

Revelations in Riding:  
The Changing Ideas Behind Sweet Briar's Riding Program 1920-1935

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History 105: Doing Sweet Briar History

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I pledge... *Katie Davilli*

The early twentieth century was the dawn of a time of great change concerning women's roles and their place in society. The country was beginning to divide over what it thought was acceptable for and expected of women during time. Women's colleges during the 1920s and 1930s were greatly affected by this shift in views. The twentieth-century Southern patriarchs looked to the women's colleges to produce alumnae who would preserve Southern distinctiveness and the status quo.<sup>1</sup> The ideas present at most southern women's colleges were that of the "Pedestal"<sup>2</sup> or submissive women, who retain the southern ideas of virtue. While the Northern ideas of women seemed to be progressing to a place where women were more liberated, trying new things, and assuming new roles, the South was progressing to that place at a much slower pace. "Changes in...life occurred much later at Southern women's colleges". So, now along with this idea of the "Pedestal" I have associated the idea of the south being behind the times of progress and enlightened thinking with regards to women's roles and abilities.<sup>3</sup>

Now, examining the much smaller setting of Sweet Briar women's college, I would like to see if the same ideas hold true here as well. Sweet Briar, a small liberal arts college situated in the mountains and hills of southern Virginia, would definitely be considered a prime example of a traditional southern women's college, valuing the same ideas as mentioned earlier in the discussion of the "Pedestal". I would like to see if during the 1920s and 1930s Sweet Briar is indeed behind the times, as the idea of the "Pedestal" implies.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Thompson McCandless, "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940," in *History of Higher Education Annual, Vol. 7*, (published under the auspices of the University of Rochester, 1987), 45.

<sup>2</sup> McCandless, 45.

<sup>3</sup> McCandless, 48.

The history of Sweet Briar's riding programs can provide valuable insight in this discussion. Women at the college were undoubtedly considered in the same manner as women globally at the time. Many women at Sweet Briar had at least some basic riding knowledge as a part of their upbringing in higher class households or from life on farms. The riding program at Sweet Briar officially began in 1920-1921 academic year.<sup>4</sup> Its primary functions were as a recreational activity and as an athletic activity, from which participating students could earn Endurance Points towards their athletic requirements. Over the program's first fifteen years, from 1920 to 1935, there began a shift in the ideas and practices of horseback riding and horsemanship. These ideas and practices were considered "progressive" and perhaps, upon further investigation, can prove that Sweet Briar was not the typical southern women's college attempting to preserve the idea of the "Pedestal".

I plan to look at multiple sources of evidence in examining this question. The Sweet Briar News is a valuable source which discusses most changes and events of the riding program that occurred during the 15 year time span which I am examining. Old horse show prize lists and entry lists are valuable for their description of the nature of the competition and they document any changes that occurred in the structure of Sweet Briar shows. There are handwritten minutes taken by the head of riding from 1928 to 1932 which discuss the goings on in the program. Finally there is a box of articles, pamphlets, and letters in the Sweet Briar Archives labeled "Captain Vladimir Littauer" which contains important information regarding his incredible influence on the Sweet Briar riding program beginning in the 1930s.

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<sup>4</sup> Sweet Briar's Junior Class. *The Briar Patch 1920-1921* (Nashville: Benson Printing Co., 1921) Sweet Briar College Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

Before the 1920s, horses and horseback riding were very much a part of every day life. Their uses were mostly of a practical nature. Before the first mention of the riding program in the athletic section of the year book and the college catalogue, the only mention of horses that could be found in all of the archival material was a reference in the handbook of where they could be rented in town.<sup>5</sup> When the riding program was established in the 1920-1921, the activities associated with it seemed to be mostly practical in nature. Other than receiving “endurance” athletic points for a certain amount of riding, riding seemed to be used mainly as a method of transportation or hunting. In 1928 Sweet College held its first annual May Day horse show, which we now know as the Annual Show.<sup>6</sup> In the handwritten journals dated 1928 to 1932, there is discussion of the riding council meetings, scheduled fox hunts and drag hunts, the horse shows that the school’s riders would be attending, and the current ratings and statuses of the college’s riders. This information tells us that by this time, 1928, they had established a riding council similar to the one we Sweet Briar riders are familiar with today. It held organized meetings and made important decisions regarding the riding program. They had a ranking system for the riders who participated in the program. There were A, B, and C level riders, each with their own privileges, who together made up the program. During these early years of the riding program it is evident that the majority of riding was field riding, riding to the hounds or fox hunting, or riding as a part of the lesson program. There did not seem to be a very competitive a nature to the program at this point, granted

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<sup>5</sup> Sweet Briar Student Associations. Sweet Briar Handbook 1918. Sweet Briar College Archives. Sweet Briar, VA. Stack 2, right side, 3<sup>rd</sup> shelf from the top.

<sup>6</sup> Amelia Woodward, handwritten riding journal and meeting minutes, 1928-1929, Sweet Briar College Riding Center Archives, Sweet Briar, VA. Bailey Room Shelves, Second from the bottom.

there were not many opportunities for horse showing in the area at the time. There was only mention of the annual show held at Sweet Briar and the Amherst County Fair show.

This appears to be an ordinary amount of involvement in the riding community for a southern women's college with some form of a riding program for the time. At this point there is still no real evidence to suggest that Sweet Briar was behind the times or ahead of the times for that matter. In fact, it seems as though they are at an ordinary level of involvement and thinking with regards to the horses and the riding program for the time. However, we then begin to see a crucial turning point in Sweet Briar's riding program, which is brought along by the influence of notable horseman Captain Vladimir Littauer.

Captain Vladimir Littauer was a notable Russian horseman who came to the United States in the early 1920s. He established a riding school in New York in 1927 and became widely known for his excellence in teaching riding and horsemanship. In 1930, Captain Littauer visited Sweet Briar and gave a riding clinic to the students and faculty. The clinic consisted of both mounted (on horseback) and un-mounted or classroom sessions. Captain Littauer discussed new ideas and theories on how to best work and communicate efficiently and effectively with your horse as to elicit his best possible performance. His teachings put emphasis on the best interests of the horse, alleviating all possible sources of discomfort or excess mental stress caused by its rider's behavior or misbehavior.<sup>7</sup> It may seem obvious that a rider should already be thinking about his horse with these things in mind, but one must remember that until recently, horses had been considered an animal for work or sport as in hunting, not as a partner in showing or

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<sup>7</sup> Captain Vladimir S. Littauer and Colonel Prince Kader A. Guirey, *The Boots and Saddles Riding School: 1927-1938* (New York City: Sacramento, 1939), 12.

competing. These new ideas and approaches for dealing with the horses could also be applied to horses whose primary function was work for greater productivity because of a happier horse.

The ideas and teachings of Captain Vladimir Littauer, which he use to instruct students and the Sweet Briar clinics, became the foundations of what is now a highly revered, award winning, and nationally known riding program here at Sweet Briar. The system of ideas and practices that Captain Littauer taught in his clinics and at his riding school in New York help to lay the foundation of what we now know as the American System of Forward Riding (which is still widely used at Sweet Briar and other riding programs today).

Captain Littauer returned to Sweet Briar for many years to give his annual clinic on forward riding. Many colleges from the surrounding areas, as well as independent riding professionals and students were invited and attended the clinics.<sup>8</sup> Other schools looked to Sweet Briar's riding program as an example to be admired and followed. After the Littauer clinics became a regular part of the program and his ideas fully integrated in to the college's teachings, it is clear that the program became much more involved in competitive riding. This is evident though the writings in the journals kept by the heads of riding each year, the news paper articles detailing competition plans and results, and the prize lists (pamphlet detailing show information including class lists and entries) from all of the horse shows that Sweet Briar hosted or attended.

Now, with this added evidence to our story, we can say that Sweet Briar was indeed an exception to McCandless' thought about southern women's colleges. They

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<sup>8</sup> Natalie Roberts, handwritten riding journal and meeting minutes, 1930-1931, Sweet Briar College Riding Center Archives, Sweet Briar, VA. Bailey Room Shelves, Second from the bottom.

were not all holding on the idea of the “pedestal” in the sense that they were avoiding progress and were behind the times. Sweet Briar was an exception. Sweet Briar was well ahead of its time with regards to the riding theory which was imparted to the students. I am assuming that because other colleges and riding professionals attended the Littauer riding clinics, lectures, and other Sweet Briar events such as shows and hunts, that they looked to Sweet Briar for knowledge and insight when it came to their riding programs.<sup>9</sup> This is evidence would suggest that Sweet Briar was a leader, at the forefront of riding theory, and thus, could be considered innovative or ahead of its time- when considering and comparing to southern women’s colleges of the time.

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<sup>9</sup> Martie Stephens, handwritten riding journal and meeting minutes, 1931-1932, Sweet Briar College Riding Center Archives, Sweet Briar, VA. Bailey Room Shelves, Second from the bottom.

## Bibliography

Primary sources:

Littauer, Captain Vladimir S. and Colonel Prince Kader A. Guirey, *The Boots and Saddles Riding School: 1927-1938. New York City: Sacramento, 1939.*

This is a very reliable source. It was written by Captain Littauer himself about his riding school in New York. In this work, I am sighting his ideas on horsemanship and riding. The publications of his ideas in this book are accurate and can be corroborated. They can be found elsewhere in his notes and other articles.

Roberts, Natalie. Handwritten riding journal and meeting minutes, 1930-1931, Sweet Briar College Riding Center Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

Stephens, Martie. Handwritten riding journal and meeting minutes, 1931-1932, Sweet Briar College Riding Center Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

Woodward, Amelia. Handwritten riding journal and meeting minutes, 1928-1929, Sweet Briar College Riding Center Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

These three sources were apart of a collection of hard backed journals which I discovered in the Bailey Room at the Harriet Rodgers Riding Center. They were written each year



by the Head of Riding- normally an upper class student in the riding program. The information within these journals seems quite accurate. Corroborating evidence of the facts found in these journals can be found in both news paper articles of the time and in prize lists and brochures of the college's horse shows.

Sweet Briar's Junior Class. *The Briar Patch 1920-1921*. Nashville: Benson Printing Co., 1921.

This is the year book from the 1920-1921 school year at Sweet Briar College. I used this source as proof of the beginning of the riding program. This is the first yearbook in which riding is included in the athletics section. The first Head of Riding is pictured here along with the heads of all other sports. I would consider this a fairly accurate and trustworthy source since I am relying on picture evidence.

Sweet Briar Student Associations. Sweet Briar Handbook 1918. Sweet Briar College Archives. Sweet Briar, VA.

This source was used only to prove the shift in attitude towards horses and riding that occurred over a few short years at Sweet Briar. There were only a few words mentioning that horses could be rented in town if needed. I am taking this evidence as accurate since

it was put out by the SBC student associations for the information and benefit of the Students.

Secondary Sources:

McCandless, Amy Thompson. "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940," in *History of Higher Education Annual*. Vol. 7. published under the auspices of the University of Rochester, 1987.

This is essay was supplied to the students of the Doing Sweet Briar History class by Professor G.Berg. I am using it here in this work to site the historical opinion of its author, Amy McCandless. Used in this context, I believe that it is a trustworthy source which accurately portrays McCandless' views on the subject of southern women's colleges.