

Women at Sweet Briar College  
in the 1920's

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\* "Women in The 20's :  
A View from SB "

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Sweet Briar's History  
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Throughout the 1920's, colleges everywhere saw increased enrollment, smaller, single-sex colleges especially.<sup>1</sup> Sweet Briar College, itself small and single-sex, was there with all the others. In 1919, the entire student body consisted of 276 students, 19 of them Seniors, 110 of them Freshmen. By 1924, the student body had increased to 366 students, with 37 of Seniors and 135 Freshmen,<sup>2</sup> a difference of almost a hundred students in only five years. The college at this point had five dorms with another on the way. Why were women choosing to go to college? Most especially, why were they choosing Sweet Briar?

To answer the first question, says Dr. H. Melish in a 1923 Commencement speech, "This glorious age of freedom calls for women of self-reliance and moral worth. College women are the salt of society, the light of their generation... Our college women are chosen spirits, and before them open rich opportunities of influence and service."<sup>3</sup> People were beginning to realize the importance of an education and what it could offer. Lois Peterson, Class of '26, Sweet Briar College, wrote an essay in her Freshman year on why she chose Sweet Briar. In this essay she describes, in her mind, the modern views of women (1920):

"...girls should be interested in politics and government and the newspapers and keep up with the times." She further states that "the day is gone when a girl sits at home sewing and embroidering. A girl of today must have action..."<sup>4</sup> Though this is the view of just one person, it does give us an indication of how women felt in the early 1920's. But still, why choose Sweet Briar over other schools in the country?

In addition to having a large campus, a small number of students, and strict regulations, Sweet Briar had what was considered a wide variety of courses. In 1915 there were majors in English, Modern Language, Ancient Language, History and Economics, Mathematics and Physics, and Science.<sup>5</sup> By 1923, a

student could also major in Philosophy, Psychology and Social Science. Psychology was added in 1920 provided the department could come up with enough courses for the major; Social Science was considered in January of 1920, after it was learned that it formed the heart of the new curriculum of the Southern Association of Colleges.<sup>6</sup> It was accepted formally as a major in February of 1920, and by 1922, eleven out of thirty-two Seniors were Social Science majors, though by the next year that lead had fallen to English. In addition to courses in these majors, there were others, some required, some not. One requirement was two hours of hygiene, which included first aid and the general laws of personal hygiene. Another section was Home Economics. This included Foods, Dietetics, and Household Management. This department is described in a 1925 Sweet Briar Bulletin as being "not based primarily on cooking, and not including textiles of any kind, but dealing with budgeting, interior decoration and advanced forms of cooking."<sup>7</sup> It was decided that courses such as Home Economics, Music and Art be part of the regular college instead of separate since home economics is part of "almost every woman's life" and since the history of art and music appreciation are "a vital part of the great body of cultural knowledge."<sup>8</sup> It was also noted in the bulletin that Sweet Briar was the first college in the South to offer music courses as full-credit courses.

Besides being chosen for its curriculum, Sweet Briar was probably chosen as a secure place, with strict rules and ideals; maybe not chosen by the students, but by parents. Though the 1920's was a time for jazz, smoking and bobbed hair, students at Sweet Briar were expected to be ladies in every situation; at all times did they represent the college. For this reason, the Student Government Association covered all facets of student life. In 1923, parties of students going into Amherst had to be comprised of four or more girls, one of whom had to be a Senior. In Lynchburg, students had to remain

dignified at all times, there could be no dates after 7:30 p.m., and no one could go in on Sunday without permission. While on campus, the regulations were just as rigid. No one could walk outside campus limits in groups of less than three; girls could not entertain men on campus during the week; and everyone was required to attend chapel. Sunday morning and Thursday night.<sup>9</sup>

Three specific examples from the Faculty Minutes were especially noted:<sup>10</sup> In 1920, Dr. Harley noticed that many students were complaining of eyestrain and a nervous condition. It was thus decided that students be in bed by 10:30 each night with absolute silence after that time. A second example was with Article XIII of the SGA By-laws, which states that riding unchaperoned in cars with young men is never allowed. On 8 May 1922, two students were expelled from Sweet Briar for just that, as there was incontrovertible evidence that "they had several times been seen in Amherst in company with two men whose reputation is so bad that they are not permitted to come to Sweet Briar." What was even worse was that they had driven for two hours in a closed automobile without a chaperone; the motion to expell them was passed unanimously. The third example is less an example than a whole concept; that of smoking. In the 1923 SGA By-laws it is stated that "smoking is a flagrant offense against the rules of Student Government. Any student enrolled at Sweet Briar found guilty of smoking in any place during the college session shall be recommended to the faculty for expulsion. This rule shall apply to the college buildings, campus and vicinity, neighboring towns, trains from and returning to Sweet Briar."<sup>11</sup> While smoking was being tried all over the ~~country~~<sup>U</sup>, at Sweet Briar it was not. One student had begun smoking during the summer and found it impossible to quit once back at college. The immediate punishment was expulsion, but because she and fellow students felt that she could stop if necessary, this was changed to suspension.<sup>12</sup> Two years after this, in 1925, it was decided that the penalty for

smoking in each case would be left up to the Executive Committee of the Student Government.<sup>13</sup> This was a large step for Sweet Briar students since the lesser penalty was now parole and a period of "campus" in place of suspension. A further revision occurred in February of 1926, when the By-laws were revised to state, "Smoking is not countenanced at Sweet Briar, on Sweet Briar property, or in public places such as roads, stations, stores, hotels, or anywhere in Amherst, Lynchburg or at neighboring institutions except in private homes in which a student is a guest."<sup>14</sup> Though some of these regulations may have appeared strict, they were mostly designed for the protection of the student. Remembering that these were the 1920's, female students had to be protected from danger as well as from a bad reputation. The previous example of the students driving unchaperoned with males shows this point since that event could have, and probably did, hurt their reputations.

With all of this though, there were also many privileges given to the students. A major responsibility was the Student Government Association, designed to maintain the college standards. This association, run by students, governed promptness at collegiate exercises and quiet and order in places not controlled by the faculty.<sup>15</sup> It was also noted that in 1919, many of the requested privileges were referred to the Student Government Association, for the student leaders to decide on. Another privilege was with the social life. President McVea, in her 1925 bulletin, says how social activities are important: "Sweet Briar believes that proper social activities have a large place in the life of a normal human being."<sup>16</sup> Though such activities as dances were restricted to a specific number, a big deal was made of them. The dances especially were a large part of the students' social activities.

While these activities were taking place at Sweet Briar, wilder and more exuberant things were occurring outside, in both the United States and Europe. Compared to these events, Sweet Briar appeared almost placid. Though

changes did occur along the way, they occurred slowly and Sweet Briar remained quite stable. But one must remember that the college was still young, just into its twenties, and things that appear to some as change are possibly parts of the college not yet formed. To say that the added majors were changes in the curriculum, may actually be to say that they were additions to a curriculum not yet completed. The important changes that did occur seem instead to be in privileges given to the students. But were these changes just for appearance? Were they used for the benefit of the students or were they used to attract a higher number or caliber of new students. There is no doubt that most of these changes were requested by the students, but for the administration and faculty to approve them, there must have been a stronger motive.

Throughout all of this though, with the high ideals for women, and the great vocational options open, women were still expected to continue with the traditional roles presented. Dr. Meta Glass, president of Sweet Briar from 1925-1946, exemplified this in a speech made in 1927, when she says, "Higher education of women in no way interferes with matrimony and home-making...Our graduates marry in large numbers...They are sound in all the essentials and marvelously capable; and are the best mothers the world has ever seen..."<sup>17</sup>

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Fass, Paula. The Damned and the Beautiful.
- <sup>2</sup>Faculty Minutes, Volume 6 (8 October 1919); Volume 7 (15 September 1924).
- <sup>3</sup>The Lynchburg News, "'Moral Task of Womanhood' Subject of Dr. H. Melish." (6 June 1923).
- <sup>4</sup>Lois Peterson, English Essay, (20 September 1922).
- <sup>5</sup>Sweet Briar College Catalogue, (1915-1916), p.30.
- <sup>6</sup>Faculty Minutes, Volume 6 (13 January 1920).
- <sup>7</sup>Sweet Briar Bulletin, Volume VIII, No. 6 (June 1925) p.7.
- <sup>8</sup>Sweet Briar Bulletin, p.8.
- <sup>9</sup>Constitution and By-laws of the Student Government Association of Sweet Briar College, (1923) pp. 18-22.
- <sup>10</sup>Faculty Minutes, Volume 6 (16, February 1920); Volume 6 (8 May 1921).
- <sup>11</sup>Constitution, p.21.
- <sup>12</sup>Faculty Minutes, Volume 7 (22 October 1923).
- <sup>13</sup>Faculty Minutes, Volume 7 (15 January 1925).
- <sup>14</sup>Faculty Minutes, Volume 8 (3 February 1926).
- <sup>15</sup>Constitution, p.7.
- <sup>16</sup>Sweet Briar Bulletin, p.9.
- <sup>17</sup>The Lynchburg News, "Dr. Meta Glass Talks of Educated Women," (2 December 1927).

## PRIMARY SOURCES

Briar Patch (1922) This is one volume of the library's collection of yearbooks. It and others can be found in Room 2 of the Archives, on the shelves on the left-hand side. As these yearbooks are published by the students, they are useful for an idea of student life. This particular yearbook was used to find the majors of the students.

Bulletin-Sweet Briar College (June 1925) Bulletin of Sweet Briar College as written by President McVea, comprised of sections on An Interpretation, The Spirit of Sweet Briar, My Ideal for Sweet Briar Students, and Prayer at the Opening of College. This was found in the blue box labelled President McVea, located on the right-hand shelves in Room 2. Only the Interpretation was useful as it gives President McVea's views on the subjects as presented to the reader. As it is a published material, it included only what the author and editor chose to include.

Constitution and By-laws of the Student Government Association of Sweet Briar College (1923) This booklet is the equivalent of portions of our student handbook in that the Student Government constitution and by-laws are included as are the penalties. Since this source is an original source, one used at the time, it has the same value as college catalogues have (mentioned below). Both are written as informative sources for incoming and present students. This was located in Volume 7 of the Faculty Minutes, which are found in Room 1 in the right-hand shelves.

Examination Booklet (20 September 1922) A student's account of why she chose Sweet Briar College. It was found in Lois Peterson's (a student) scrapbook from 1922-1926, located in Room 2, on the middle of the left-hand shelves. The examination booklet is dated September 20, 1922 and while it is good to see the reasons why she chose Sweet Briar, one must realize that this only reflects the views of one individual and should not be taken to reflect all students at that time.

Faculty Minutes, Volumes 6-8 (1919-1926) Minutes during President McVea's term. Those chosen were found in Room 1 on the right-hand side on the middle shelves. The chosen minutes discussed privileges, punishments, smoking, and admission requirements. Benefits include the original concerns of faculty members and the importance given each event. Some of the requirement changes and course changes are such that they may not have been noticed if someone had just been going through course catalogues. It isn't known if anything has been left out, but as they are to be accurate representations of what occurred, I am assuming that they are fairly inclusive.

Sweet Briar Clippings (1920-1929) These are four envelopes of newspaper clippings located in Room 1 on the far card-table. The four are divided into 1920-1923, 1924-1925, 1926-1927 and 1928-1929. Most of the articles are useless for this topic, but some of the more useful ones include those on Convocation and Founder's Day speeches, the education of women and how clothing causes envy and jealousy. The articles give good insight into the views of different individuals but the reader is still left mostly to the discretion of the reporter.



Sweet Briar College Catalogues (1911-17, 1923-28) These catalogues show admission and degree requirements as well as courses of instruction. The volumes are found on the left-hand shelves of Room 2. While they have been published, they were intended as informative booklets and so are beneficial in that way.

#### SECONDARY SOURCES

Paula Fass, The Damned and the Beautiful This book, being a source published for entertainment and information is not as useful as the others in putting forth an idea of why students chose to go to school, and why they might have chosen Sweet Briar. It was a good source in that it gave the reader an idea of the changes that took place during the twenties, especially in regards to youth.