

Lexington's Lively Maiden Ladies

By Matthew W. Paxton Jr.



WHEN ROBERT E. LEE was president of Washington College here after the Civil War, he indicated that he would be sad if his daughters married and left him and his invalid wife. The daughters, Mary Custis, Mildred, Agnes and Anne, must have been thoroughly convinced of this, because in a town teeming with young men at the two colleges, none of the Lee daughters ever married.

Whether this set a trend has never been verified, but the fact remains that maiden ladies played a major role in the town's life for many years after that war. They were educators, business women, musicians, artists, health professionals and hostesses of the town's many boarding houses.



MISS EDMONIA SMITH, a granddaughter of Gen. Francis H. Smith, first superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute, gave many Lexington children a good start on their education at the primary school she op-



Edmonia Smith

erated in her Jackson Avenue home. To those who excelled she gave the coveted "right hand of fellowship." Her brother, Dr. Livingston Waddell Smith, taught mathematics for several generations at Washington and Lee University, and once told this writer, who was struggling in his calculus class, "You are not the student your father was."



MISS HELEN and Miss Ella Webster were prominent figures at W&L. Miss Ella was secretary to Dr. Francis P. Gaines, president of the university from 1930 to 1959, and Miss Helen was assistant to Earl S. Mattingly, university treasurer. It was said that the Misses Webster ran the college. In 1926 the Websters and their sister and brother-in-law, Gen. and Mrs. James A. Anderson, purchased a farm which they named Sunnyside. They operated Sunnyside Dairy until 1950, when the farm was converted to a beef cattle operation. A portion of that beautiful farm is now the site of Kendal at Lexington.



One of the cherished college traditions has been the W&L Fancy Dress Ball.

Annie Jo White, all dressed up for her Fancy Dress Ball



Founder and for many years director of this event was Miss Annie Jo White, librarian at the college. *Life* magazine once called it the outstanding collegiate social event of the South. Miss Annie Jo selected the theme for the ball, and appropriate costumes were ordered from Van Horne's of Philadelphia. The students particularly liked the fact that they had to get their dates' measurements to order the costumes. Some girls responded by giving Marilyn Monroe's measurements. On the long-anticipated day when the costume arrived, their sizes bore little or no resemblance to the girls' measurements, so there had to be frantic alternations. Actually, the appearance of the costumes made little difference, because only those of the leaders of the ball bore out the theme of the event. The rest were more or less the same, year after year.

MISS MARY MONROE PENICK was the grande dame of music in Lexington. Organist and choir director at Lexington Presbyterian Church for 44 years, she was the principal organizer of the Rockbridge Concert-Theater Series, which became the primary



Mary Monroe Penick receiving an honorary doctorate from Washington and Lee in 1971

provider of classical music here after World War II. She also taught music in the public schools and would prepare the students for concerts of the National Symphony Orchestra that the series brought here. She directed performances of Gilbert and Sullivan operas and led programs of choral music, including Handel's Messiah and the Brahms Requiem.

PROMINENT on the Lexington scene during the first half of the 20th century were the Misses Nettie and Lula Dunlap. Miss Nettie was principal of Ruffner Elementary School and taught eighth

grade, which was required only of those students who through learning difficulties or disciplinary



Nettie Dunlap

problems were not considered ready to move on to high school. Miss Nettie could handle them with one hand tied behind her.

Miss Lula was Lexington's voter registrar. She did not make registration easy. She would hand the prospective voter registrant a blank sheet of paper and say, "Register."

THE MISSES GADSDEN and the Misses Barclay held sway on Lee Avenue. Both took boarders and offered tables amply supplied by excellent cooks. Miss Ellinor and Miss Anzolette Gadsden were twins, and both were known as Miss Allie. One could hardly tell them apart until one of them gained weight, and the rumor went around that one Miss Allie had swallowed the other. The Gadsdens were granddaughters of Gen. William Pendleton, General Lee's chief of artillery, and rector, both before and after the Civil War, of Grace Episcopal Church. The Gadsdens were excellent athletes, and during the summers a croquet court was set up on the long, level front yard of their family home, The Pines. Miss Anzolette worked at the *Rockbridge County News* and later was on the staff at the W&L library. Miss Ellinor worked at the VMI library.

In the Barclay household, Miss Elizabeth Barclay was a leader in community affairs, and Miss Mary Barclay was a key person for years in the W&L Alumni Office. She and her brother, Houston Barclay, were



Elizabeth, left, and Mary Barclay

wood carvers, and she carved the ornamental mace carried in all W&L academic processions. The Barclay residence, a center of hospitality, had been the home of their maternal ancestors.

IN BARCLAY LANE lived the Misses Ellen and Judith Anderson, daughters of William A. Anderson, the "Lame Lion of Rockbridge," who was wounded in the Civil War and later became at-



Judith, left, and Ellen Anderson, ages about 7 and 5

torney general of Virginia. Miss Ellen, who studied art in Paris and later drew sketches for *The New York Times*, was goddaughter of Miss Mildred Lee. She was president of the Mary Custis Lee chapter of the United Daughter of the Confederacy

and when she retired from that post, she announced that the chapter was being disbanded.

POPULAR with several generations of young women, for whom she provided lodging when they attended dances at the local colleges, was Miss Lizzie Graham. Her house, which stood on Letcher Avenue, was pictured in the movie *Brother Rat*, which starred Ronald Reagan.

MISS GWENDOLYN HOWE held important posts at Jackson Memorial Hospital. She was daughter of Dr. James Lewis Howe, distinguished professor of chemistry at W&L and an international authority on the platinum metals.

MISS JENNIE HOPKINS, who lived in the Hopkins House on Nelson Street and whose property included the present-day Hopkins Green, was for many years receptionist and secretary at the Rockbridge County News. At the time of a W&L mock convention, her

student renters, knowing that she was a staunch Democrat, affixed a large Republican banner to her upper front porch and locked the porch door.

LEXINGTON'S lively single women of yesteryear should be saluted before the memory of them slips away.

Matt Paxton (1927–2023) was editor and publisher of the *Lexington News-Gazette* (and of the *Rockbridge County News* until the papers merged). He was a civic leader here for his entire adult life.