

"Charles T. Zepp, The Shut-In Friend"

Carroll County Times article for 4 February 2001

By Jay A. Graybeal

Charles T. Zepp (1858-1901) of Melrose lived most of his life confined to his home. Despite suffering the life-long effects of a crippling childhood illness, he touched many people, with and without physical disabilities, through his periodical The Shut-In Friend. The Melrose correspondent for the American Sentinel newspaper wrote an article about his life for the February 2, 1901 issue of the newspaper:

"Charles T. Zepp, who became widely known as a "Shut-In," through his publications, died at his home at this place on Saturday, 26th of January, aged 42 years, 3 months and 7 days. He was born near Melrose, October 19th, 1858.

When but 5 months old he had a severe attack of fever, but recovered and became able to talk and walk until the age of 10, although he would frequently stumble and fall. He gradually became worse, compelling him to use crutches, and for the last 20 years or more he was not able to get away from home without help.

His influence, however, has spread and those who have been helped by it number many thousands. Before 1893 his influence was centered mainly upon those around him, or who came to see him. In 1893 his brother put a notice in a paper, asking for reading matter. Many hundreds of pounds were received, and a correspondence was started. It was impossible to write to all who wanted to know his condition, so he wrote a short history of his life, which was printed. Up to date, over 2,200 copies have been sold. With the proceeds, a wheel-chair was purchased for him in Feb., 1894, which was used up to Tuesday, Jan. 22nd, 1901, when he was suddenly taken ill with the grip, which developed into pneumonia, resulting in this death, four days later. Through his booklet, he and his brother were enabled to start "The Shut-In-Friend" which now goes regularly into 3,000 homes. In July, 1894, a society to help Shut-Ins was started, and now numbers about 500. He was president of it up to his death. For the past 7 years his birthdays were remembered by several hundred people, and when he was yet publisher of "Shut-In-Friend," he received between 2,000 and 3,000 letters per year, and the Zepp Brothers sent nearly as many letters. He wasn't able to do much of the work himself, but his influence caused the work to be done. His brother has in his possession over 3,500 letters from people all over the United States, Canada, and even from England, saying that the work of Zepp Brothers had helped them. In 1899, he received a Gem Roller Organ from his many friends, everywhere, which was a help to him, to those who visited him, and to his loved ones.

I cannot mention all those living who have helped to make his life sunshine, but the following, who have preceded him into eternity, did what they could: John W. Kephart, Ira B. Zepp, Mrs. Ira B. Zepp, Elmer A. Bachman, Mary A. Zepp. Jan. 6th, 1901, the whole family, father, mother, Charles, James, Noah, Albert, wife and child, were together, the last time here on earth. Listen to what he says in his History: "Recently, when all of our family were once more united here on earth, my earnest prayer is that we may all be united in eternity. Oh, how many families think of that when they are all gathered together here on earth!" Yes Bro. Charles is gone to his rest, where no wheel-chairs will be needed, no pains or aches to bear, and where he can sing and dance for joy with the angels. He loved the song, "Nearer, my God to Thee," and often played it on his roller organ.

On Tuesday morning a short funeral service was held, at his house, as the dear old mother, who was with him for 42 years, is sick in bed, and could not go to the church. Rev. S. M. Roeder took for his text, Revelation 14: 13, which was very appropriate, and very clearly explained."

The Historical Society is fortunate to own several copies of the Shut-In Friend. The publication serves as a reminder of one man's contribution to help others who shared his considerable challenges. The many kindnesses shown to him by his family, community and people throughout the world help us understand the lives of handicapped persons in the late nineteenth century.