

December 18, 1996

MEMORIAL MINUTE FOR ABBA V. NEWTON

Abba Newton was born on February 19, 1908 in Ballston Spa, N.Y. She lived in a large and beautiful home with her parents and her only sister, Katharine. Abba was devoted to them all. The house was a duplex, with separate front doors leading to the first and second floors. Three maiden aunts, sisters of Abba's father, lived in the attached house. Aunt Charlotte tutored both Kay and Abba until a year before they entered Mount Holyoke College, from which they both graduated in 1929. Abba majored in mathematics and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

Abba earned her master's and Ph.D degrees in Mathematics at the University of Chicago, one of the very strongest Mathematics Departments in the country. Her 1933 doctoral dissertation on the projective geometry of space curves was published in the Transactions of the American Mathematical Society in 1934. The paper's use of infinitesimals by a 1930's geometer especially speaks to a 1990's logician.

After completing her Ph.D., Abba taught mathematics at several institutions, including Hartwick College and Smith College, before joining the Vassar department in 1944 as an assistant professor. Abba rose through the ranks at Vassar, becoming a full professor in 1957. She was a mainstay of the mathematics department for twenty-nine years. Abba did not have an easy manner with students, but once they realized how interested she was in them, many of them became devoted to her. As one student said to Abba's colleague Janet McDonald, "Miss Newton explains it so good." Most mathematicians would do just about anything to earn such praise even only occasionally.

Abba earned a National Science Foundation Science Faculty fellowship to spend a year at the University of Michigan in 1958-59. Her other leaves from Vassar were equally well spent. She chose to spend semesters at such internationally renowned mathematical centers as the Institut Henri Poincaré in Paris and Princeton University.

Abba endured two severe bouts of pneumonia during her childhood. As part of the prescribed cure, she was sent outdoors even in the fiercest winter weather. These experiences may have sparked her absolute love of nature, plants and animals, outdoor games, and hiking. At Vassar Abba hiked by herself all over the campus and would easily have matched President Fergusson in her walking tours of today. She loved to play tennis and was an ardent member of the Mid-Hudson chapter of the Adirondack Mountain Club. Deeply religious, Abba supported Christ Church in Poughkeepsie as well as her family church in Ballston Spa.

Abba had a quiet, but delicious sense of humor, often telling amusing stories on herself. For example, during her semester leave in Paris she lived with a French family. Abba assiduously practiced her French and began to gain confidence until the five-year old of the family said to her, "Tu parles drole." Janet McDonald recalls an occasion when Abba was chairman of the Mathematics Department. Sarah Blanding, then President of Vassar, summoned all department chairs to a meeting early on a Saturday morning to ask their advice on dealing with a serious incident between two senior members of a department (whom shall be left nameless!). When Abba returned home to the college apartment Janet and she shared, Janet was eager to know what transpired at the meeting. Abba, always meticulous about preserving any imposed silence, replied, "I can't tell you what happened unless you ask me!"

After her retirement in 1973, Abba maintained her strong interest in mathematics and in the life of the College until her health began to fail in 1986. She continued to review books for CHOICE regularly. Abba also was a fixture at department colloquia, and a then eager young colloquium chair now recalls with some fondness how she always communicated her regrets on those rare occasions when she was unable to attend.

Abba's sister Kay, upon her own retirement in 1977 from teaching music in the Mount Vernon schools, moved to Poughkeepsie where she shared Abba's home. Both women continued to be very active in the community, participating especially in Meals on Wheels, Christ Church and as tutors for Literacy Volunteers of America.

Abba's final years were spent in a nursing home in Poughkeepsie. Her sister died unexpectedly in August of 1994. Abba died on May 5, 1996.

All of us who remember Abba recall vividly her zest for life, and her high standards of academic and moral behavior coupled with her quiet wit. We miss her!

Respectfully submitted,

Winifred Asprey
Janet McDonald
Charles Steinhorn