

SYDNOR HARBISON WALKER

1891 - 1966

Miss Sydnor Harbison Walker, Vassar alumna, faculty member, trustee and Assistant to the President, died December 12, 1966, at her home in Millbrook, New York, at the age of 75. She was born in Louisville, Kentucky, the daughter of Walter and Mary Sydnor Perkins Walker.

After attending Louisville schools, Miss Walker came to Vassar and was graduated in 1913 with honors. Economics was her major interest and she returned to Vassar to teach it in 1917, with an M.A. from the University of Southern California. Professor Emeritus Mabel Newcomer, a young colleague at the time, writes that "her quick wit and gaiety made her well liked among students in the residential hall where she lived ..... as a teacher she exhibited these same qualities, combined with clarity of thought and expression .... although she could be sharply critical of the careless and the dilatory."

In 1919 Miss Walker decided that she needed some practical experience and went to work for a pioneering firm of industrial relations consultants where she wrote their weekly news letter. Three members of this young firm became college presidents and some years later Miss Walker herself was on the way to the presidency of a prominent college for women.

A fourth member of the firm was Beardsley Ruml.

In 1921 Miss Walker engaged in the relief work of the American Friends Service Committee, first in Vienna and later in Russia. In a letter to President Emeritus MacCracken, she vividly describes her experience.

"We are now feeding about 15,000 a week through our depots, and we are supplying clothing to nearly 3,000. Our work is done on an individual case basis, which we think to be the soundest, not only from a social point of view, but because we believe that method essential for the creation of a spirit of international good-will - at no time a secondary object in our program... In addition to the feeding and clothing.... we are teaching mothers to care for their babies through the welfare centers; we are supporting a score of hospitals and other institutions for children; we have restocked farms with poultry and cattle and are helping farmers to build up permanent food resources for the city; and we are assisting materially in such constructive Austrian enterprises as the building of suburban land settlements and the creation of a SYDNOR HARBISON WALKER - continued

market abroad for the art work of many gifted persons...we feel that we are a real part of the life of the city and not a superimposed group of relief workers."

It is not hard for those who knew Miss Walker to visualize her presiding over relief work in the Imperial Palace of the Hofburg, whose stately corridors were cheerless and deserted

save for these activities.

Returning to America in 1924, Miss Walker combined her interests in industrial relations with social welfare and education by becoming a research assistant at the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund in New York. In the meantime she received her doctorate in economics from Columbia University in 1928 with a dissertation on "Social Work and the Training of Social Workers."

When the Rockefeller Foundation absorbed the Spelman Fund in 1929, Miss Walker began her association of twenty years with the Foundation. She moved from the research department to the position of Associate Director of the Social Sciences Division and finally became its Acting Director. While there she developed a program of international relations involving considerable travel in Europe and South America in very responsible positions. In 1933 she collaborated in the preparation of the report of President Hoover's Committee on Social Trends, contributing a chapter entitled, "Privately Supported Social Work."

In 1939 Miss Walker was proposed for trustee of Vassar College by the Faculty Club and she was elected by the board. Again quoting Miss Newcomer, "her contribution as a Vassar trustee was very real....Her experience on the faculty and as a student, and her current work in the Rockefeller Foundation, had given her a real understanding of the problems of the college and enabled her to offer constructive criticism and suggestion for change."

Her resignation as trustee occurred in October 1942, and came because of a crippling illness which led eventually to her permanent confinement to a wheel chair. A friend and fellow alumna described her long battle against mistaken diagnoses, official predictions of helplessness and the end of her career.

"Sydnor simply rejected the idea of permanent immobility.... for a person who never knew what fatigue meant, who never could understand inactivity, either mental or physical, SYDNOR HARBISON WALKER - continued

nothing could have been more tragic than paralysis."

When Miss Walker realized that complete recovery was impossible, on her own initiative she went to one of the first rehabilitation clinics in New York and learned to help herself to a remarkable degree. Also she wrote, and the Woodrow Wilson Foundation published in 1945, a report entitled "The First Hundred Days of the Atomic Age."

In 1948 another opportunity to serve Vassar came to Miss Walker when Miss Blanding named her Assistant to the President. She returned to live in Metcalf House and became an active participant in Vassar's development. Miss Blanding knew her as "a brilliant woman who never lost her zest for life nor her interest in things of the mind. She was a voracious reader and stimulating companion."

After Miss Walker's retirement in 1957, she bought a large colonial house in Millbrook, reminiscent of her native Kentucky. There she continued her vital interest in Vassar and in the many friendships she had made throughout her rich and colorful life.

Respectfully submitted,  
Josephine Gleason  
Clarice Pennock  
Verna Spicer  
Winifred Asprey, Chairman  
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