

Sweet Briar- Amherst Relations

1918-1929

"I pledge"
Nancy Finley
January 25, 1985
Prof. G. Berg
SBC's History

Sweet Briar-Amherst relations from 1918-1929

Colleges do not exist as separate entities, therefore, they must establish relationships with the town, city or county in which it is located. Each college chooses the type of relation desired and has the power to change these relations over time. Sweet Briar College found itself on the site of an old plantation in Amherst County, with a population scattered over many miles. The college noticed the county lacking in health care and education and although it might have tried to remain secluded the college set about helping the county almost from the very start. Three associations formed and active in the years 1918-1929 are examples of this type of helping relationship, the Association of American University Women, the Young Women's Christian Association and the Amherst County Health Association, all of which were composed partly or entirely of Sweet Briar students, alumnae or faculty. The information about these associations found in the Sweet Briar archives is strictly from the "helpers" point of view, the voices from those "helped" remain unheard. However, the information available provides us with an idea of why these associations were formed and what they accomplished.

In December 1930 Professor Caroline Sparrow of Sweet Briar College wrote a letter to Mr. Sandberg of the Association of American Colleges about the involvement of Sweet Briar in the health affairs of Amherst County. At the end of World War I the students of Sweet Briar

had \$500 they had intended to donate to the war effort, but at the suggestion of the faculty they gave the money to Amherst County to help pay for the salary of a nurse. Amherst County, they believed, needed their assistance because it was so "backward" and poor. In order to raise further money the Amherst County Health Association was formed with an executive committee of some women from Amherst and a few Sweet Briar faculty members.(1)

Therefore, after 1919 a nurse worked steadily in Amherst County. This was made possible because of the efforts of interested students and faculty at Sweet Briar and the residents of Amherst County. Most of all it seemed possible because of the attention the committee created, so much so that the county supervisor began appropriating \$1,000 toward the salary of the nurse and the school board paying \$300. Sweet Briar continued to donate about \$300 annually. Miss Sparrow believed the enterprise worked because Sweet Briar insisted the leaders of the Association be from Amherst, the members from Sweet Briar were only helping.(2)

Also in the letter to Sandberg Miss Sparrow noted the incredible effect the nurse had on the health of Amherst County. Upon the nurse's original examination 90% of all children were found to under par in some way. At the time of the letter the percentage had dropped to 30-40%. This drop also had something with the state's instigation of awarding a certificate to children with good vision, teeth, nose and throat, hearing and normal weight. With this incentive to become a "5-point" child, many children were persuaded to be examined by the nurse, so that between the years of 1926 and 1931 the number of "5-point" children rose from 118 to 745. Also because of the efforts of the A.C.H.A. tuberculosis nearly disappeared, typhoid disappeared

and the welfare of babies improved with the onset of trained midwives and instruction for expectant mothers. Concluding Miss Sparrow noted that this was an example of Sweet Briar going out into the community and being of service.(3) Mr. Palmer wrote back to Miss Sparrow stating that the involvement of Sweet Briar in the health of Amherst was "indeed a very striking example of the contribution a college can make to its local community."(4)

The A.C.H.A. was originally affiliated with the Red Cross but they broke away so they could deal with their problems close at hand. An editorial in the Sweet Briar News in 1929 deals with the choice of the individual donation to either the Red Cross or the A.C.H.A. The editor felt that the student, in deciding, should consider themselves citizens of Amherst County before citizens of the U.S.A. The former duty is more pressing, people are in dire need in Amherst County and the state does not realize this. The welfare of the county, then, is in "the hands of its more fortunate friends."(5) Sweet Briar's is in a perfect position to help greatly, therefore, students should donate to A.C.H.A., the Red Cross will be glad that Sweet Briar has helped. This editorial is an excellent example of student concern for the welfare of Amherst County residents. But the question is, were the students really concerned about individuals in Amherst or was donating money seen as some sort of responsibility due to their status in society?

Shortly after Sweet Briar became involved in the A.C.H.A., the Sweet Briar chapter of the American Association of University Women suggested another way Sweet Briar could become involved with the community in which the college was located. In 1921, when Emilie Watts McVea was President of the college and of the A.A.U.W. chapter,

the idea of an Amherst County Day was suggested, among others, for local work. Therefore, in 1922 plans were made and committees formed for the first Amherst County Day to be held May 13, 1922.(6) In a pamphlet advertising the Day the purpose of the gathering was stated by Dr. McVea as, "Sweet Briar wants to know all of you better and Sweet Briar wants you to know the College better so that every year you will love it more and be prouder of it every way."(7) Because of the success of the first Day it was decided that Amherst County Day become a once a year event and that it would become greater in years to come.

Amherst County Day was a day when all citizens of Amherst County were allowed to roam around the campus.(8) Events were planned for the benefit of the guests, the children were entertained by track events, games and swimming in the lake supervised by Sweet Briar students. In these early days the most popular events seemed to be the "Better Baby Clinic and Contest" and the "5-point parade." Both of these events were created, as was the A.C.H.A., to improve the health of the people of Amherst County. Babies brought to the "Better Baby Clinic" were examined by Sweet Briar's Dr. Harley. Advice and instructions were given to the mother on more effective ways to raise their children. An award was given to the mother who had taken the best care of her baby since the previous Amherst County Day. The 5-point parade was a parade of all the children in the county who had received their 5-point certificate from the state. Being able to participate in this parade was another incentive to be examined by the nurse.(9)

Other events for the benefit of the residents were demonstrations of farm equipment, home demonstrations, the Sweet Briar farm tour, and speakers on various subjects such as Dr. T.K. Wolfe, editor of The

Southern Planter, talking on new innovations in agriculture.(10)

Anything about agriculture was of great interest to the residents. Amherst County Day also provided a forum for politicians, many came to help their campaigns because they could discuss matters with many of the voters in the county all at once. For the children there were essay contests sponsored by almost every department of the college, spelling bees and dancing. In looking at the type of activities planned it would seem that Amherst County Day was instituted, as stated in the March 6, 1929 issue of the Sweet Briar News, to "promote friendly relations to the end that the college might hold a place in the county as an educative influence." The last two words in that quote imply that the relations formed are highly unequal. Sweet Briar, being in a higher educational position, is an influence on the rest of the county.

Faculty members seemed to be more intimately involved, especially Dr. McVea. It was she who instituted Amherst County Day in the beginning, along with other opportunities allowing Sweet Briar to help, such as providing the premises where the Agricultural and Home Economics Club of Amherst could meet to hold a short course. They learned about poultry culling, raised and quick breads, canning and sewing. Dr. McVea welcomed the club and expressed the hope that they come back.(11)

McVea's interest in the community is also evident in the local newspaper articles which appeared after her death in 1928. In one article she was praised because she was interested "not only in educational matters, but in the community as well and had many friends in Amherst County and in Lynchburg."(12) They almost seem surprised that she could actually have friends in the county. It was her

example of Sweet Briar's role to help that was followed in years after her death. In a student editorial on Amherst County Day in 1929 the editor believes that the tradition of hospitality at Sweet Briar should continue in memory of Dr. McVea. The Day was seen as an example of southern hospitality. The campus becomes the estate, the faculty and others are the hosts and hostesses. The lawn party is the one true trait of southern hospitality left, with the picnic lunches and games.(13) Therefore, it appears that Dr. McVea had a great influence on creation the image of Sweet Briar as part of the Amherst community and because of that position insisting that the college be hospitable and help the people of Amherst.

Another example of Sweet Briar's involvement with Amherst county during this time period is seen in the student organization, the Young Womens Christian Association. (YWCA) An extension committee of the YWCA worked at the Indian Mission, among "a race scorned by the white and scorning the Negro, a people with the mental, moral and physical weaknesses of all three races. . ."(14) This quote is extremely enlightening in that it allows a glimpse at what these women actually thought they were doing. They were Christian, justifying their attempts at "civilizing" these Indians that were so unlike themselves. Not meaning to say that all this was conscious on their part, they did have their social and religious position to uphold and helping their Indians performed this function.

For the YWCA at this time the Indians were a responsibility of Amherst and Sweet Briar was a part of Amherst. In 1919-20 much had been done, a church was built by Mr. Arthur Gray and a two-room schoolhouse and mission house erected. The Sweet Briar provided funds for those buildings and the YWCA supplied a kitchen and a workroom.

The ultimate goal of the YWCA was to establish an industrial school where the girls could live, sew, garden, raise poultry and learn academics. The boys could learn farming, basic carpentry and stock raising. It would be a place where the entire community could gather.

As of 1920 the Mission had a full time teacher supported half the year by the Episcopal Church in Amherst and the Sweet Briar YWCA. Students hiked up there to organize parties for the children and fill stockings at Christmas. This pitch appeared in the Sweet Briar Handbook through the 1920's, with the Extension Committee of the YWCA adding more activities such as the collection of books for the Amherst library, a health campaign at a local school and sending magazines and provisions to the county poorhouse. Their aim was to make people "warm, well, and happy." (14.5)

A member of the YWCA, Elizabeth Eggleston, wrote an article in the Sweet Briar Magazine in 1917-18 entitled "Our Indian Neighbors" in which she asserts the problem of the Indians to the student body. The students must realize the "squalor and the utter hopelessness of the people at the Indian Mission." (15) Students can help their condition if they stop being slack and walk to the Mission and help teach. If they cannot give of themselves then give money or old clothes, everything helps. It is all up to the students. (16) Calling on their sense of responsibility, their responsibility as a Christian, surely must have been extremely effective in rallying for more student support.

In looking at these examples of the A.C.H.A., Amherst County Day and the YWCA one is able to determine fairly accurately Sweet Briar's role in the community and the reasoning behind their involvement. Both students and faculty were involved in the affairs of the county

beginning soon after the founding of the college, under the direction and influence of President McVea.

In each case Amherst County, or the people selected, are described as "backward," "ignorant," "poor," and in "dire need." Amherst County was one big charity case and Sweet Briar established itself above the county, maintaining its position as the plantation once did before them. Remembering the actual condition of Amherst and the ideas that the people of Sweet Briar had about the mentality and physical conditions of their neighbors, the only type of relations possible at this time were exactly those created. Amherst, according to this information, was not on the same level as Sweet Briar. Therefore, Sweet Briar created these associations not really to relate to the people of Amherst but to uphold their perceived duty as members of the community, being people of better material and religious standing.

Therefore, in the years 1918-1929 Sweet Briar did assert its position as a member of Amherst County by helping the people of the community. They were helping, however, according to their notions of improvement. Unfortunately we do not know how the people of the county took to being aided in this fashion or whether they had wished to be helped, especially in the case of the Indians. But to Sweet Briar they were establishing friendly relations with Amherst County in the way in which they saw themselves able. Other colleges in other settings probably would have established relations differently because of their location and the differing situations of the people around them.

Notes

- (1) Miss Caroline Sparrow. Letter to Mr. Sandberg, December, 1930, Found in the "Sparrow Folder," Sweet Briar College Archives, Sweet Briar, Va.
- (2) Sparrow letter.
- (3) Sparrow letter.
- (4) Mr. Archie Sandberg. Letter to Miss Caroline Sparrow, December 1930, in the "Sparrow Folder."
- (5) "Red Cross of ACHA?" Sweet Briar News, November 21, 1929, p. 2..
- (6) Informatin on the AAUW found in the "Minutes of the Secretary," years 1921-22.
- (7) Pamphlet for Amherst County Day, found in box labelled "Amherst County Day 1923-60."
- (8) All white citizens that is, no blacks were invited.
- (9) Information on Amherst County Day in box mentioned above.
- (10) Sweet Briar News, May 18, 1929.
- (11) Article in the Lynchburg paper in 1923, in collection of news clippings entitled "Sweet Briar College Clippings for 1920-28"
- (12) Sweet Briar News, October 3, 1928, p. 1.
- (13) Editorial in the Sweet Briar News, May 15, 1929.
- (14) "students Handbook 1919-20," published by the YWCA.
- (14.5) Further information on the Indian Mission found in the "student Handbook."
- (15) "YWCA," Sweet Briar Magazine, vol. 9, 1917-18, p. 147.
- (16) Sweet Briar Magazine.

Annotated Bibliography

"Amherst County Day 1923-60"

This is a box of varied information on Amherst County Day found in room #2, third section on the left, third shelf down. Information includes letters to speakers, posters and news clippings. Valuable to my study are the few pamphlets from the 1920's because they contain descriptions of events for those early years. Collection unknown.

"Minutes of the Secretary of the AAUW 1921-28"

This book is found in a box labelled "AAUW," in room #2, third section over on left, third shelf down. This is a nearly complete collection of minutes, some blank pages may suggest those dates were not transferred into this book. The book itself is useful for it contains the first mention of Amherst County Day in 1921, and other information on the donation of money to the ACHA. Mentions of the Day lessen through the years.

"Sparrow Folder"

Found in the top drawer of the file cabinet in room #2. Useful to me was an enclosed folder on Amherst County health and the ACHA. The file also contains information on Lynchburg in the Civil War and notes on the condition of the "Negro." Collection unknown.

Students Handbook 1919-20"

Found in room #2, second section on left, bottom shelf, the handbook is a book put out by the YWCA mainly for Freshmen use. It details the purpose of the YWCA and other clubs and the rules and regulations of the college. It is a good source of information on the functions of clubs and of the rules of different times.

"Sweet Briar College Clippings from 1920-28"

These three envelopes were found in room #1 on the table. Collection unknown. The envelopes contain news clippings from the Lynchburg and Amherst papers. During this period many articles were written including a weekly column on happenings at Sweet Briar. There are articles on Amherst County Day and other activities between Sweet Briar and the community.

"Sweet Briar Magazine vol. 9, 1917-18"

This issue is found in room #2, first section on left, third shelf down. This is a student magazine put out for the students. Issues contain fictional stories, alumnae notes and reports from the clubs and associations. The magazine is a good source for information until 1927 when the Sweet Briar News took its place.