

WOMEN AT GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE

1900-1930

Talk presented at Gustavus Library  
Associates luncheon, May 15, 1984

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When I began my research project in the Gustavus Archives I asked myself the question: How have women contributed to life at Gustavus? And, following that: How will I be able to discover their role? Researching women's roles in the past is a difficult assignment because there is a lack of women's history sources. After I had read some of the available evidence in the Gustavus Archives, the staff members, especially Edi Thorstensson, suggested that I do oral history interviews. She knew of many women living in and around St. Peter who attended or graduated from Gustavus. I chose the years 1900-1930 as my starting and end points, and with help from Chester Johnson, Florence Peterson, and Ruth Johnson, decided upon a list of women with whom to begin interviewing.

I spoke with three women, Violet Mattson Towley, Catherine Chapman, and Josephine Osborne. To these women I owe a great deal of thanks. All three were delighted and eager to share their stories with me of life at Gustavus as they remember it. Their reminiscences provide there distinct views in my chosen time frame of women at Gustavus. I've chosen to include Clara Tederstrom, former preceptress of Johnson Hall, in my narrative as well, both to offer another viewpoint and to more completely depict the era.

Violet Mattson Towley, a 1928 graduate of Gustavus, and daughter of former Gustavus President P.A. Mattson, spoke to me about her mother, Emma Olson Mattson. Emma was a remarkable woman--independent, strong and determined--and uncelebrated. She grew up in Hopkins, Minnesota, a community of immigrant farmers, and graduated valedictorian of South High School in Minneapolis--quite an achievement for a country girl. She continued her studies at the University of Minnesota, where she

took a course in the normal school. A gifted artist, Emma painted and taught art in Hopkins upon completing her studies.

In 1895, Emma Olson married P.A. Mattson. They moved to Tacoma, Washington, where Dr. Mattson, a Lutheran minister, had the "planting urge," to start churches among the Swedes in the Pacific Northwest. Emma traveled with him, nursed him through tuberculosis, and gave birth to two children while there.

In 1904 P.A. Mattson was chosen to be the new president of Gustavus. The Mattson family left Tacoma, moved to St. Peter, and set up house-keeping in the White House, the president's home on the hill.

Emma Mattson accepted her role as president's wife with great dignity, endless patience, and a sense of humor. Dr. Mattson, a stern, exacting man, demanded much of himself, the faculty, the students, and of his own family. Emma never let him down.

Because there was no college dining room or canteen at the time, Emma Mattson took it upon herself to feed and entertain the hordes of guests, parents, and visitors who found their way to the hill. Her daughter remembers that the coffee pot was always on, and the White House was open to anyone who needed an ear, or a shoulder to cry upon. Her daughter, Violet, remembers that her mother was given a set amount of money for groceries each month. "I think my father tried that one about the loaves and the fishes," she says, "because he'd come home with flocks of people, and my mother would have to feed them. I have marveled so at her patience...." Violet says she and her siblings were taught by Emma to always offer whatever you have, but to never apologize.

In those years following the turn of the century, Gustavus students lived under much stricter rules than they do today. Women students

were expected to be in their dorm, Johnson Hall, by 7 or 7:30 pm, Violet remembers. Emma Mattson sympathized with the girls. When she saw that they were coming back late, past the curfew hour, and climbing up the fire escape to sneak into the dorm, she never said a word to Dr. Mattson. In fact, says Violet, she "would go out and even get them a ladder once in a while because she felt it was wrong to lock the doors at 7 or 7:30. Mom didn't believe in that."

Mrs. Mattson did the same for her own daughter, Myrtle, who was dating the saloon-keeper's son--a young man of whom Dr. Mattson did not approve. Violet recalls:

She had one window in the back of the house...that we always took the screen off because we knew Papa would come in the front door and so then this saloon-keeper's son could get out the bedroom door and Papa wouldn't know he was there. My mother made that arrangement, incidentally.

Emma Olson Mattson, her daughter remembers, brought a sense of balance to their home, with a man who, in her words, "went at high gear constantly." Emma also, I believe, brought a sense of balance to the Gustavus community, mediating between her husband and the faculty and students. Because of her own great individual strength, her own initial career interest and artistic talent, she was able to encourage independent young women to pursue their own goals, and she trusted them, even if it meant breaking college rules.

Clara Tederstrom is another woman who contributed to life at Gustavus. Miss Tederstrom served as the preceptress of Johnson Hall from 1913-1921, after Mattson's presidency. During those years, she lived in the dorm with the students, supervising their activities, caring for them when they were ill, ordering their food and supplies, and cor-

responding with their parents when necessary. The Gustavus Archives holds a collection of Clara Tederstrom's letters, to and from parents. I loved reading those letters. Included in them are many notes from parents in 1915 granting permission for their daughters to attend the controversial new movie, "Birth of a Nation." Also included are letters from worried mothers and fathers asking: is my daughter well? is she studying? is she causing trouble in the dormitory? Dutifully, Clara wrote back to these parents, assuring them of the daughter's well-being, or, when necessary, not hesitating to point out the daughter's lack of discipline or failure to conform to the college rules. One mother wrote to Clara thanking her for keeping watch over her unruly daughter. "I have many times thought of you," she wrote, "and wondered how you could stand to look after so many [girls], when we find it difficult to care for one. We are very thankful to you for your kindness, and for any advice you may give her and I do hope she will be greatful [sic] to you for it. She always speaks kindly [of you] and loves you."

Miss Tederstrom conscientiously served as a disciplinarian, a nurse, and essentially a mother for a generation of Gustavus women. Her contribution deserves to be remembered.

My interviewing led me to two more interesting former Gustavus students, Catherine Towley Chapman, and Josephine Osborne. Catherine attended Gustavus for two years--until 1930; Josephine graduated in 1932.

Mrs. Chapman, who is Violet Mattson Towley's sister-in-law, grew up in St. Peter. Her father had taught at Gustavus as head of the School of Commerce. Five of her six siblings attended Gustavus, though

not all finished. Catherine quit after two years because she thought she was wasting her father's money. The only career open for women that Gustavus could prepare her for was teaching, and Catherine did not want to teach. She emphasized that these were Depression years, and work was hard to come by. So when she was offered a job in St. Peter, she accepted it.

I asked Catherine about Inez Rundstrom, the math professor who taught at Gustavus for 48 years. Did she and other unmarried faculty women have much of a social life in St. Peter? She answered, "I'm sure they didn't. [Of] course, if they were married, that was a little different. Then they could get out. But I don't think [Inez] got invited many times because she was always so pleased to be invited."

We talked about student morality in the late 1920s. I asked if women students smoked cigarettes.

"Oh yes!" she replied. But "we weren't supposed to. Ruth and I did. Just under the President's window, practically. I suppose just to be ornery...mainly just to be smart."

Catherine's candid answers revealed much about her two years at Gustavus. When I asked her to tell me what her most significant memory of Gustavus was, she said it was the friendships that had held on. Now, she says, she is one of the oldest left among her classmates. "It just doesn't seem right," she continued, "it's so painful to see them go."

Josephine Osborne graduated from Gustavus in 1932. She has led a varied and exciting life--traveling all over the world, and final-

ly settling again in St. Peter. She was the first member of her family to attend college. She trained to become a teacher, but again, it was during the Depression, and, as she says, "the jobs just weren't [there]. It was a very tough time for teaching."

Although Josephine lived off campus during her Gustavus years, she vividly remembers humorous incidents which occurred up at Johnson Hall. This is one of her favorites:

It was Halloween night, and the boys were doing some foolishness of some kind. One of the houses on campus had a cow. The boys got the cow out of its pen and took it up the steps, tying it to the door of Johnson Hall. The girls were supposed to be in bed by 10 or 11:00, but some of them were in cahoots with the boys. Somehow they had managed to sneak out under the watchful eye of Miss Swanson, the preceptress (whom everyone called Swannie).

The boys rang the doorbell and disappeared with the group of girls, leaving the cow at the doorstep. When Swannie opened the door, there stood the cow.

All the boys hid behind the bushes with the girls; meanwhile, Swannie called President Johnson. The pranksters watched as Dr. Johnson came running out into the night wearing a long black robe with his white nightgown underneath. And the last we saw, says Josephine, Dr. Johnson was standing in his nightgown trying to put this cow back into the pen--which<sup>it</sup> had taken twenty students to get out.

Josephine has a marvelous memory for witty stories. She also recalls clearly her academic life. When I asked her what female professor she admired most at Gustavus, she unhesitatingly answered, Inez Rundstrom. Math was Josephine's strong point, and Inez Rundstrom was a strict, dedicated teacher. As Josephine remembers: "Dr. Rundstrom was a

wonderful person; a very religious person, a fair person. I liked her very much."

I asked Josephine if she thought women students were taken seriously when she went to Gustavus. Her answer surprised me. "I was taken as a threat to the boys because my math was pretty good," she said. "I never thought there was any discrimination. If you deserved an A, you got an A. If you didn't, you didn't."

I have enjoyed my opportunity to delve into the histories of various women at Gustavus. I've learned some specific facts about several women, but more about the nature of women's history in general. I've realized that those of us who are interested in history must make special attempts to include women in our picture of the past. If we don't, the historic record is left incomplete.

In the history of writing history, women have been overlooked as contributing members of society. Their functions, like those of Emma Mattson and Clara Tederstrom, are often private, quiet enterprises, unheralded, and mostly ignored as contributions.

We have an obligation to our mothers, grandmothers, and to ourselves to find out as much as we can about the lives and accomplishments of women. This is what my project in the Gustavus Archives has taught me. I encourage you to look into your own past. Perhaps you have old diaries and letters, or pictures of family members from long ago. The Gustavus Archives welcomes contributions of these articles, and of your time and ideas for the continuing study of women's history at Gustavus. Or, you might want to begin an oral history project with a friend or relative. We all, I think, have the ability to carry on the oral tradition and fill the historical gaps for our families,

churches, and communities.

I urge you to consider the women whose lives have influenced you:  
what can you learn from them? The answers might surprise you.