

# “Go Where No One Else Will”

by Lynne Belluscio

I was filing some Ely family genealogy papers the other day, and happened to read a newspaper clipping about two sisters, Charlotte Elizabeth Ely, and her younger sister Mary Ann Caroline Ely. The LeRoy newspaper was dated May 3, 1904.

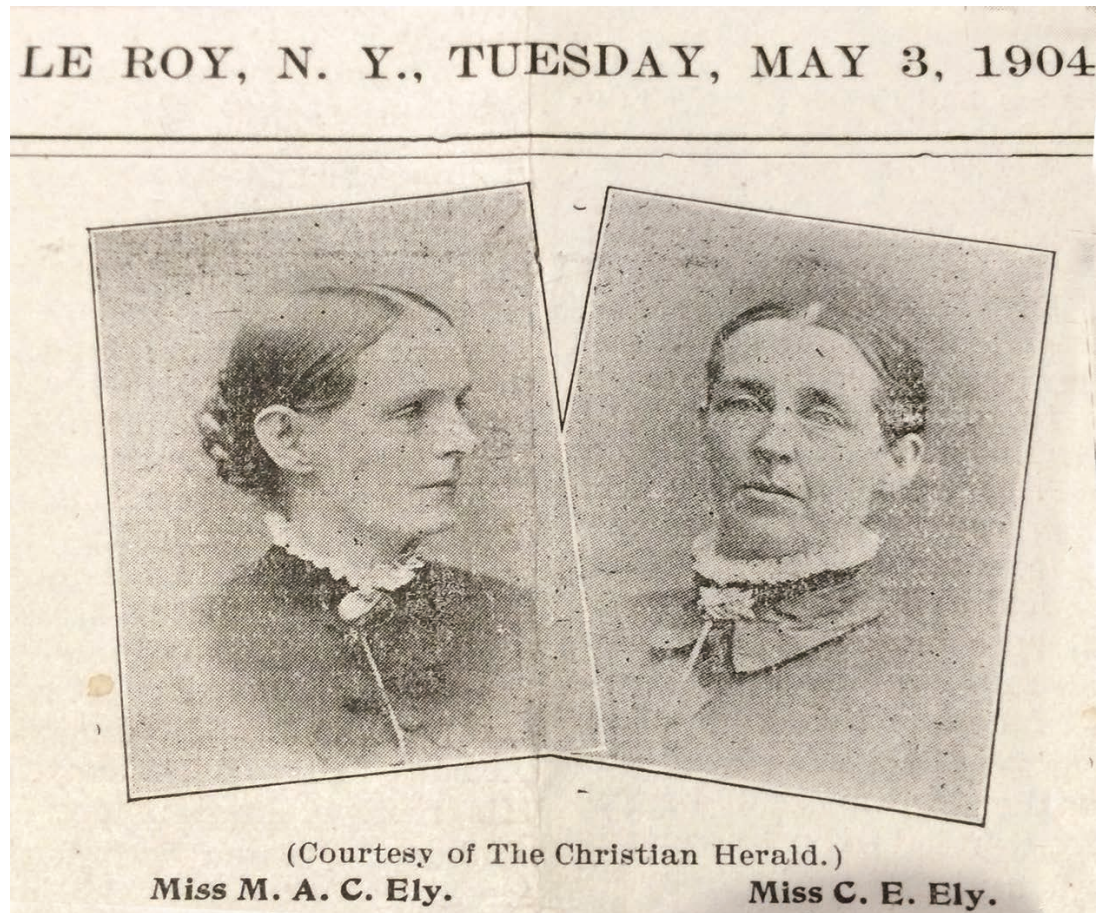
“For more than thirty years, the Misses Ely have been missionaries in Turkey. They were sent out by the American Board. Soon after locating at Bitlis they founded a college for young women and named it Mount Holyoke Seminary in honor of their Alma Mater. They are well known in LeRoy and throughout Western New York.”

I just had to learn more about these two women. Our clipping file had an obituary for Mary who died in 1913 in Turkey. She had been in Turkey for 45 years but had been back to LeRoy to visit relatives just a few years before her death. Her cousins were Calvin Keeney, Mrs. Avery and Mrs. Harmon.

Mary was born in 1841 her obituary says she was born in Batavia, but the history files at Mt. Holyoke say that she was born in Wilmington, Delaware. Her sister, Charlotte, was born in 1839 in Philadelphia. I searched the Ingham data base and I am pretty sure they never attended Ingham, however they did attend Elmira and graduated from Mount Holyoke.

Mary’s obituary also mentioned that she taught school at a “select school” in Stafford, and that will take a little more research. In any event, they met Rev. and Mrs. George Knapp who were missionaries in Turkey and decided to go to Bitlis, Turkey in 1868 where the sisters opened the school.

There are numerous articles about the Ely sisters that can be found in various missionary magazines. Mount Holyoke has two boxes of their letters and communications in their archives. Mary Lyon, the founder of Mount Holyoke, taught her students to go out into the world -- to become missionaries and to “Go where no one else will go.” It was written that the Ely sisters’ theory was “to retain as much as possible the native customs and to avoid



Westernizing or modernizing (the students) so that they would not be separated from their families or villages.” It was very difficult for the Ely sisters to overcome the local traditions in Bitlis that placed higher value on boys, not girls. The people in Bitlis were Armenian Christians and Muslims.

In 1870, Charlotte bought a Steinway piano and had it shipped to Turkey. It arrived at the port of Trabzon and had to be carried by porters 200 miles to Bitlis. Charlotte hoped that teaching the students to sing would introduce them to Western civilization.

In 1895, the Armenians were attacked and many killed and the Ely sisters had to care for hundreds of orphaned children, but soon the sisters were forced to leave for their own safety. They returned in 1897 and rebuilt their school. During this time, the area was also hit by an earthquake.

Unfortunately, Bitlis was in the midst of uprisings that led to the Caucasus War between Russia and Turkey and the beginnings of World War I. This was the time of what is called the Armenian Genocide - an issue that resurfaced last year on the hundredth

anniversary of this tragic event in the Middle East.

Mary developed a heart condition and was evacuated to an American hospital in Beirut, where she died in 1913. Charlotte continued to live in Bitlis, but according to one story that I read, she was captured by rebels, and was held in captivity for several months during the winter. After she was released, she was reluctant to share her story and to accuse her captors. Bitlis was taken over by soldiers, and she had to move to a nearby town,

where she died in 1915.

The more I read about these two women, the more I was amazed that nearly 150 years ago, they were facing similar conditions that we are reading about in today’s newspapers. They hoped that their efforts would make a difference and help create peace in the midst of turmoil. But it is another example of history repeating itself. Last night I searched the Internet to read more about Bitlis and Armenian community that the Ely sisters dedicated their lives to. It was too terrible to imagine.

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