



*Elizabeth Hazelton Bixby Sherrard*

## Dakota Images

To over fourteen hundred children living around the turn of the century, Elizabeth Hazelton Bixby Sherrard was simply "Mother Sherrard." Her work as cofounder and matron of the South Dakota Children's Home Society was the culmination of a lifetime devoted to public service.

Elizabeth Hazelton was born on 7 November 1829 in the Finger Lakes region of New York State. In 1851, she married Edmund Bixby, a civil engineer, and moved to Chicago. The couple had one child, Charles. Elizabeth's long public-service career began in the late 1850s when she tended cholera victims and, later, wounded Union soldiers. After Edmund Bixby's death in 1867, she worked on behalf of Chicago's poor and met William Bird Sherrard while he was helping to establish a home for newsboys and bootblacks. They were married on 9 October 1869 and soon moved to Kansas to enter the cattle business.

In the 1880s, the Sherrards homesteaded near Willow Lake in Clark County, Dakota Territory, where they began to place orphans, sent to them from larger cities, in local foster homes. Recognizing the need for a simpler, more humane alternative to the traditional orphanage, the Sherrards moved to Sioux Falls and opened the South Dakota Children's Home, founded on the "placing out" principle, in 1893. Thus, at the age of sixty-four, Elizabeth Sherrard began caring almost single-handedly for well over a hundred children each year, some of whom were mentally or physically handicapped. Because the organization depended entirely on private donations, she also assisted her husband in his fund-raising duties by handling correspondence, traveling the state, and helping to publish *The Children's Friend*, a monthly newsletter. While some readers criticized its "advertising" of children in need of homes, the newsletter, with its direct appeals, crusading tone, and Biblical allusions, was effective in publicizing the home's needs. By 1902, enough money had been raised so that the organization could move from its rented house to a new, thirty-three-room facility.

Elizabeth Sherrard died on 21 May 1908 after several years of failing health. In 1913, the state Woman's Christian Temperance Union honored her by placing a bronze frieze in the Capitol at Pierre.

by JEANNE KILEN ODE

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