

Magdalene Kramer, President of the National Association of Teachers of Speech, 1947

By Beverly Whitaker Long, from *Review of Communication*, 6(3), 174-176.

Magdalene Kramer, NCA president in 1947 (when it was called the National Association of Teachers of Speech), received her Ph.D. from Columbia in June of 1936. In July of that year, I was born. In 1958, when I was enrolled in summer school at Teachers College, Columbia University, I met her. Or maybe I just saw her in the hall. I'm not quite sure. But I do remember she was tall and had reddish hair and was imposing—at least to a very impressionable high school teacher from Arkansas. The fall of 1999 I went back to Columbia. In the Department of Special Collections at the Milbank Memorial Library, I found a file labeled “Kramer.”



Magdalene Emma Kramer was born June 17, 1898 in Canton, Ohio. She received an A.B. from Trinity College, Washington, DC, in 1920; an M.A. from Columbia in 1930, and a Ph.D. in 1936. A teacher in the Washington and Ohio secondary schools for eight years, she served for the last four of them as teacher of oral English and director of dramatics. At Columbia she moved rather seamlessly from student to faculty: 1930-1933, teaching assistant; 1933, instructor; 1936, teaching associate; 1937, assistant professor; 1939, associate professor; 1945, professor ;and 1963, emeritus professor. From 1941, two years after she was promoted to associate professor, she served as chair (actually chairman) of the Department of Teaching Speech, a post she held until she retired in 1963. She chaired a department of five to ten faculty members while teaching a broad array of courses in general speech, theatre, and speech correction and audiology—for twenty-two years.

Magdelene Kramer's early academic interest probably was in theatre. I can imagine that she was in plays in college and studied speech arts, especially oral reading. During her high school teaching, she taught English, oral English, and served as Director of Dramatics, meaning, I suspect, that she directed junior and senior class plays and coached students for extracurricular activities. By the time she moved to New York to begin her advanced degrees, she was an experienced teacher. She was, as one of her 1936 students noted, known by her peers as “Madge.” Teaching “choral speaking, a new field [and] oral interpretation, she was a vital, enthusiastic, well-informed teacher . . . an animated red-head.” She wrote a dissertation on “Dramatic Tournaments in the Secondary School,” an extensive survey that concluded with carefully evolved recommendations, including the claim that festivals were more educational than contests and that the primary goal in such activity was not competition, but appreciation and education for the students.

Not surprisingly, Professor Kramer—Madge—was teaching junior and senior level courses even before she completed the Ph.D. She must have been pleased when Columbia asked her to stay and become a full-time faculty member. Over the years she would continue to teach basic and advanced oral interpretation and a series of courses on teaching speech, psychology of speech, directing dramatics, research methods, and internships. Throughout her tenure, the department required diagnostic, qualifying examinations (oral) for all entering advanced degree candidates in addition to the usual written comprehensives to complete degrees. She appears to have taught 15-17 hours each semester and regularly advised M.A., Ph.D., and Ed.D. candidates—

roughly 15 per year. The department also offered a number of certification programs, which she administered. She advised undergraduates as well.

In 1937, Madge Kramer's salary was \$3000, plus \$667 for summer school. By 1947, when she served as president of our national organization, she was making \$6500, plus \$1200 for summer school. The following year she had a "sabbatical with salary" of \$7500. When she retired in 1963, her annual income was \$13,000.

Kramer was an early, perhaps founding, member of the New York Metropolitan Teachers of Speech, an executive council member of the New York State Speech Association, and president of the Speech Association of Eastern States. A member of the American Speech and Hearing Association, American Educational Theatre Association, National Education Association, National Council of Teachers of English, American Educational Research Association, she clearly was what would have been called an exemplary, broadly informed, speech professional.

Evidence suggests that she cared profoundly about speech in the life of students because, she argued, it made for responsible citizens. She participated in special lecture series on the importance of teaching children to speak well. For older students, she not only urged work in oral interpretation, but also championed critical listening and even parliamentary procedure to "help develop a more tolerant and understanding attitude toward groups or individuals who disagreed with them."

The year of her retirement, the department's name changed from Teaching Speech to Speech and Theatre, the "speech" still including speech pathology and audiology. After she retired, two new faculty members taught the courses she had been teaching. An interim chair was replaced three years later by a person who chaired both the Department of Language and Literature and the Department of Speech and Theatre Arts. By 1970, speech's status had been reduced to Department of Languages, Literature, Speech and Theatre.

By now, fifty-five years later, I think we can see why Madge was a likely candidate for president of NCA (then NATS) during what must have been very stressful post-war times. The Psychology of Speech courses she had been teaching for a decade must have helped in her moving about in a male dominated organization. She had a proven record of working with diverse students, faculty, and administrators in a variety of private and public institutions. She was efficient, apparently healthy, single, undaunted by days and nights devoted to work, conversant with the needs of teachers in fields outside her own, charming, spirited, and published. She was also nurturing. A story from Linda Lederman, distinguished professor at Tufts: "When illness prevented me from attending classes for almost half of one semester, she helped me make up the work so that I could complete my degree on time. She helped me get my first teaching job—right out of Columbia with a brand new M.A. When I asked her what I could do to repay her kindness, she said. "You can pass it on."

I was disappointed, but not really surprised, when I asked one man why he thought she was elected president. He guessed that "it was time for a woman—and someone in her field and from her part of the country. The rhetoric boys looked at all of that." Perhaps I can respond more strongly when I've completed my research, but for now, I would say that the boys probably got more than they bargained for.

She was president of NATS when the convention was held in Salt Lake City. Since she was a woman president—the third in the association's history—she, according to Loren Reid "felt the prestige of women everywhere was at stake." Faculty from the University of Utah "rounded up

special attractions.” Probably most to Madge’s satisfaction was the completion of a new constitution, one that, as far as I can determine, recommended the name change to Speech Association of America.

Madge Kramer remained active in the national association, presenting papers as late as 1960. After retirement she continued to live in New York City until 1976 when she developed cancer and moved to her sister’s home in Connecticut. She died November 23, 1978.

The Teachers College archives produced a good deal of information, and it also produced a number of fascinating leads. Magdalene Kramer’s obituary notes twenty nieces and nephews. Surely somewhere in so large a family there are scrapbooks and memories as yet untapped. A number of her students during the fifties might be traceable. There may be records in the D.C. college where she received the B.A. and at the secondary schools where she taught. And perhaps there are people reading this work in progress report who can suggest other leads. ADDED NOTE: Given Dr. Long’s invitation, Anita Taylor contributed the following paragraphs after reading materials sent by reviewers of this page.

Magdalene Kramer’s ‘Azubah J. Latham: Creative Teacher,’ published in *The Speech Teacher* in September 1963 describes the educational philosophy, approaches to teaching and creative work of a woman whose life path in some ways parallels and did briefly overlap with that of Kramer. Latham taught in a variety of schools before coming to Teachers College at Columbia in 1903 where in 1913 she became “Assistant Professor of Speech in charge of all the offerings in speech and dramatics” (187-188). Latham retired in 1933, three years after Kramer earned her MA. Thus, during Kramer’s first 4-5 years at Columbia, Latham doubtless was an important figure, conceivably an important professional role model for Kramer. Thus, we can probably take much of the article’s praise for Latham as indicative of Kramer’s own philosophy and goals. She commended Latham’s “ahead of her time” educational procedures in which “most of the time was spent in students’ reading and in critical analyses of the readings” (188); her advocacy of teaching through use of example, theory applied to situation; and her insistence that oral interpretation of literature be communication by full analysis and understanding of its meaning as well as good vocal technique. Kramer praises Latham for being a “firm and strict task-master,” as well as having her own creative abilities, and for recognizing and cultivating creativity by her students. We can reasonably conclude Kramer strove for the same outcomes. Jane Blankenship writes of two occasions when she met Prof. Kramer: “once when she came to Mt. Holyoke College, when I was an instructor, while completing my dissertation. . . . [Later] when she chaired one of the association’s constitutional conferences.” Blankenship continues, “During the informal lunch and at the large group meeting the adjective which struck me most readily to describe Kramer was “imposing.” Hermann Stelzner, who also participated in the Conference, reported that the same term emerged in his mind also. “We agreed that ‘imposing’ here was meant positively, as someone who was capable, strong, and positive. At the Mt. Holyoke luncheon, I was awe-struck at being in the presence of a former SAA president. She did her best to include me in the conversation and presumed that I might have something to say. She conducted the conference in the same way, with strength and graciousness.”