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Speech on observance of Frances E Willard's birthday

Strom Thurmond

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I deem it an honor to appear before you on this occasion when we are gathered together to pay tribute to the memory of a great American and one of the outstanding women of her generation—Frances Elizabeth Willard.

As most of you are doubtless aware, Frances Willard is, so far, the only woman to be represented in Statuary Hall, the United States Capitol's Hall of Fame. When, seven years after her death, the State of Illinois notified the Congress of its desire to present a statue of its most illustrious daughter to stand in perpetuity in Statuary Hall, the response of both houses of the national legislature was immediate and overwhelming. In the Senate Shelby M. Cullom, speaking on behalf of the State of Illinois, said:

"The world has been better because Frances E. Willard lived. She devoted her life unselfishly to the cause of humanity, and she brought sobriety into the homes of countless thousands; and at her death she left an organization that has been and will continue to be a potent factor for good in the world."

Educator, author, lecturer, staunch advocate of the rights and duties of womanhood, whether in America or elsewhere, zealous defender of the dignity and purity of the home, confidante and wise counselor of youth, and finally, sponsor and tireless advocate of the noble cause of temperance, she revived in her person the
attributes and virtues we associate with those saintly women of old—Saint Genevieve, Saint Joan, Saint Theresa of Castile. She was of the true spiritual nobility.

She herself wrote in her autobiography:

"I have been called ambitious, and so I am, if to have had from childhood the sense of being born to a fate is an element of ambition. For I never knew what it was to aspire and not to believe myself capable of heroism. I always wanted to react upon the world about me to my utmost ounce of power, to be widely known, loved, and believed in—the more widely the better. Every life has its master passion; this has been mine. Very few things waken my contempt, but this couplet in the hymn book did:

Make me little and unknown,
Loved and prized by God alone.

"Its supreme absurdity angered rather than amused me, for who could be "loved and prized" by the Great Spirit and yet despised by the lesser spirits made in his image? Who could deliberately desire to be "little and unknown," of small value and narrow circle in a world so hungry for help and strength and uplift, yet beloved and prized by God? No. I wanted to be now and in all worlds my very utmost. I fully purposed to be one whom the multitudes would love, lean on, and bless. Lying on the prairie grass, and lifting my hands toward the sky, I used to say in my inmost spirit, "What is it that I am to be, O God?" I did not wish to climb my others' overthrow, and I laid no schemes to undermine them, but I meant that the evolution of my own powers to do for me all that it would. I felt that a woman owed it to all other women to live as bravely, as helpfully, and as grandly as she could, and to let the world
know it." Those were the words of Frances E. Willard.

There, surely, spoke a fiery spirit! Her rather lonely childhood in the Wisconsin wilderness of a century ago had, despite her love for hunting and fishing and the out-of-door life, gradually made her more and more introspective and analytical. Fortunately for herself and her future cause, her family's somewhat straitened circumstances were at least sufficient to afford her a college education. She met the challenge of intellectual discipline and competition with joy and eagerness, with an appetite sharpened by long years in the lonely forests. She was graduated valedictorian of the class of 1859 at Northwestern Female College, and for the next ten years she devoted herself to the cause of feminine education, moving rapidly from one distinguished educational post to another, and this, be it noted, in a day and age when higher education for women in America had just dawned. If Miss Willard had accomplished nothing else in her long career, that first decade would entitle her to a pre-eminent position among the great American pioneers of feminine higher learning.

When, in the year 1874, the great temperance crusade swept the country, Miss Willard found the cause for which she was born. It was like the blinding light which burst upon St. Paul on the road to Damascus. From thenceforth as long as strength remained to her, the devotion of Frances Willard to the cause she loved and regarded as supremely noble was never to flag: to the end of her days she poured out her energy and enthusiasm. In that year of her great enlightenment bands of women appeared everywhere throughout the country—on the street and in the saloons, oblivious of jeers, ridicule and curses—singing and praying against the evils of
the liquor traffic. Frances Willard joined one of these bands in Pittsburgh and she delivered her first prayer in public kneeling on the sawdust floor of a Market Street saloon. The very next week—the Napoleonic celerity with which her advances in every line of endeavor upon which she embarked from one of the most striking phases of her career—she became president of the Chicago Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. From this office she advanced to the secretaryship of the Illinois Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and then to the corresponding secretaryship of the National Woman’s Temperance Convention. In 1879 she was elected president of the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and twelve years later her career was fittingly climaxed by her election as president of the World Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. In the year 1891 she was the foremost figure in the world in the cause of temperance. No leader even approached her, in her own country or elsewhere.

But that boundless energy was not confined to the cause of temperance alone—closest though it undoubtedly was to her heart. From appealing to her countrywomen for support of the cause of temperance it was but a step to embracing that of woman suffrage as a means to make temperance effective. She helped organize the Prohibition Party in 1882, and about this time was elected president of the National Council of Women.

I must leave to other speakers the final assessment of Miss Willard’s life work, as it was manifested in its various phases. Certainly neither during her lifetime nor since was her pre-eminent ability ever seriously challenged in whatever field she chose to appear. The historian, Katharine Anthony, says of her:
"Her profoundest faiths and her highest beliefs, her chivalry
and her supreme trust in woman, all bore fruit in the work of the
Woman's Christian Temperance Union. She saw temperance as a measure
for the protection of the home and the Christian life, and as an
ideal involving personal sacrifice. Other leaders have stressed
the social and economic aspects of the reform and used more practical
methods; but temperance reform has remained for the popular mind
very much the reform for which Frances Willard strove, and temperance
legislation has risen or fallen according to the strength or
weakness of its moral appeal."

On February 18, 1898, her busy, happy career came to an end.

In the ceremonies in the Senate of the United States in
connection with the acceptance of the statue of Miss Willard, to
which I have already referred, the late Albert J. Beveridge,
historian, author of the great "Life" of Chief Justice Marshall
and one of the greatest orators of his own or any generation,
said, in concluding his tribute to Miss Willard:

"Her chief title as a teacher of social and moral science
lies in this: With a profound insight she perceived that the
most difficult problems of civilization, the problems which have
brought the statesmanship and philosophy of the modern world to
a dead standstill, if they have any solution at all—and she
confidently believed they had—they would find it at last in the
actual application to the daily life of the world of the divine
precepts which constitute the most precious part of the inheritance
of these Christian centuries.

"And so I think that the General Assembly of Illinois did
well to set up this monument in memory of her."
And, in the larger sense, the General Assembly of Illinois, by this tribute to Frances Willard, acted for all the citizens of all the states.

THE END