MADAM PRESIDENT

Victoria Woodhull for President

By: Shelly Pearsall

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from Remarkable Ohioans

Stories by: Shelley Pearsall
Editing and Biographical notes by: Bette Lou Higgins
Victoria Woodhull portrait by Mary McHale

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Ohio is the birthplace of eight U.S. presidents: Grant, Hayes, Garfield, McKinley, Taft, Harding, William Henry and Benjamin Harrison. It is also the birthplace of the first woman to run for president. While students read about Grant, Garfield, Taft and the other Ohio presidents in school, few have ever heard the story of Ohio's most persistent presidential candidate: Victoria Woodhull.

Some say that Victoria Claflin Woodhull Blood Martin never made it to the presidency because she was not presidential-quality material. Others say that she didn't make it because she was a woman, and a woman had never been, and never would be, President.

But even today, some still argue that Woodhull's gifts as storytelling, leg-pulling, palm-reading hornswaggler could have made her one of the all-time greats.

This is her story...

Truthfully, the tale of Victoria Claflin's childhood does not sound very much like the usual school book account of the early life of a president. There were no log cabins, cherry trees, or honest tendencies in Victoria's family. Victoria was born on September 23, 1838, the seventh child of a well-known crook in Homer, Ohio.

Her family was distinguished only by their efforts to avoid law, order, and respectability. According to one local legend, Victoria's father was visited by the sheriff investigating a claim of counterfeiting. As the charges were explained to him, her father pulled a counterfeit $100.00 bill from his pocket, proceeded to tear it into tiny pieces, and ate the evidence piece by piece in front of the sheriff.

So, it should not be surprising that morality was not a strong part of Victoria's character. However, she did have gifts in other areas. Both Victoria, and her younger sister Tennessee were remarkable in their extraordinary beauty. Victoria had raven-dark hair, startling blue eyes, and a face that some described being as lovely as the face of a porcelain doll or a delicate cameo. Tennie was equally beautiful, and perhaps even more stunning, than Victoria. Both girls also possessed special supernatural abilities. They claimed that they could read minds and

foretell the future, and with these abilities, they managed to frighten away most of the local children in Homer -- and a few adults, too.

However, the girls' parents were not ones to overlook a good money-making scheme, even if it involved their daughters. So, at a young age, Tennie and Victoria became the stars of the family's seedy, traveling medicine show. They were the show's supernatural "mediums" and could perform levitation, rappings, séances, palm-readings, and other rituals. With her stunning good looks, Tennie also promoted "Miss Tennessee's Magnetic Life Elixir for Beautifying the Complexion and Cleansing the Blood", but it is unlikely that anyone who purchased the elixir ever attained her extraordinary beauty. (Although the potent alcoholic contents of the medicine might have made her customers believe that they looked better!)

Now, if Victoria had become President, historians probably could have overlooked this chapter in her life. They might have painted her as an unfortunate victim of exploitive, money-hungry parents. Or, they might have glorified the medicine show stories, making them entertaining bits of presidential folklore: "President Woodhull Once Read Palms To Make A Penny"...

But historians couldn't overlook the next chapter in her life. At the age of fourteen, Victoria married 28-year old Doctor Canning Woodhull, to escape from life on the medicine show circuit. At the time, she claimed that the doctor was the heir to an enormous family fortune and the nephew of the mayor of New York City. Of course, her parents quickly gave their support to this profitable match.

However, it is difficult to separate the fact and the fiction in this account. Just after the marriage, the doctor's parents "surprisingly" cut him off from the family fortune, and he plunged into a life of alcohol and other vices. But it is also possible that there was no fortune, no wealthy family, and that alcohol had been his problem from the beginning.

To escape the unfortunate match, Woodhull polished up her medicine show skills again. While reading the palm of a well-respected, Civil War veteran named Colonel Blood, Woodhull happened to notice a very strange sign: a

line on the palm indicated that she and the Colonel were supposed to be joined in marriage. Astonishing! It was destiny! Since the Colonel believed sincerely in the supernatural world, he divorced his wife and quickly consented to marriage with Victoria, who was on her way toward building a life of presidential respectability, even if her methods were not exactly suitable lessons for the history books.

Just a short time later, Victoria had another important vision: a house in New York City waited for the newly-married couple. She described the house to her husband, and she even foretold the fire that would be burning for them in the grate when they arrived. Amazingly, the house that she envisioned was available on fashionable Great Jones Street -- and a fire crackled cheerfully on the hearth! The Colonel purchased the house, and Victoria had worked her magic once again.

After their arrival, Victoria quickly established herself and her sister in high society in New York City. Their beauty and their supernatural gifts became their calling card. Cornelius Vanderbilt, of the Vanderbilt empire, was so entranced with them that he helped them to establish themselves as the first female stockbrokers on Wall Street -- more popularly known as the "Bewitched Brokers". The two sisters, who had once earned mere pennies in medicine shows, soon claimed profits of $700,000.

With some of their earnings, the sisters started their own newspaper, "Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly", dedicated to women's causes. Since the sisters had limited educational opportunities they often found assistance with the newspaper articles from the Colonel and other intellectual friends. Circulation for the weekly paper grew to 50,000, even though it rarely came out once a week.

Stock markets, newspaper writing, fortune-telling, and fraternizing with millionaire men: there seemed to be little that the sisters couldn't do. But Victoria Woodhull would not be content until she attained the real prize: the presidency of the United States.

She joined the growing women's rights movement. It didn't take long for her to hit the “front page”, so to speak. On January 11, 1871 she became the first woman to address a House Committee. While other suffragists were

advocating to get the right to vote for women, Victoria declared women already HAD the right to vote because the 14th and 15th Amendments implicitly granted women the right to cast their ballot! Unfortunately, the members of the House did not agree with this logic and women were not granted suffrage until the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920.

Speaking before Congress, though, was just a stop on her campaign trail to the White House. At the age of 31, she used her own newspaper to announce her candidacy. In the presidential election of 1872, she would be campaigning against fellow Ohioan, Ulysses S. Grant. She told readers that her running mate was the black leader, Frederick Douglass, although she had never mentioned this idea to him, and he later refused to even entertain the possibility.

Victoria created her own political platform of new ideas and social reform. Today, many of her ideas sound ordinary -- even a bit dull, but in 1872, they were considered radical by some, and by others, laughably ridiculous.

Victoria and her "Cosmo-Political Party" (officially called The Equal Rights Party) supported an eight-hour work day, minority representation in Congress, universal suffrage for women, public housing for the poor, a national education system, and the creation of an international body to help prevent war around the world. And if elected, they also promised a few more revolutionary changes: a new United States constitution to replace that dusty, nearly century-old document, and a one-term limit on the presidency. (After all, Victoria didn't want to sit around in the White House for years!)

Needless to say, the first woman to run for the presidency was not elected. Grant won easily over Democrat Horace Greeley. However, Woodhull did receive 3,000 votes, and she insisted that many others were discarded by unscrupulous male poll workers, or the count would have been much higher.

After divorcing Colonel Blood, Victoria Woodhull decided it was time to move to a country where they appreciated women named "Victoria" -- a place where Victorias could actually be queens! She and Tennie sailed to England and managed to find themselves wealthy English husbands. Tennie became Lady Cook, Marchioness,

and Woodhull resided with her third husband, John Martin, on a sprawling country estate. Both sisters became philanthropists and continued to work for Women's Rights. Despite her new life among the English gentry, she did not give up working on her reputation in America, by reforming her previously scandalous ways.

In 1892, she and her husband sailed to America testing the waters for another presidential campaign. She visited several cities, including her hometown of Homer, Ohio. As a candidate, she was interested in analysis of impure foods, free courts of justice for the poor, and encouragement of the arts and she promised to create a system of education that would produce gods, not inferior human beings. Eventually, she gave up the idea of campaigning again and returned to England. In the states it seemed people didn't seem too concerned about the fact that they were "educating inferior beings" and Grover Cleveland became the first president of the United States to be re-elected to office in different terms.

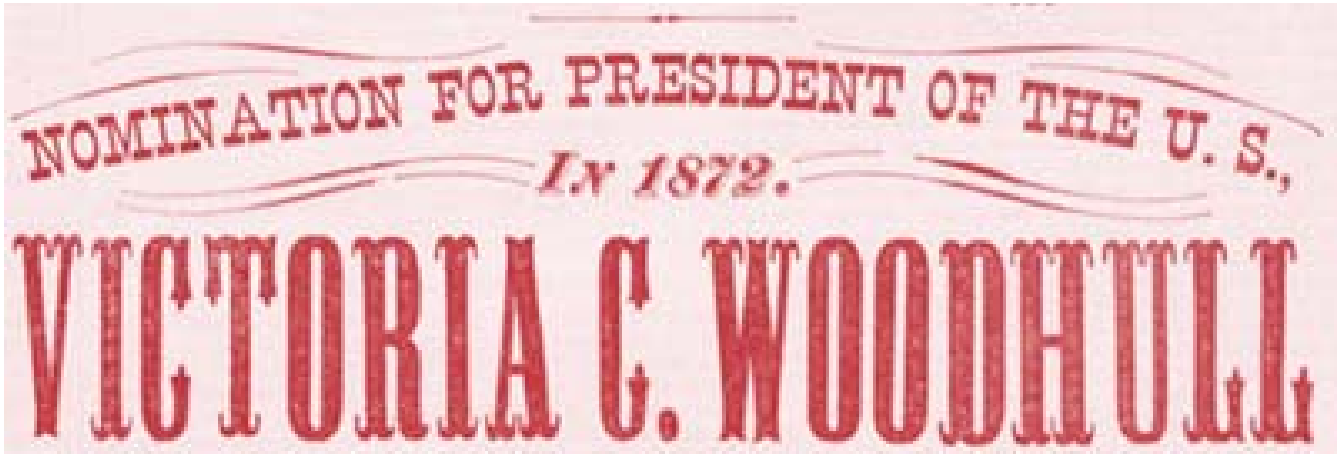
After three decades of trying to be the first woman President, Victoria Woodhull finally had to concede defeat. But there had been other successes in her life. The poor palm-reader from a lawless Ohio family was now a wealthy English gentlewoman. The girl who had barely any "schooling", could claim a newspaper, bank, and brokerage business to her name. Her financial and business success -- regardless of how it had been achieved -- was nearly unequaled by any other woman of her era.

To some people, Victoria Woodhull was persistent in pursuit of her dreams. To others, she was a foolish, vain publicity-seeker. Her critics pointed out that, except for the election of 1872, hardly anyone ever voted for her. Yet, she continued to run for the highest office in the land at each election. Even more remarkable, she did not have the right to cast a ballot in support of herself for President: in those days, women were not allowed to vote.

Now, if Victoria Woodhull had been elected the first female President of the United States, she promised to have changed all that. If she had become President, women everywhere would have gained the right to vote, and the right to do a few other things as well. (She planned to introduce slacks and sex education to America) But some people say that if you believe that, they have some of "Miss Tennessee's Magnetic Life Elixir for Beautifying the Complexion and Cleansing the Blood" to sell you.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES:

Victoria Woodhull (September 23, 1838-June 10, 1927) is truly one of Ohio's most remarkable characters. Coming from such a poverty-stricken background and with little education, she managed to become the first woman to publicly address the United States Congress, first woman to run for U.S. president, active suffragist, newspaper editor and stockbroker -- she accomplished more than anyone would have expected. Except for her spiritualist activities and the fact that she managed to become involved in a number of scandals and "out of the normal" activities, she might well have become one of Ohio's most prominent citizens. It is interesting to note that in reality, those "extreme" social and political beliefs she stood for have, for the most part, since become reality.



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"Madam President" is from EVE's storytelling program REMARKABLE OHIOANS which is just one of our many presentations spotlighting little-known stories from the past. Victoria Woodhull is the subject of a new documentary by Eden Valley and FilmAffects -- VICTORIA WOODHULL: SHATTERING GALSS CEILINGS. The film is available for streaming and on DVD and there is a companion book available. For information about the project visit www.victoriawoodhullforpresident.org

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