

Victoria in Chicago

At some time before late 1854, Victoria and her husband Canning Woodhull moved from Cincinnati to Chicago. There she birth to her mentally-challenged son, Byron, on December 31, 1854, in a small frame house. In the biography written at Victoria's request by Theodore Tilton, she recalls the room being so cold it had icicles on the bed frame.

According to at least one biographer, Victoria fell ill with childbed fever and had to be tended by her mother, who lived elsewhere. After a month away, she returned to find Canning gone. This was not unusual, as he frequented ale houses and brothels. But after a month with no income and no food, she sought him out. Word on the street was that he had taken up at a fashionable boarding house with a mistress he called his wife. In her biography dictated to Theodore Tilton, Victoria paints what happened next in dramatic fashion. "The true wife, still wrestling with God for the renegade, sallied forth into the wintry street, clad in a calico dress without undergarments, and shod only with India-rubbers without shoes or stockings, entered the house, confronted the household as they sat at table, told her story to the confusion of the paramour and his mistress, and drew tears from all the company till, by a common movement, the listeners compelled the harlot to pack her trunk and flee the city, and shamed the husband into creeping like a spaniel back into the kennel which his wife still cherished as her home."

On and off throughout the mid-1800s, Victoria's father, Buck Claflin sold tonics with supposedly healing powers that were really a combination of alcohol, laudanum and other ingredients (snake oil) in Chicago at the Wonderful Child Miss Tennessee's Magneto Infirmary, 265 Wabash Ave. In 1865, the family moved to Chicago, either with Victoria or with her following soon after. Eventually, she and possibly the whole family, was evicted for fraudulent fortune telling or because the neighbors thought her business was actually a brothel, depending on which story you believe.

Victoria and James claimed to have remarried in Chicago in 1868 after a brief separation when Victoria's sister, Polly, and her husband, Dr. Sparr, tried to blackmail the Colonel on charges of bigamy, saying his first marriage was still valid.

Victoria also visited Chicago during many of her lecture tours, including an 1873 address to the American Association of Spiritualists in Chicago.

Sources:

The Woman Who Ran for President by Lois Beachy Underhill

Notorious Victoria by Mary Gabriel

The Scarlet Sisters: Sex, Suffrage and Scandal in the Gilded Age by Myra Macpherson

Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution by Amanda Frisken

Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull by Barbara Goldsmith