

Mary Margaret Roberts, Editor, *Speech Teacher/Communication Education*, 1973-1975

My family situation provided me with an idyllic early childhood. The youngest of four children with a “big brother” as the oldest and two solicitous sisters, I felt secure in my loving world. For each of my first six summers, we visited our Aunt Jen (my mother’s sister), who was like a grandmother to me and also “kept house” for my doting grandfather, in Greene, Iowa. My mother had been his youngest (with a twin brother also) and his favorite. When our grandfather and Aunt Jen showed us off proudly in tiny but wonderful Greene (about 1,300 population at the time), we glowed.



We felt equally valued in my hometown of Independence, Iowa (then about 3,500 population), where my father was a wise, respected public school superintendent. His parents had emigrated from Wales, where his father had been a frugal slate miner, after our Civil War. Although ignorant of farming methods, my grandfather welcomed the opportunity to farm his mortgaged land in a Welsh community near Harmony in southeast Minnesota. Farming was hard work. The Welsh had historically valued education, partly as a means of escape from the mines, and my grandmother sacrificed to insure that my father and one of his younger brothers could go to high school and college. My father completed high school in three years and then worked his way through Upper Iowa University in Fayette, Iowa, in another three years. After his third year he became an educator during the winters and either worked as an itinerant field hand in Montana in the summers or studied toward a graduate degree at the University of Iowa. When he had finally paid off his college debt, my grandfather deemed him eligible to marry.

My mother graduated from Upper Iowa with a classics degree in 1907, proud of her accomplishment and determined (as my father also was) that their children should attend college. During their long courtship, she remained decorously at home on the farm near Greene, helping with such feminine tasks as cooking for threshers, playing her piano, writing frequently to her fiancé, and generally participating in rural community life.

Her lack of work experience outside the home was my mother’s only significant deficiency for her parental role. We children knew that our father and we children were the most important elements in her life. Additionally, we “knew that we were good, wonderful children because she told us so, frequently. Her educational background, along with my father’s, was highly advantageous for us; we were impressed that she never forgot her Latin! Our daily dinner and supper table conversations covered worthwhile subjects; as the youngest, I no doubt profited most from these discussions as they challenged my understanding.

When, as a graduate student at Northwestern, I discovered Quintilian’s discussion of the importance of the child orator’s mother and his nurse in his language development, I recalled with gratitude my mother’s early distinctive contributions as well as her steady encouragement of my educational endeavors throughout her life. When studying high school Latin, I had already recognized that she, like the noble Roman mother Cornelia, had regarded her children as “her jewels.”

Two events rocked my comfortable childish world: my brother’s illness and the Great Depression. As I neared the end of second grade, my brother was diagnosed with diabetes at age 13—a very serious condition at the time. Tom, gallant about his deprivations and

limitations, learned immediately to administer his insulin injections and managed his illness remarkably well for 55 years. Being only seven years old, I felt deprived that we no longer had family Easter egg hunts because he could not have candy; I did adapt well, however, to our family's greater emphasis on a consistently nutritious diet emphasizing fruits and vegetables and avoiding sweets. My mother became much absorbed in planning and cooking suitable meals and in my brother's condition generally.

One year later, my father was invited to leave his Independence post for one in the larger Iowa town of Decorah (approximately 5,000 population). Although I felt adrift in my new school and community, my teachers were welcoming and outstanding (as they had been also in Independence). I spent much time on schoolwork and reading and cherished our July weeks at a little lake in north-central Minnesota which gave my father respite from his responsibilities as well as revealing a forest landscape for the rest of us that was much different from Iowa cornfields.

Whereas we had previously felt comfortably well off, the depression meant that the expense of my brother's medications and the reduction of my father's salary checks combined to diminish our lifestyle. My father had solidified his teachers' respect and affection even farther by voluntarily taking the same percentage salary cuts that they sustained, instead of insisting upon the contractual raises that had been promised him on moving to Decorah. Because my father was a person of integrity, good judgment, and broad outlook, I never experienced any feelings of adolescent rebellion. He was always right in his decisions. I learned from my mother not to hurry his decision-making since he typically took time to consider each matter from all relevant angles before announcing his verdict; once articulated, it was unchangeable. We appreciated his reasonableness and dependability.

Most male civic leaders in northeast Iowa at the time seemed to me to be as broadminded in regard to women's potential as my father was. Thus I was then largely unaware of the existence of discrimination against women. Although born in 1923, only a few years after passage of the nineteenth amendment, it seemed natural to me that women should always have been regarded as reasoning human beings possessing the potential for both sound political judgment and varied vocational choices. In the 1920's in Independence, a fine woman headed the school board. In 1931, a Decorah woman school board president hired my father as superintendent. He liked working with both of them. Additionally, he included female students as valued members of his high school debate teams in both schools. (Coaching debate as an extra, gratis contribution, he maintained enduring relationships with his former team members.) Like most children, I suppose, I had assumed that my father was an "average" educational administrator; also, that his sensible, supportive attitude toward women and girls was a representative one. On the contrary, of course, he was distinctly advanced in these views. I therefore subsequently experienced shock as I witnessed conspicuous instances of poor male judgment and discrimination against women in education. Each instance, for years, was a fresh surprise.

Both my parents and my siblings impressed upon me that it was my duty to excel at school and to bring honor to the family. I responded with enthusiasm to most school subjects except mathematics and science, especially liking those that involved language skills, since the whole family was interested in reading and in language generally. Partly, I think, because he had been too poor and too busy earning his way to participate in high school and college activities himself, my father strongly encouraged us to participate in school activities as widely as possible. In high school my activities included debate (on my father's team), interpretative reading and humorous and dramatic declamation, a speech class play and the senior class play, the school

newspaper, Girls' Athletic Association (I did little but play tennis since I was not athletic), girls' chorus and mixed chorus, and the yearbook. In college I participated in debate, Campus Players, Irving Society, and the student newspaper, and edited the yearbook as a senior. For the last two years, I also held my first paid job at the college radio station, a rich experience. (My parents had thought that we children ought not to take jobs away from those who needed them worse than we did during the Depression.)

When World War II broke out in my sophomore year, we women students suddenly became welcome for the first time as announcers on KWLC. I wrote daily continuity for all the announcers. I also served as program director during the two summers following my junior and senior years; our faculty advisor left the campus both years to continue his doctoral study. I very much appreciated the constant support of our patient technical engineer, Oliver Eittrheim, founder of the station and its faithful mainstay. I was touched that he sent me an orchid corsage—the first orchid I had ever received—as a graduation present, a real sacrifice for him on his meager salary.

Our move to Decorah made it possible for our parents to finance degrees for all four of us at Luther while we lived at home. I much preferred college to high school since the students were so much more mature and interested; most of my courses were well taught and fascinating. I majored in English, minoring in speech, Spanish, European history, and secondary education. Since World War II shrank both Luther's faculty and its student body, we 200-plus students who remained worked hard to preserve academic values and cherished traditions. Three of us who wanted to complete minors in Spanish met together at 7:00 a.m. three times a week to translate *Don Quixote* without any faculty guidance though a faculty wife awarded us grades. Donald Seavy, my eighth grade history teacher and an outstanding educator, was the first to tell me that I would want to teach in college rather than high school. Although I did not immediately agree, I was thoroughly convinced after two days as a Red Wing, Minnesota high school teacher. I did know that at least one advanced degree would be necessary for college teaching; I was doubtful that my weak eyes could endure the requisite reading. When I had first started wearing glasses in the seventh grade, I had been told to do no reading except what was required at school. I had thus decided that it would be impractical to follow in my older sister's footsteps and acquire an M.A. in English at the University of Iowa. I decided to switch to the speech field in the hope that somewhat less reading would be required and also because I had found students to be more responsive to speech instruction most had experienced only in English classes. When an eye specialist I consulted in Minneapolis confirmed that I should no longer regard myself as "an eye cripple," I began a four-summer M.A. program in speech at Northwestern University. It was challenging and satisfying. With McBurney and Hance, I read Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian. With Wrage, I savored public address. Etc.

Besides teaching English and Spanish at Red Wing, I also coached debate and interpretative reading and a new choral reading group. I had been given my choice between debate and advising the annual staff, choosing debate because of fatigue from editing the Luther yearbook under wartime limitations and because of my confidence that I really knew debate. Thus I went to my second teaching position, in speech and debate at Thomas Jefferson High School in Council Bluffs, Iowa, with much confidence. After three good years there and the completion of my M.A. degree, I felt ready for the college arena. Luther needed a one-year replacement for my debate coach while he took a sabbatical, so I went to Luther for the year of 1949-50. It was one of my happiest teaching years. My girls' debate team from Council Bluffs came with me, and I inherited a competent men's team. We had an impressive year. I also taught 18 hours of stimulating classes each semester, with many mature veterans as students. I lived at home with my parents and brother, who all took much interest in my daily activities. After my

five-year absence, it was satisfying to perceive my parents and brother appreciatively from an adult viewpoint and for them to view me as an adult. I enjoyed rewarding associations both professionally and socially with my colleagues.

I next went to PittsburgState University in Kansas, settling in with friendly associates and a group of hardworking debaters eager to help re-establish a competitive program. Soon, however, I realized that I needed a doctorate to stay in college teaching. Thus, having heard Waldo Braden speak energetically at a national convention and also hearing him praised by one of my former Luther students who had earned an M.A. at Louisiana State, I went to Baton Rouge as an editorial assistant in the S.A.A. National Office at the beginning of Dr. Braden's Executive Secretary term. My special responsibility was to edit the Association Directory of Members.

Dr. Braden regarded himself as broadminded in regard to women, and he really was, especially in comparison with most Southerners. Although somewhat paternalistic, he and Mrs. Braden, with whom I also worked in the office, were very kind to me. I did ultimately observe, however, that male Ph.D. candidates received more attention with their dissertations than I did. And I continued to encounter the same prejudice as a woman in debate that I had endured elsewhere. While helping with Luther's annual high school forensics tournament as an undergraduate, I had been annoyed that male Luther students with less experience and skill than I were routinely assigned to act as debate judges, while I functioned merely as a chairperson/timekeeper. Imagine my greater indignation at LouisianaState that, after 10 years of successful high school and college coaching, I was sent—although a Ph.D. candidate—to serve as a timekeeper at an LSU high school tourney while less experienced male undergraduates functioned as judges. I reported the situation angrily to Dr. Braden but did not sense understanding on his part. Throughout my experience as a frequent judge at tournaments, my treatment was similar. Participants who did not know me usually assumed that I was an uninformed draftee—some student's mother or teacher in an unrelated "feminine" field. I was always unnerved when a bold, skeptical male high school student would ask me condescendingly, before the debate began, whether I had ever before judged a debate.

Because my father had been a leader in state and national education associations, I thought such participation was a standard part of one's professional obligation. I also welcomed such activity because I knew it would give me contact with educators whose respect I needed to make meaningful the many recommendations I would write for my students for jobs and honors. I therefore participated enthusiastically in the state, regional, and national associations. While at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania from 1957 to 1961, I thoroughly enjoyed the Eastern Association; I also functioned the last year in the friendly Pennsylvaniaassociation as its Executive Secretary. Tom Hopkins of Mt.Mercy College, my predecessor, was an ideal mentor who made that task rewarding.

I found the Kansas speech communication atmosphere receptive also and was active in the state association as long as I lived in Kansas. In the 60's I became editor of the state journal, an agreeable post, and served two terms. I was not enthusiastic about becoming the association president but appreciated my colleagues' confidence and took my turn. Similarly, I was not eager to serve as president of the Central States group in the early 80's but did not think I should refuse the nomination by Bobby Patton, who gave me good support. I thought it important for women to be represented. Whenever anyone inquired later about my possible interest in the national association presidency, I declared that I "felt no call" and that a sufficient number of women were becoming available, by that time, who actually were interested in holding the position.

Before completing my dissertation at LSU, I accepted a debate position at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania where I was expected to travel with team members every weekend from the last of October into April. Although the original attraction of debate for me had been the promise of travel since my siblings had attended tournaments in Texas and South Carolina and Kentucky—with side trips to Mexico and New York City—I felt that four years of the Pitt schedule were quite sufficient. After Mary Louise Gehring confided that she thought she “would turn in her debaters for graduate students,” I decided to do the same. I therefore returned to Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kansas, when asked to establish the Master’s program there in speech and theatre.

In every earlier debate post except the temporary one at Luther, I had had to fight for support for the activity. At Red Wing, for example, the English department head who was my immediate boss had greeted me by declaring icily that she had always regarded debate as a very boring activity; the yearbook was her special interest. At Red Wing as well as at Council Bluffs and Pittsburg State, I had activated moribund debate programs. Thus the prospect of starting a new Master’s program in speech communication did not seem daunting, although the head of one of the most powerful PSU departments informed me—during my third week on the job—that my program would “never get off the ground unless I cooperated with him in getting rid of my own department head.” I informed him that I certainly would not undercut a person who had hired me twice and was supporting my program, and that it would succeed—as it did.

Progress was slow, but I was blessed with a succession of splendid graduate students whose achievements helped the cause, and I thoroughly enjoyed my 29 years of directing the Master’s degree program. I immediately instituted a summer workshop/short course for area speech communication teachers which Dr. Braden supported by being the first guest leader; it continued as long as I stayed at the university. The outstanding guest leaders greatly enriched the experience of our other graduate students as well as that of the short course enrollees. I had been confident that they would because of my observation of visiting scholars’ contributions at Northwestern and LouisianaState.

The next significant event was my editorship of *The Speech Teacher* (now *Communication Education*) from 1973 to 1975, starting at age 50. I had already done several editing assignments for Dr. Braden, who achieved the office for me. I was much pleased with the post though fully aware that my selection aroused both envy and skepticism that I would function adequately among several unsuccessful candidates, and perhaps others. I would not have known the names of any other nominees except that two (one of them a friend of mine!) shared with me in anger that they did not understand why I was chosen when they had been available. I fully understood the political correctness of the choice of a woman editor in the new “equal opportunity” climate.

I assembled an excellent editorial board from my acquaintances plus several Minnesota people whom Bob Scott helpfully recommended; these included John Sisco and Karlyn Campbell. Since women then constituted one third of the members of the Association, I appointed women to one third of the posts. I also included representatives of the community college, high school, and junior high members. The editing task consumed practically all the time for three years when I was not in my classroom or assisting students with their graduate research projects, but I really enjoyed all the decisions and processes. I wanted each journal issue to offer something to appeal to a wide variety of readers, from beginners in the field to distinguished scholars. I initiated “blind” author submission to the editorial readers, something the Women’s Caucus had been advocating. During my term, I also became enlightened concerning the use of sexist pronouns and abandoned that usage during my editorship.

Although I was not personally attracted to administration, I dutifully applied for several posts that Dr. Braden thought merited consideration. Again, I was appalled at the overtly sexist discrimination I met, so returned with relief to my own believing students.

Absorption with teaching responsibilities, professional organizations, and editing left me with little opportunity for my own writing. I did make convention presentations and submit an occasional journal article. When the one on graduate study appeared in *The Speech Teacher* in the early 60's, I naively supposed that it would attract M.A. students. Actually, only one student ever told me that he had read the piece prior to enrolling! Since my original educational model had been the public school situation in which publication was irrelevant, I did not realize for some time that it was becoming a requisite in higher education. Furthermore, during my two graduate student experiences, I had inferred that my appropriate role was to admire the scholarship of my professors rather than to presume to initiate something comparably worthy of publication. I tried to make my fledgling graduate students aware of their need to write and publish, and to give them appropriate help in the endeavor.

I served on a great many committees for professional associations, with Bill Howell's original nineteen-seventies Status of Women group, the Nominations Committee, and a recent Karl R. Wallace Award Committee being representative for NCA; the Nominations Committee and the Federation Prize Committee, for Central States; and the Membership and the Publications committees, for the American Forensic Association. I participated in the NCA Legislative Council for a number of years.

Two special sojourns that punctuated my career were an idyllic summer of teaching at Appalachian State University in the mid-50's and an enriching sabbatical semester and summer at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst in the late 70's.

I traveled often with my sister Lucile Roberts, now a retired colonel in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps, visiting her in every place she was stationed for 30 years except Vietnam. I was our chief photographer.

A significant number of male colleagues, as well as women colleagues and former students, offered much-appreciated support. I will cite a few of the women: Edna Sorber, Jane Blankenship, Dorothy Wallace, Sharon Ratliffe, Patricia Townsend, Ruth Arrington, Mary Frances Hopkins, Beverly Whitaker Long, Anita Taylor, Janice Schuetz, Mari Tonn, Laura Meeks, Beth Lamoureux, Karolyn Yocum, Ruth McKenney, Vicky Bradford, Nancy Beth Poteete, D.A. Bishop.

I retired in 1990 after a change of department chairman at Pittsburg State University. Three years later, I moved to Bella Vista, Arkansas, where my two supportive sisters each had a townhouse. Bella Vista is a beautiful area of lakes and trees in the Ozark foothills, and it reminds me of Decorah, Iowa. I have continued with various editing projects and highly recommend the activity for retired persons. I taught as an adjunct professor for several semesters at Missouri Southern College in Joplin and as a volunteer for the Beaver Lake Literacy Council one year in the Bentonville High School program in English for Spanish-speaking students. I carry on an extensive correspondence. In addition to other church and community activities, I am an Advisory Board member and a mentor in the Benton County Single Parent Scholarship Program, which awarded more than 110 scholarships for the second semester of the 2001-02 year. My sister Lucile and I make frequent visits to the Branson area and other favorite places. I am content with my former and my present life and continue to cherish memories of professional colleagues, students, and other friends.