled endlessly. In exchange for her salary of twenty dollars per term, Miss Turner managed the housekeeping and dining room.

The boys in her charge were between the ages of twelve and eighteen and pulled slightly mischievous pranks like tying a live pocket gopher underneath the girls’ dining table. Occasionally, some of the more daring boys played cards, smoked, frequented saloons or billiard rooms, or drank “punch.” If caught, banishment from campus was a strong possibility.

Miss Turner’s primary responsibilities included keeping the boys’ deportment in check and providing moral guidance. She failed in this regard, as students characterized her as “overbearing” and exhibiting an “insufferable manner” toward them. “She had no friends among the students,” stated Harold B. Kildahl, class of 1895. One evening in March 1893, the out-of-favor matron faced a well-devised plot to topple her once and for all.

As the evening supper bell ran, hungry boys descended to the dining room in the northeast corner of the Main’s basement. Some may have rhythmically chanted a saying popular at St. Olaf at the time: “Come and eat, come and eat; frozen potatoes and half-cooked meat,” to Miss Turner’s likely disdain. Girls from Ladies Hall dormitory stood patiently in a designated waiting room until their time came to be seated.

The dining room held five long tables orientated west to east; boys and girls were seated separately. White oilcloths covered the tables and hung down over the sides and ends. A pitcher of molasses sat on each table to the delight of students with a sweet tooth. Aromas wafting from the kitchen suggested boiled mutton and potatoes and bread and butter.

Miss Turner, attired in a white dress, arrived for supper and sat down at the front table with other staff members. The silverware, scoured earlier in the day with powder made from two red bricks rubbed together, appeared satisfactory. A senior student said grace and before “amen” resounded, heads turned and followed the entrance of Miss Turner’s dog.



Some of these young men who attended St. Olaf Academy in 1892 may have been participants in the nefarious plot against Miss Martha Turner.

He trotted across the dining room, leaving tracks from paws that had recently been dipped in an ink pot. The dog bounded into his owner’s lap. The next moment was disastrous. Miss Turner, fully enraged, tried to stand but was unable to do so. A conspirator had poured a generous amount of molasses on her chair before her arrival, affixing it to her posterior.

A shocking silence prevailed. Miss Turner extricated herself from the chair while flashing angry eyes at the students. Grim-lipped, soiled by paw prints, she immediately exited the room clinging to whatever vestige of dignity remained. The silence was broken by a few titters that cascaded into a crescendo a triumphant laughter.

After supper, President Mohn held court in the chapel, which was located on second floor in the Main, with the intention of identifying the perpetrators from within the ranks of 147 students.

He lectured in vain to the boys on high ideals, nobility of character, and the courage of confession. No one came forward, and the incident was soon closed. Nothing more was said of the abrupt and permanent departure of the grossly insulted Miss Turner. 🍯

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