

VIRGINIA RAGSDALE

FOR NINE YEARS, VIRGINIA RAGSDALE lived on the College campus, and her presence meant more to Guilford College than she would ever have been willing for anyone to say. Dr. Ragsdale was one of the finest scholars whose lives have touched that of the College; she was also one of the most unassuming. Her life was a constant illustration of Dr. Hobbs' oft repeated remark, "There is no limit to what a person can do if he doesn't care who gets the credit."

Virginia Ragsdale, the daughter of Joseph S. and Emily Idol Ragsdale, was born on December 13, 1870, at the home in Jamestown. There with her sister, Ida, and her brother, Will, she spent a happy childhood varied with visits to "Grandma's house", a place of pure enchantment in every season. The Idols had lived on the same farm for generations—the new house was built in 1843—and the children loved it all: the yellow rose beside the front steps, the portico at the back with railing and lattice work, and the long flight of stone steps down to the deep shade of a row of cedars, the front room with gilt-framed mirrors on opposite walls, the kitchen with the Dutch door, the great dresser with slits in the shelves to hold spoons, the fireplace so deep that they could sit within it, warm and secure, the attic where apples were stored for winter use, the old loom-house where grandmother and aunts wove the lengths of stout cotton checks and linsey woolsey for everyday clothing. The visiting days were long and busy; the memory of those days remained bright.

The Ragsdale children went to school at the old Flint Hill School in Jamestown, a private institution which their father had owned and managed for a year or two just after the war was over, and he was out of the army. Jewel Weatherly, often mentioned in Jamestown history, was the principal teacher when Virginia Ragsdale was going to school there, and he was a good teacher for a young mathematician, for mental arithmetic was his chief delight. Miss Ragsdale said, "We acquired speed and accuracy that stood us in good stead long years afterward. I should like to know how many times we went through Olney's *Algebra*—at least until we knew it backwards and forwards."

Virginia Ragsdale was well prepared when she entered Salem Academy as a junior; she pursued the usual course of studies, graduating in 1887 with an extra diploma in piano playing. She was valedictorian of the class.

Virginia Ragsdale was graduated from Guilford College with the class of 1892, a class which has set high standards in life as well as in college. It was an extremely active group which, during its college career, led in the movement for the building of the Y.M.C.A. (now called the Music Building), expanded the athletic program, excelled in oratory, and shortly after graduation founded the Alumni Association of Guilford College.

Among the honors which came to the Class of 1892 was one which had particular significance for the College as a whole; in the spring of 1892, Bryn Mawr College established a scholarship to be awarded annually to the Guilford woman graduating with the highest scholastic average. Virginia Ragsdale was the first to win this honor.

In the fall of 1892, she began her long residence at Bryn Mawr; there she matured as a scholar. She took her bachelor's degree in 1896 and returned in 1896-97 as graduate student and demonstrator in physics; at the end of the year, she was awarded the Bryn Mawr European Fellowship.

Her field was mathematics, and with the advice of Dr. Charlotte Angas Scott, the able professor under whom she had done much of her work, Miss Ragsdale chose the University of Gottingen in order that she might study under the distinguished mathematicians, Klein and Hilbert. Two other Bryn Mawr students went abroad at the same time, and the three had a fine year at the University of Gottingen. They planned their arrival in Germany so that they had about two months of living with German families in the pleasant little town of Eisenach before the university opened.

They visited Weimar; they spent their spring vacation happily in Italy; and when the year's study was over, they had a fine trip down the Rhine and on into France. Of course, they shopped in Paris, Miss Ragsdale buying a black straw hat nicely trimmed with pink roses; then they went on to England for three weeks, came home on a fast boat, and prepared to begin the year's teaching.

Miss Ragsdale had been appointed teacher of science and mathematics at the Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore and stood at the beginning of her fine career as a teacher. After three years of teaching she was awarded her third important scholarship, one given by the Baltimore Association for the Promotion of University Education for Women, and returned to Bryn Mawr to complete the work for the Ph.D. degree. It was conferred in 1906. Dr. Ragsdale was one of the first woman scholars from North Carolina to earn such a degree upon the basis of foreign study. Her dissertation, "On the Arrangement of the Real Branches of Plane Algebraic Curves," was printed in the *American Journal of Mathematics*.

After two years of study (1901-1903), she taught at Dr. Sach's School for Girls in New York City; in 1906 she became head of the department of mathematics at the Baldwin School in Bryn Mawr, and in 1911 Miss Gertrude Mendenhall succeeded in persuading her to return to North Carolina and to become a member of the mathematics department at Woman's College. There she was instructor, associate professor, and professor of mathematics, being the head of the department from 1926 until 1928.

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DR. RAGSDALE

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As a mathematician Dr. Ragsdale had that certainty which emerged from her own great abilities and from her excellent study and preparation; she also had the power to look forward, to foresee the developments which would come. Courses in statistics were not formally introduced into the Woman's College curriculum while she was a member of the faculty, but she had taken the steps which led to their establishment, for she had suggested to Miss Strong that the time had come for the two of them to begin the study of the subject, and they had proceeded with the work.

Dr. Ragsdale was an excellent teacher interested in her students, patient with them in trial and error, ever steadfast in holding them to the highest standards of exact and careful work. There was great courtesy and consideration in her manner when she discussed calculus—or any other subject. She was a fine scholar and a fine woman; no student could fail to recognize those two facts, neither could she fail to see that her professor was making absolutely no effort to impress her with them.

Students and faculty members, friends in every period of her life, felt the depth of her modesty, for she seemed always unconscious of her rare powers. The Tribute offered to her memory by the faculty of Woman's College contains a characterization for which her friends are grateful: "Two of the most striking things about her were her integrity and her singleness of mind. And because her eye was single, she saw questions in the large, and her judgment was just. She had courage, too, as well as wisdom—courage to do and to stand for what she felt right and courage to carry on in the face of physical disability, anxiety, loneliness, and grief. And her wisdom and courage were equalled—even excelled—by her unselfishness. She had a positive talent for self-effacement. Underlying all was her religious faith, silent but real."

Dr. Ragsdale retired from teaching in 1928, saying that she felt that her place at Woman's College could be taken by someone else but that her place at home could not. Her mother was ill, and Dr. Ragsdale ended her teaching to carry the responsibilities of the home.

After her mother's death, she built the beautiful house, which now stands as her gift to Guilford College, and moved from Jamestown to enter upon a new phase of her life. In her last nine years, she was not a professor in retirement, she was a busy person living a life of quiet enjoyment, varied with many interests and many friendships, and filled with the joy and satisfaction of setting fine plants in the earth and watching them grow and bloom in beauty.

Her garden was always beautiful, yet Dr. Ragsdale insisted that after all she knew very little about gardening and owed all of its excellence to those who helped and advised her. Miss Ragsdale's friends remember the many flowers she brought: early daffodils, narcissus, and small old-fashioned hyacinths from the irregular border along the fringe of woods, columbine and bleeding heart, mauve tulips and blue phlox, great stalks of iris, yellow day lilies, zinnias, small and intense in July heat, airy rose-red spider lilies in September, great fountain sprays of chrysanthemums pungent as autumn, and to end the season the translucent Christmas rose.

Miss Ragsdale's flowers came to College occasions too—only a short time before her death, she sent the larkspur, the roses, and the lilies to decorate the tables for the

Alumni Banquet. She was always deeply interested in the Alumni Association, which her class had founded, and served on its executive committee for several years. She brought her garden to its greatest perfection of bloom at commencement time, and she often made her home the center of alumni activities for the older group of Boarding School and College graduates.

Miss Virginia Ragsdale's home reflected the beauty and taste which her garden also showed; she had inherited fine old furniture from her family, she had bought other excellent pieces while she was teaching, and she made her home the setting for them. She often entertained her Woman's College friends, her friends and neighbors at Guilford, and the clubs to which she belonged, the Friday Afternoon Book Club and the Guilford College Art Appreciation Club. Her nieces and nephews felt much the same about her home as she had felt about "Grandma's house" and often came to see her. Family ties were strong, and there was a great depth of affection for "Aunt Jennie" among the seven children of her brother William G. and Lucy Coltin Ragsdale: Joseph S., Thomas C., and William G. Ragsdale II, Mary R. Strickland, Lucy R. Heilig, Virginia R. Cox, and Emily Ragsdale, and among the children of her sister Ida R. Hill and her husband, Joel Hill: Fred S., Frank L., and Theodore D. Hill, Louise H. Bower, Emily H. Michal, and Mary H. Snell. One nephew, Joel R. Hill, is not living.

Genealogy had its charms for her, and she had studied family history carefully, but her principal interests were not in the past but in the lives of her family and friends, in the continuing life of Guilford College, and in the activities of the present. She followed last year's campaign carefully and was among the first to make a contribution to it. She kept up her membership in the American Mathematical Society and the Mathematical Association of America and resumed teaching for a few weeks in 1943 when she was needed at Woman's College during the illness of the head of the mathematics department. She read widely and was constantly adding the best new books to her excellent library. She enjoyed travelling and with Dr. Anna Gove spent a part of the summer of 1939 visiting the expositions at San Francisco and New York. Another earlier trip was also memorable—the year of her graduation from Bryn Mawr, seven young friends spent eight days or so on a wagon trip over the Blue Ridge Mountains into Virginia. Thirty-five years later, six of them repeated that journey recalling their memories of the sudden storm, the land marks along the way, the climbing of Mitchell's Peak, the daring swim in New River. Those making the review trip were Miss Mary Petty, Miss Ragsdale, Mrs. Frank Armfield, Mrs. R. T. Pickens, W. J. Armfield, Jr., J. O. Ragsdale, and Herbert C. Petty. Henryanna Hackney White was absent; her death was then the first break in their circle of friendship.

The death of Dr. Virginia Ragsdale, which occurred on the fourth of June, 1945, ended many pleasant associations, yet she had made her life such an integral part of Guilford College that its influence does not end. Memories of Virginia Ragsdale remain as bright and clear as the last roses before frost; her home remains as an evidence of her devotion to Guilford College and her generosity to it. The life of the College and the life of the community have been more beautiful because of her gracious presence among us.

—Dorothy Lloyd Gilbert