

Sept. 11, 1991

Mary Olive Hillis

1919 - 1990

Although Mary Hillis came to be a seasoned traveler of several continents, there was never any question in her mind but that the best part of the world was the American Middle West and the best part of the Middle West was the state of Illinois. The best part of Illinois, in turn, was the flood-ridden valley of the Illinois River in the southwestern part of the state and its jewel was Beardstown with a population of about 6000 souls. Those who love well do not love often; and there may be an upper limit to the size of a place one can love well: Beardstown sounds just about right.

Mary Hillis had no doubt that it had been her great good luck to have been born, on December 11, 1919, in this best of all places. There she grew up and went through grade and high school. The college of

her choice was one county over and twenty miles from home: MacMurray College for Women in Jacksonville, from which she graduated in 1941 with a Bachelor's Degree in Chemistry, high honors, and election to Phi Beta Kappa. Graduate school required greater dislocation: she went on to the University of Illinois at Urbana, where she earned, in the remarkably short space of three years, a Master's Degree and a Ph.D. in analytical chemistry. Her chosen field fitted her temperament and character: it demands meticulous and painstaking care, but rewards it with comforting certainty.

To accept an offer to teach at Vassar on a one-year replacement contract was a difficult decision. Mary never forgot and often mentioned her fear that she might not fit in with the "sophisticated ways" of the East Coast. "Sophistication" is not a term of approbation in the Mid-West; if it conveys a minim of admiration, it also carries an ounce of suspicion, and a pound of disapproval. But Vassar was a women's college and it was not large: it was the size of a place one could love. Mary Hillis came for a year and stayed for

thirtyeight.

In those years she adapted to some of the sophisticated ways she found here. She decided that gin and Democrats were not as evil as she had been led to believe. She learned to enjoy a drink, registered as an Independent, and never voted for a Republican candidate for President again. But the benefits she may have derived from adjusting to Vassar are far outweighed by the benefits that accrued to Vassar from the solidly Mid-Western values she brought with her and maintained throughout her life.

Mary Hillis was kind and generous; she was unassuming and just plain good. She may well be the only member of the Vassar faculty who never said a harsh word about any other member of this body. She cherished friendship and she was the best of friends. Many knew her easy-going hospitality; there were few Saturdays when she did not cook dinner for friends and asked them back on Sunday for left-overs. Her legendary potato salad was the focus of annual commencement day parties given by her and a friend. She had

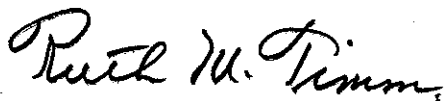
solitary hobbies like stamp and coin collecting, photography and knitting, and hobbies she shared with friends, like travel and food.

But the center of Mary Hillis' life was her work. She was one of the last generation of women who devoted their lives entirely to Vassar. She was a competent research chemist who made contributions to complex ion formation, qualitative microanalysis, and computer-assisted instruction. No recognition of her work could have made her happier than the honorary doctorate awarded her by her alma mater, MacMurray College. But it was as a teacher that she truly excelled. She combined intellectual rigor and demanding standards with unflagging kindness and infinite patience. Although her students were in awe of her knowledge, they loved her as a person, and because of her, many came to love chemistry. There is a large but unknown number of Vassar students who decided to major in chemistry solely on the strength of Mary Hillis' Freshman course. One of these, now a colleague in the department and a signatory of these minutes, recalls her own conversion. She vividly remembers Mary's infectious enthusiasm. Even in teaching such abstract

matters as quantum mechanical wave functions and the transition state theory of kinetics, she impressed upon her students the awesome, even mystical, beauty of nature, a beauty that could nevertheless be rationally studied, modeled and comprehended, - a beauty that was not at all diminished, but actually greatly increased, if one understood its workings.

Mary Hillis was struck by diabetes when she was sixty. She coped with this in her characteristic way: she made no fuss and she didn't let it interfere with her work. Instead, she read up on clinical chemistry, bought the requisite analytical instruments, and monitored her blood sugar levels with precision and with scientific detachment. Nevertheless, her illness made her retire early, in 1982. There had never been any question what Mary Hillis would do after retirement. She returned to Beardstown to live in the house in which she had been born. She tended to her hobbies, was active in community affairs, and welcomed visitors, - more often than not friends from Vassar, - for whom she could cook. Her only disappointment was that her health no longer permitted her to travel much herself.

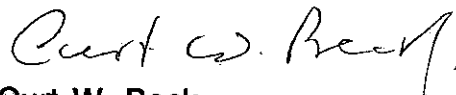
Mary Hillis died on September 6, 1990. In her will, she left equal bequests to the chemistry departments of MacMurray College and of Vassar. Those were the two places closest to her heart. She will always have a place in ours.



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