

In Memoriam  
Virginia Ragsdale

Dr. Virginia Ragsdale's long connection with our college ended some eighteen years ago when she resigned from the faculty because of home responsibilities. But so outstanding was she, both in scholarship and in character, that the college honors itself when, in view of her death this past summer, it recalls her gracious memory and pays tribute to her rare worth.

Born at nearby Jamestown in 1870, Miss Ragsdale grew up in the hard years following the Civil War when, to use her own words, "life was plain and simple." From a charming account of her childhood written for her nieces, we learn that in these frugal years "biscuits" and "preserves" were company treats and a new dress or the purchase of a new lamp for the house, a real event. But high thinking went with the plain living and sacrificial effort secured for the children the best education available. Apparently Miss Ragsdale's interest in mathematics was stimulated by her first school for, so she records, "mental arithmetic" was "the teacher's delight, and we acquired speed and accuracy in calculation which stood us in good stead long years afterwards." She adds: "I would like to know how many times we went through Olney's Algebra--at least until we knew it backwards and forwards."

Such thoroughness seems to have made a good foundation for further academic success. In 1887, Miss Ragsdale was valedictorian of the graduating class at Salem Academy and along with her B.S. degree at Guilford College in 1892, she won the first Bryn Mawr scholarship awarded at Guilford. This record of achievement was repeated at Bryn Mawr. Along with her A. B. degree there, she won a foreign fellowship which gave her, after a year of graduate study at Bryn Mawr, the opportunity to work at

Cottingen under the distinguished mathematicians, Klein and Hilbert. Then followed several years of teaching at the Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore. There she was awarded a third scholarship, this time by the Baltimore Association for the Promotion of University Education for Women. Returning to Bryn Mawr and building upon her work in Germany, she completed in 1903 the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. She thus became one of the earliest of North Carolina women--possibly the very first--to receive a doctorate upon the partial basis of foreign study. Her major was Pure Mathematics, her minors Physics and Applied Mathematics. Analytical Geometry was her special interest--perhaps through the influence of the very able Dr. Scott at Bryn Mawr--and her thesis bore the title: On the Arrangement of the Real Branches of Plane Algebraic Curves.

Her student days now ended, Dr. Ragsdale entered in earnest upon her chosen work of teaching, first in Dr. Sach's School for Girls in New York City, then in the Baldwin School at Bryn Mawr with some work at Bryn Mawr College also. The death of her only sister brought her back to North Carolina in 1911, and we were happy enough to secure her for our College. After fifteen years in our Mathematics Department, she succeeded Miss Mendenhall as head of the department. Two years later, however, she resigned because she felt that she was needed at home. The years of loving and sacrificial service which followed were ended only by the death of her mother in 1934. Then came prolonged and serious illness for Dr. Ragsdale herself--the result of long strain. But at evening time there was light. Moving from her old home at Jamestown in 1936, she built on the Guilford College campus the house which was to be her parting gift to the college and became in this lovely new home an interested and happy member of the Guilford community. This pleasant home she left last June to enter upon--I use the words of a niece--"the peace and beauty which must be hers in the life beyond."

Turning from our hasty sketch of Dr. Ragsdale's life to think of what she was and what she stood for, we meet several contrasts. She took her work as a teacher by no means as routine but seriously. Never tolerant of slipshod work or of bluffing, she was yet patient with the slow and immature. And she had the forward look. At our College, for example, we have a telescope partly because of her insistence. And though the now important subject of Statistics was not formally introduced into our curriculum until 1929, the first step toward the development of our courses was taken by Dr. Ragsdale. Indeed, she began the study of the subject even before she became head of the department. On the other hand, her strong family loyalty--a loyalty almost fierce, according to one friend--made her ready to subordinate her own career to the call for personal service at home. As we have seen, she came South and then later resigned from teaching because of this family loyalty. Again there is the contrast between her intellectual gifts and attainments and her modesty. She had, to use the words of Dr. Foust, "the modesty and deep humility which characterizes excellence in any field." In her case this modesty was extreme amounting even to diffidence and sometimes hindering the prompt recognition of her worth. She had, for example, been in the college for several years before Dr. Foust could say--as he did say--"I am just finding Dr. Ragsdale out. And she is a jewel; she is a jewel." Then there were other minor contrasts. Thus, she was entirely frank and simple in social intercourse and yet so reticent that even her friends were ignorant of much that she felt and especially of much that she suffered. Again, she held herself and others to exacting standards, yet her friends remember her as tolerant, understanding, and even compassionate. One friend intimate with her from childhood, cannot remember to have heard a single unkind judgment from her lips.

Such contrasts as we have suggested did not, of course, indicate a split in Dr. Ragsdale's personality but rather the depth and richness of that personality. 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 to be right and courage to carry on in the face of physical disability, anxiety, loneliness and grief. And her wisdom and courage were equaled, even exceeded by her unselfishness. She had a positive talent for self-effacement. And underlying all was her religious faith, silent but real.

Dr. Ragsdale had many interests--her lovely old furniture, travel, art and music, books, community and college problems. But perhaps her greatest sources of enjoyment were her flowers, her friends, and her nephews and nieces. Gardening was an unfailing resource, and her roses and iris and other garden beauties were shared generously. As for the nieces and nephews, they looked up to her, grew in trying to meet her high standards, depended on her strength and wisdom, enjoyed her sense of humor, and rested in her loving-kindness. Even her small grand niece "looked on her as a contemporary who could find the most delightful books and write the nicest letters."

Those of us who had the high privilege of knowing Dr. Ragsdale will always be grateful for her presence at our College and will always find it a little easier to be genuine and fair and high-minded and humble. She would wish no better memorial.

J. A. Highsmith  
 Anna M. Gove  
 Mary M. Petty  
 Cornelia Strong, Chairman

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