IDA R. CHAMNESS

Ida R. Chamness was born at Roiseland, County of Kvinnesdal, Norway, on 8/21/1867, the daughter of Tobias Tollaksen Roiseland. Her parents were Friends, members of the Norse Yearly Meeting. A Friend from Iowa visited that yearly meeting in about 1879, and Ida's two older brothers went to America with him. Another brother came to America, and then in 1887, Ida and her sister Theoline came to Le Grand, Iowa, accompanied by their father, who returned to Norway.

In the course of a religious visit, Benjamin Pickett visited the Friends meeting at Stavanger, with a young man named Lester Chamness as companion. Stavanger was the meeting Ida attended, and this meeting with Lester led up to their marriage in a meeting at Stavanger on 9/23/1880. He took his bride back to his home near Emporia, Kansas. In 1894, they visited Norway with their little son, Merlin. Ida was recommended as a minister by Cottonwood Monthly Meeting (Kansas) on 3/9/1895. In 1899, she was liberated to attend New England and Canada Yearly Meetings. Lester bought a place near Stavanger, Iowa, in 1900, but they did not move there until the spring of 1901. In 1907, they bought a farm near West Branch, Iowa, and this became Ida's home for the rest of her life.

Ida's health was frail, but this did not prevent her from traveling extensively in the ministry. She visited New England Yearly Meeting in 1901, 1902, 1907 and 1913; Canada Yearly Meeting in 1905, 1907, 1910 and 1913; Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1903, 1907 and 1909; Ohio and Western Yearly Meetings in 1911, and that in Kansas in 1915. When at Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1907, she met Mary Stokes, who became her lifelong friend, assisting her financially and accompanying her on many of her religious journeys.

Ida Chamness was very active in the ministry in North Carolina during the time of the separation there (1904-1911). In 1904, she visited both quarters (Eastern and Southern). Benjamin Brown, a North Carolina minister, was very kind in assisting her in getting about, which was very difficult because of her poor health. She was there again in 1906, 1908, 1910, 1911 and 1913. Her ministry seems to have been well received everywhere she went, and it would appear she played no small part in the establishment of the Conservative Yearly Meeting in North Carolina.

In 1905-06, Ida visited Norway, attending the Norse Yearly Meeting. During this visit, her mother died. She went again in 1909, bringing her father back with her for a visit. In 1912, accompanied by Mary Stokes and Joel Johnson of Windsor, Virginia, a minister of North Carolina Yearly Meeting, she visited Norway, England, Wales and Scotland. In 1914 she was again in Norway.

Perhaps no one traveled more extensively in the ministry during this period than Ida Chamness. However, she had enemies in her home meeting, who frequently prevented her from getting the customary minutes of liberation. In such cases, she went without them. She felt strongly that God called her to go, and did not feel it right to let man stand in her way. This trouble culminated in Ida's disownment by West Branch Monthly Meeting in second month, 1917. Her husband left her almost immediately after this event, going to Alabama, and did not return until shortly before his death, which occurred on 7/4/1939. Ida had been accused of mistreating her husband. Perhaps the fact that he came back to her to die may shed a little light on the facts of the case.

It is distressing to go into some of the things that Ida had to bear, but it seems due to her memory not to pass them by without some mention. She appealed her disownment, but it was upheld by the yearly meeting in 1919. Between the time of her disownment by the monthly meeting and this final action, some of the members of the meeting at West Branch filed a complaint of insanity against her. The hearing was held at Tipton (Iowa) on 1/30/1919, and her enemies were ignominiously defeated.

Ida Chamness did not wither away after her disownment and desertion by her husband. She was a firm believer in the principles of Friends without any deviation. From the time of her disownment until her death, she held meeting in her own home. She brought her children up in the old Friends belief, including plainness of speech and dress. It seems remarkable that Friends principles and practices were steadfastly maintained by many American yearly meetings until about this time, with such a rapid departure since, to the great loss to the Church.

In 1927, Ida visited in the ministry England, Scotland, Norway, Germany and Finland. In 1930, she attended Ohio and North Carolina Yearly Meetings. She was ever ready to help the unfortunate and to offer such a refuge when possible. When one John Mercer, age 28, was arraigned at Tipton (Iowa) in seventh month 1936 for a hold-up murder committed in 1930, Ida felt to attend, and knelt in prayer in the courtroom. The newspaper reported that the "prisoner was affected." She visited him in the jail after this hearing and several times later at Fort Madison, accompanied by some of her daughters. About three months before his execution, he joined the Chamness meeting, and as far as appears, was truly converted. After his execution on 1/24/1938, the Chamnesses claimed the body, which was interred on their farm after the funeral in their home.

In the same year (1938), Ida went to Norway again, accompanied by her daughters Ina and Jennie. After their return, they continued to work against capital punishment, interesting themselves in the case of Walter Rhodes, who paid the penalty in fifth month 1940. Ida continued to labor in the gospel, attending the public meetings of Ohio Yearly Meeting in 1944 and Stillwater Quarterly Meeting (Ohio) in fifth month 1946, after which she (with others) visited and held meeting with a young man held prisoner at Columbus (Ohio) following his arrest at Barnesville (Ohio) for non-compliance with the draft law. She often attended quarterly and yearly meetings in Iowa in spite of her disownment.

After a lingering illness and gradual decline, Ida Chamness departed this life on 4/5/1952, aged nearly 85, in that faith in which she had lived, having requested a religious opportunity just before passing into a coma which continued for about 48 hours until her death. The remains were interred in the Hickory Grove Burying Grounds on fourth month eighth after a favored funeral. It must be said that Ida Chamness had a remarkable gift in the ministry. This treasure was, as it always is, in an earthen vessel, in this case, a very frail vessel in her young years when she was so active in the gospel. She was truly one of the sweet singers of Israel. She was preceded in death by her daughter Ina, who also had a sweet gift in the ministry.

A word should be said of Ida's religious experience. She tells in a letter to the writer that she was deeply affected by a rebuke from her father when she was about twelve, after which it became her constant concern to seek God and serve him. She would go alone to some secluded place and wait on God and pray aloud, and "my labor and concern was with and for children in particular everywhere to bring them to God. I loved meetings and religious readings. My main concern to live was to bring people to God. In my 14th or 15th year, I had a fuller experience of God's love in my heart. I was not well and felt that I might die and was not ready. I was home alone reading an account of a girl dying a victorious death. I laid down the tract and felt to kneel in prayer, at which time I was melted into a flood of tears, and felt such love to everybody, and I spoke audibly and said, 'Let all the world praise the Lord, now I am not afraid to die.' Oh the happiness and sweetness and what quietude and solid feelings, every step quiet and gentle. This is my experience, the nearer to God and more drinking in of His Spirit, the more weighty and solid we feel, and not fly up in the air or some wild action, which is carnal and of the flesh."

Ida Chamness had a testimony against "man-made worship, singing, preaching and praying at the command of men, and sounding of music on dead strings of wire." "Any sinner can learn to play fine tunes on musical instruments, but there is no life in them, and thus, they can give no life to the soul. But as the child Jesus is brought into our hearts, and we are alive to the eternal power within us, we will feel whenever a sermon or prayer is offered from head knowledge, and the playing on these dead musical instruments would strike at our spiritual life."

Ida had a strong testimony against the idea among some under the name of Friends, that a person who felt called of God to travel in the ministry should desist when called upon to desist by fellowmembers, as though they had the "right to say ahead of God go at His call or not go." According to accounts, Ida was barred from entering the meetinghouse at West Branch for public meeting first day afternoon during yearly meeting in 1933 because she would not promise to keep silent. Two women stood at the door and barred her way. No real Friend could make such a promise. She said to one: "I think thee knows I don't speak unless I feel I have to." Then, as they followed her as she walked to the end of the porch, she turned and said, "What if some day you come to the gate of Heaven, and Jesus won't let you in?"

"Oh, death is solemn. We should feel thankful for every moment we are allowed to live and spend the time to the glory of God, and be kind, loving and tender to all, and do good to all. My soul is in deep travail it seems to me much of the time, and concerned for us and the world at large, and so little that can be done . . . I feel the fields are white until harvest. I could go all around to all the meetings of Friends and elsewhere." (From a letter dated 1/20/1940).

"Yes, my constant concern is to be watching and have oil in the vessel. But only One can fit the unspotted white garment on as a bride for the Heavenly Bridegroom. Oh, what it means." (3/12/1950)

Ida Chamness attended first day meeting at Iowa Yearly Meeting in eighth month 1951. She writes: "I spoke what came to me at home for the yearly meeting: No washing done in Heaven, no unclean thing can enter Heaven, and so no washing done there, all the washing must be done whilst in the body, etc."

This memorial by Kenneth Morse,
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