

LILIAN L. STROEBE

1875-1959

When Miss Lilian L. Stroebe retired in 1945, at the age of 68, in good health and undaunted in her zest for an active life, she turned German Department historian. She re-read forty German Department annual reports, studied statistics, compiled a list of publications of members of the department, and read over all her diaries, *A Line A Day*, kept diligently through thirty years. The College published her 43 page essay, *The Teaching of German at Vassar College in Peace and War. A Retrospect 1905-1943*.

She came to Vassar in 1905, and it can be said that those early years of this century may well be regarded as the beginning of a new era in the teaching of modern languages. Up to the turn of the century, any native speaker of a language was considered to be a fitting instructor. Now a Ph.D. became necessary, as proof of training in literature, philology, and phonetics. The translation method was being abandoned for the direct method, that is the oral approach to the language. Miss Stroebe was admirably equipped to be a leader in this trend. Born in Illenau, Germany, she was one of the first women to receive a Ph.D. from the University of Heidelberg.

In 1905, she came to the United States, meaning to be a mere visitor for about a year. But fate intervened. Staying in New York, she decided to have some laundry done. But the establishment she selected happened to be a French hand laundry. When she saw the bill, she felt that her funds would not hold out, and that she had better look for a job in this expensive country. She secured one at the Rye, New York, Seminary. This led to her appointment at Vassar, and so it is to a laundry bill that we owe the presence here of a leading personality in the teaching of languages. Here she was to spend 58 years of almost continuous teaching.

Her energy and her devotion to her profession could not tolerate idle summers, and in 1912, she initiated the summer school in Lakeville, Connecticut, which later developed into the nationally known Middlebury Summer School of Languages. Recognition came when Middlebury gave her an honorary degree in 1944.

Another high light of her career was the discovery in February 1912 of what is now the famed Speck Collection of

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Goetheana at Yale University. It was delightful to hear her tell about the clue given by a student, the intrepid walk she took with Miss Marian P. Whitney, then Chairman of the Department, and others, crossing the frozen Hudson

on foot to take the West Shore Railroad to Haverstraw, where to their amazement they found in back of a little drug store the valuable collection to which the elderly druggist, Mr. Speck, had devoted all the time and funds he could spare from his business. Yale rather than Vassar was selected as a depository because our College did not have the space to house the large collection. It is now housed and handsomely exhibited at Yale in a special wing of the Sterling Library and is the finest Goethe collection in this country, second only to one private collection in Germany.

This safari is an example of Miss Stroebe's love of long walks and trips. She was an accomplished mountain climber, and after age and arthritis made active walking difficult, she took great joy in trips abroad, and during the year, drives in Dutchess County. Companions privileged to drive her enjoyed with her the pleasures brought by the changing seasons, from the hunt for the first pussy willows to the forages for lilacs around abandoned farm houses, and to the search, in the fall, for the elusive bittersweet. And the picnics and cook-outs in which the staff and all the German majors took part--those were the days! when we were setting out it was lovely to hear her say, with a contented sigh, "Now there is Sunday in my soul!" She taught us 'the lay of the land and the rhythm of the road.' In her work with younger colleagues she shirked no trouble to help them to come up to their best possibilities. Patiently, she sat in the classroom to observe a newcomer's technique, which must have bored her considerably. Her detailed and objective comments were those of a person who knew exactly what she wanted, and why she wanted it; they helped immeasurably to develop the teaching method of young instructors. Those of us who experienced this never cease to be grateful for what they received.

As early as 1907 an introductory course in Germanic philology and Middle High German was offered, as far as she

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could find out the first of its kind in an undergraduate college. We still teach it as part of 300.

Many articles, mainly on classroom technique, are still read by aspiring teachers, and many of her textbooks, some published in cooperation with Miss Whitney, Miss Hofrichter and Mrs. Bister, are still in use. She made one capital find, *Emil und die Detektive*, a first year reader edited with Miss Hofrichter. Its royalties paid for several trips to Europe and extensive book purchases.

The greatest inspiration she gave to her colleagues lay in her unflagging and enthusiastic devotion to her work. The Department was the center of her life, and nothing was too

much for her if it led to better teaching. The methods she developed still are a tradition at Vassar, and, through the Middlebury Summer School, they are spread to many other colleges. Her work still goes on, as she now rests after her labors.

Ruth J. Hofrichter

Evalyn A. Clark

Ada Klett Bister

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