AGNES ELLEN HARRIS

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A Tribute

by

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at the

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AGNES ELLEN HARRIS

Had I the skillful hands of Baroness Silvercruys or the gifted pen of distinguished Hudson Strode I could bring clearly before you the picture and life of Agnes Ellen Harris. That is not possible for me to do, nor is it really necessary for you. You were her students, coworkers, friends. You knew her, and so my talking with you today is like viewing again a well-remembered scene or looking again at a treasured painting; you know it well and delight each time in the viewing of it. And so this is a happy occasion as we think again of the full life and joyous spirit of our friend.

She was a very real person and so my remarks about her will be of a personal nature.

It was September 1, 1941 when I first met Dean Harris, the greatest woman I have ever known. Not that I saw her greatness at this time, for some of us are slow of perception. Also, greatness wears no label or tag announcing itself; it is distinguished by no outward signs of beauty or dress or manner. Greatness is not always because of long lists of scholarly papers, or research findings, or creative works of art, or fine architecture, or engineering feats. Greatness is in the living of life and in service to others. Greatness is in humility and loss of self; it is in doing for others. It is in the intangible things of human relations. These were the characteristics which made Agnes Ellen Harris great and made her one of the best beloved women in all the South.

Just what were her qualities and how did she come by them? Many times I have tried to analyze her character and find the answers.

Some of the answers I believe I have, but not all of them by any means, because through all the years I knew her there was always something new to learn from her and about her.

She loved people; a genuine and sincere love. Her office door was always open, so was the door to her home. Any hour of the day or night she would respond to the call of a friend, or of one in need. Her girls could go to her at any time and she would spend hours listening to their problems and talking with them and helping them. She would come home happily at 1 a.m. or 2 a.m. quite unaware of the time.

She never could understand why her telephone bills were always so high--forgetting that she had called New York or Florida or some other distant point to get in touch with a girl's parents or to make some arrangements to help a friend. Distance meant nothing to her; in the earlier years in Florida she went by horse and buggy to the canning clubs which were part of the Home Demonstration program of the Extension Service and in which she was a pioneer. When she came to Alabama it was in automobile (and what stories we have heard of her driving)--all over the state she went carrying the teaching of home economics in club meetings but even more important, talking to women and men, and always making friends.
She had the gift of friendship; people responded to her because they felt at ease with her and felt her genuine interest in them. The warmth of her personality reached out to others and won their friendship and inspired them. As one of her friends recently wrote, "She made all women feel that they were queens of their domain; and I loved her for her inspiration." Her gift for friendship was such that I have seen her at the door of an English home in Chester greet a reserved Englishwoman who came along the street to the door with the simple words, "I am Agnes Ellen Harris from the University of Alabama"; to her that was sufficient passport for anyone. And in a moment the Englishwoman, who I know had never heard of the University of Alabama nor opened her house before to a stranger, was inviting her in and showing off her home and its unusual type of window shutters and telling of wartime bombing experiences.

I have seen her sit down in the botanical gardens at the University of Leyden and in a few minutes enter into conversation with a young woman, a Dutch medical student, and the Dutch girl inviting her to her rooms for tea. Distance from home or foreign language were no barriers to a friendship for such a warm personality as hers.

Her life was devoted to education for women. This realization of the value of education is understood when we remember her background. Born at Cedartown, Georgia, July 17, 1883, her family as you would know for that period, was not rich in worldly goods but she was fortunate to be one of a family rich in human values, in happy living together, with a father who was a scholar and educator. From him she undoubtedly gained much of her broad knowledge, her enjoyment of poetry, her human understanding, her love of young people and desire for education for everyone. In her youth there were few openings or opportunities for women outside the home. At the turn of the century she was a student at Georgia State College for Women, and at this time only a few universities and colleges were offering some courses in home economics. Home Economics was very new and the great organization, the American Home Economics Association, with its membership now at 20,000 was not founded until 1908. Dean Harris was one of the charter members and later a national vice-president (1926-1929) but in 1900, with that clearness of vision which was so characteristic of her throughout life, she saw that home economics offered the greatest opportunities for a career of service for any young woman. In 1901 she went north to Oread Institute, Worcester, Mass., and studied home economics. From that time forward her life was dedicated to home economics and teaching. She taught home economics in Georgia schools, spent her summers studying for her degree getting her B.S. from Teachers College Columbia University in 1910 and her M.A. in 1922.

She seems to have been born to lead. Leadership based on knowledge and training, warm friendliness and personality, vision and courage to overcome difficulties and branch out on new pathways.

In 1908 she went to Florida to become director and later first Dean of the School of Home Economics and State Home Demonstration Agent for Florida. How she loved to tell of her early experiences in home canning with rural women in
Florida. And there were stories of the horse and buggy rides over the state and the white rats she carried with her to show clearly how food and nutrition do affect health.

She had that rare ability to laugh at herself and her mistakes and no matter what happened, to pick up and go forward again with renewed vigor toward her goal of education for women.

In 1922 she came to Alabama and the rest of her life was given to this State. First as Dean of Women and State Home Demonstration Agent at Alabama Polytechnic Institute 1922-27, and then in 1927 Dean of Women and Dean of Home Economics (1931) at this University.

It was her belief in education, and her love of people that made it "a natural" for her to be a Dean of Women. Continuously she worked to establish the idea that every young woman should have a college education. We take that for granted now but in the 1920's it was not so. Never a meeting she attended or group she was with but she would talk with the women about sending their daughters to the University.

I have clearly in mind a scene which I think was typical--Dean Harris standing in the doorway of Doster Hall, calling in that full, rich, and we must add carrying, voice of hers, to a man over on the sidewalk, "Be sure to send your daughter to the University."

It was such scenes as that which prompted one of her faculty members to say in 1948 when Dean Harris was getting ready for her summer trip to England, "If Dean Harris sees King George, I am sure she will go up to him and suggest that he send Princess Margaret to the University of Alabama." And Dean Harris could so easily have done just that; done it with that natural charm she had. She was equally at home with a mother in the simplest farm home or with kings and queens, for she saw not the title or the rank, but the person, and always others responded in like manner.

Julia Tutwiler opened the doors of the University to women, but it was Agnes Ellen Harris who brought the women into the University. Julia Tutwiler's plea for a University education for women was approved in 1893. When Dean Harris came here in 1927 there were only about 500 women enrolled. She saw this number grow to over 2,000 because she had a clear vision of what women should and could accomplish; her interest never flagged and she never ceased to work for the education of women. She wanted every Alabama girl to have the opportunity to come to the University. She also wanted every woman's club and organization to have an educational program because she knew the influence that women could have, and she wanted them informed and able to take their place in community and civic affairs. To this end, when Doster Hall was built in 1929 it was planned not only as a School of Home Economics but as a center for women's activities and it has continued as such ever since with practically every day of the week two and three women's groups, clubs or societies meeting in the Alumnae room or the auditorium.
Dean Harris was never happier than when she heard Doster Hall filled with women’s voices; the P.T.A. Summer Institute, School Lunch Managers Conference, Federated Club, Study Clubs, and others. It was music to her ears because she always saw further than the rest of us. She saw what it all meant in terms of women's accomplishments, improvement of home and family living and the advancement of Alabama.

To bring students to the University was not always easy. Many did not have the money, but she found ways to help, funding employment for her girls and often helping from her own limited funds. She worked for scholarships to help girls and that is why the present drive, by students and Alumnae to raise a large enough fund for a permanent endowment for an annual scholarship to help students, is such a fitting tribute to her memory.

It was her understanding and her efforts which got the Cooperative House built where women students could live on the campus at minimum expense and it was because of her keen interest in needy students that she loved to think that some day the Cooperative House would be known as Harris House.

One of her students who had a great struggle financially to complete her University education and who now holds a top position in her field in Alabama, a couple of weeks ago wrote, "From the day of my appointment it has been my foremost aim to do a job that would please Dean Harris. This was to have been my method of proof that her help in past years had not been in vain. I shall now try harder than ever."

Her interest in women's education led her to serve as President of the National Association of Deans of Women, as regional vice-president of the American Association of University Women and as a member of the housing committee of A.A.U.W.; as the first woman to be elected President of the Florida Education Association; as chairman of the Living Cost Committee of the Alabama League of Women Voters, and Chairman of the Rural Life Committee of the Alabama Parent-Teacher Association.

These are but a few of the positions in which she served, but they illustrate how broad was her vision and knowledge of what education of women means.

And these examples of her work lead inevitable to the question: How did she do so much and yet have an open door to her office and always time for any of her girls to come in and pour out their troubles. There is no answer to that question only to say "She did it." She did it when for a good part of her life she had a heart which as she said "acted up." Where others would have taken to a rest cure and a rocking chair she just kept on doing the things she believed should be done. She loved life and lived it to the full. She might be stretched out on her couch at home, weary and frustrated and seeking a few minutes rest, but a knock on her door would see her in a second greeting that person with gaiety and joy. Weariness was dropped like a cloak from her shoulders and with vigor and enthusiasm she would talk for hours if need be with her visitor.
Dean Harris loved to entertain people in her home and many a visiting professor or dignitary from the north or abroad has gone home with a new understanding of gracious living and southern hospitality. They may have felt that they simply could not eat such a breakfast as she prepared of waffles and grits and chicken hash and fig preserves, but they did and they loved it. Many will long remember her "porch conferences" of happy conversations and laughter, where inevitably she brought the conversation around to the fundamental question of what women are doing and how to get more education for women. Every visitor found himself telling all he knew or thought about education. Dean Harris was a diligent listener and always ready to accept new ideas. Determinedly she hid her own keenness of perception and brilliance of mind lest others be afraid to talk in her presence. She did this partly because of her own genuine humility and partly because of her intense feeling for others and desire to make them feel important and be the center of things. And when she herself talked, sometimes you had difficulty keeping up with her or filling in the unfinished sentence. If you did not know her well you might be misled by a half-finished sentence or a big jump to a new idea. Confusing at first, wasn't it! But the truth was that her mind moved so much faster than her tongue could keep up.

Dean Harris loved this University and everything it stands for; especially she loved the women students and the Alumnae. Her mail brought her letters from all over the world. The Alumnae Association which she helped to found, was to her a vital factor in the life of the University and this Alumnae Day for which she always worked so hard was to her a most important occasion. When the Alumnae Association raised the funds to have Sidney Dickinson paint her portrait, and hung that portrait in Doster Hall she always showed it with great pride to all visitors. To Dean Harris that portrait was like the other honors showered upon her; she accepted them not as honors to herself but as the recognition of women's achievements.

Mary Woolley of Mount Holyoke said, "The educated woman should be the kindest woman, the finest woman, the most honorable and considerate woman." Dean Harris was an educated woman.

Some build bridges and great buildings, some invent a new machine, some discover a new cure for disease, some write great books; there is tangible evidence of their greatness. For Agnes Ellen Harris there is none of these to point to. There is nothing to show--except hundreds of students and friends whose lives are different because of her.

She took life tiptoe to the very last
For her it never lost its lovely look
She never lost her interest in its thrilling book
Death came--no conqueror in the end,
She simply smiled to greet another friend.
She is gone. For some of us there is the never-ending loneliness which comes when a close friend and congenial spirit is no longer with us. But for all who come to this University she left the example and inspiration of a rare and great personality who gave of herself to others, who radiated goodness in its highest sense, who personified the educated women and who helped others meet life with more strength and courage.
AGNES ELLEN HARRIS

Born in Cedartown, Polk County, Georgia, July 17, 1883, daughter of James Coffee and Ellen (Simmons) Harris.

Degrees
B.S. Columbia University 1910
M.A. Columbia University 1925
Hon. L.L.D. University of Alabama 1941

Awards
Delta Kappa Gamma National Achievement Medal 1935
Algernon Sidney Sullivan Medallion, University of Alabama 1936
National Future Homemakers of America, honorary membership 1952

Outline of Career
Student, Georgia State College for Women 1899-1901
Graduate, Oread Institute, Worcester, Massachusetts 1901
Graduate, Georgia State College for Women 1902
Teacher of Home Economics, Georgia High Schools 1903-07
Teacher of Home Economics, State Agricultural School, Douglas, Georgia, 1907-1908
Director, Department of Home Economics, Florida State College for Women 1908-09
Dean of Home Economics and State Home Demonstration Agent, Florida State College for Women 1910-19
Member Summer School Faculty, Johns Hopkins University 1911-14
State Supervisor of Home Economics, Texas 1919-20
Field Agent in Home Economics, U.S. Department of Agriculture 1920-22
Dean of Women and State Home Demonstration Agent, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, 1922-27
Dean of Women, University of Alabama 1927-45
Professor of Home Economics 1927-52
Dean, School of Home Economics, University of Alabama 1931-52

Memberships in Associations
American Home Economics Association, Vice-President 1926-29
Alabama Home Economics Association, President 1943
National Association of Deans of Women, President 1932-35
American Association of University Women
  S.E. Regional Vice-President 1941-45
  Alabama State President

Florida Education Association, President
Alabama Education Association, Executive Committee
National Congress of Parents and Teachers, Life Member
Alabama Congress of Parents and Teachers, Chairman Summer Institute and Honorary Vice-President
Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs, education chairman, recording secretary, and director 4th district
Alabama Association Advisers to Girls
Delta Kappa Gamma, Alabama Chapter, co-founder and past president

Honorary memberships in: Phi Beta Kappa
                           Mortar Board
                           Phi Mu Sorority
                           Tuscaloosa Chapter Pilot-International