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"In His Steps: Sheldon's Social Gospel Comes to Kansas"

Fred Krebs

Johnson County Community College

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Gene DeGruson Memorial Lecture Second Annual - February 17th, 2000

"In His Steps: Sheldon's Social Gospel Comes to Kansas"

Fred Krebs, speaker

Overman Student Center

7:00 p.m.

The public is invited to attend the second Eugene DeGruson Memorial Lecture and reception to be held February 17, 2000, at 7:00 p.m. in the Overman Student Center on the campus of Pittsburg State University. The lecture, co-sponsored by the Friends of Axe Library and the Kansas Humanities Council, will feature Fred Krebs, a professor in the Social Sciences and Humanities Division of Johnson County Community College. His talk is entitled "In His Steps: Sheldon's Social Gospel Comes to Kansas". When the Reverend Charles Sheldon found poverty and racial inequality in Topeka in 1889 he asked "What would Jesus do?" His answer - soup kitchens, schools, and a bestselling book - inspired churches everywhere to apply their faith to community problems.

In His Steps, or what Would Jesus Do? was written by the Reverend Sheldon, pastor of Topeka's Central Congregational Church, during the summer of 1896. He called it a sermon-story, and read it chapter by chapter on Sunday evenings from his pulpit. *The Advance*, a Congregational weekly magazine in Chicago, purchased the story for \$75.00 and published it serially in thirty-one installments beginning November 5, 1896. Sheldon offered the manuscript to three book publishers who turned it down. Finally J. C. Kilner, manager of the Advance Publishing Company, which had never before published any fiction, decided to bring out *In His Steps* in book form. The first printing of a few thousand copies consisted of cloth and paper bound volumes, the former priced at one dollar; the paperback, twenty-five cents. Two years later a ten cent paperback edition was published. By 1900 Advance had published nearly 600,000 copies in five editions.

Sheldon obtained a copyright on the book but because the story previously appeared without copyright in *The Advance*, the book copyright was declared worthless. Approximately forty publishers in the United States, fifteen in Great Britain, and twenty-seven foreign language publishers had produced royalty-free editions by the middle 1960s. Sales by several U. S. publishers since the 1960s have averaged nearly 100,000 copies annually. No one knows how many copies of *In His Steps* have been sold. Estimates range from six million to thirty million, but all authorities agree that it is one of the world's all-time bestsellers. In 1953 Dr. Eric Goldman of the *Saturday Literary Review* singled out *In His Steps* as one of eight books which have changed America. Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in the book and the sale of "What would Jesus do?" paraphernalia.

In 1970 Gene DeGruson, Curator of Special Collections at Pittsburg State University, made a valuable contribution to Sheldon scholarship when he published [*Kansas Authors of Best Sellers: A Bibliography of the Works of Martin and Osa Johnson, Margaret Hill McCarter, Charles M.*](#)

[Sheldon, and Harold Bell Wright](#). Sheldon was a prolific writer and DeGruson's early bibliographical work on him consists of twelve pages. It lists Sheldon's first edition books and other publications that appeared in pamphlet and periodical form. Also included are lists of biographical works on Sheldon and the English and American publishers of *In His Steps*. DeGruson was also an avid book collector. He obtained for the Special Collections Department at PSU twenty-three different editions of *In His Steps* and copies of nearly thirty other Sheldon publications. Copies of Sheldon's publications from the Special Collections Department will be on view before Professor Krebs' lecture and at the public reception that follows.

Fred Krebs is a prolific public speaker and has been very active in civic affairs and in the Kansas Humanities Council. One of his most noted appearances was as William Allen White in the 1985 Great Plains Chautauqua "The Pen and the Plow: Writers on the Plains". Currently, Krebs appears as White as well as William Jennings Bryan and Benjamin Franklin in the Kansas Humanities Council "History Alive!" program. He has also presented Chautauqua-style characterizations of explorer John C. Fremont and artist William Merritt Chase. Professor Krebs has received degrees from the University of Kansas and the University of Missouri at Kansas City. He has taught a variety of courses including humanities, comparative cultures, government, history, cultural anthropology, and ethics.