

## The Denver Story of Emily Griffith

By Dennis Payton Knight

Born in 1868, the eldest of four children of a frail mother and crippled father, Emily Griffith went to work at the age of 14 to help the family, teaching in a sod schoolhouse in Broken Bow, Nebraska. She recognized even then that many of her student's parents were illiterate and unskilled beyond the rigors of farm labor.

That was where her dream of a school for adults was born, a place where students of any age could attend classes for free by day or night, as much as they wanted, to learn English and occupational skills. In 1895, the Griffith family moved to Denver where the Denver Public Schools hired her.

In 1915, volunteering at a distribution of clothing to the poor, Emily shared her dream with a *Denver Post* feature writer, saying, "I want the age limit for admission lifted and classes organized that a boy or girl working in a bakery, store, laundry, or any kind of shop, who has an hour or two to spare, may come to my school and study what he or she wants to learn to make life more useful. The same rule goes for older folks, too. I already have a name for the school. It is 'Opportunity.'"

The idea made it into the *Post*, and talk of an Opportunity School swept through Denver. Soon the school board gave Emily an empty schoolhouse at 13<sup>th</sup> and Welton. In September of 1916, Emily's dream became reality. She hoped only for a few, but more than 1,400 students registered the first week. For 13 hours a day, her school offered such subjects as telegraphy, industrial millinery, typing, academic subjects, and English.

A blackboard inside the entrance had a message, "A bowl of soup is served in the basement from 5:30 to 7:30. Free. This saves you time." At first the soup was prepared at home by Emily's mother, but soon 200 bowls were served each evening.

On her retirement in 1933, Opportunity School was renamed Emily Griffith Opportunity School, and Emily moved to Boulder County to live with and care care for her invalid sister, Florence.

On June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1947, the sisters were found in their cabin, shot in the head, execution style. Likely they were killed by Fred Lundy, a long-time friend who had been eating meals with them; possibly a mercy killing, because Lundy, thought to be in love with Emily, despaired of her burden caring for her sister. Lundy's body was found later in a creek, an apparent suicide.

Now known as Emily Griffith Technical College, the school still thrives downtown, having assisted over 2 million students in its century of teaching. Over seven thousand are enrolled in career-training certificate programs, trade apprenticeships, as well as instruction in health sciences, creative arts and design, and other professional studies. Emily's Griffith's philosophy, "for all who wish to learn", remains as alive today as when she first opened the doors in 1916.