

Mary Frances Henry

December 1, 1883 — October 2, 1981

With the death of Mary Frances Henry, professor of home economics emerita, on October 2, 1981, at age ninety-seven, the New York State College of Human Ecology (formerly College of Home Economics) lost the last of the women and men who had experienced most of the early history of home economics at Cornell and had made significant contributions to its development. During the first years of its existence (1900-1925) home economics education was an integral part of the College of Agriculture, beginning with a reading course through correspondence, study groups, and winter courses under the direction of Martha Van Rensselaer. In 1907 Flora Rose, with an advanced degree in nutrition from Columbia University, joined the staff, and plans were developed for a four-year curriculum with a major in home economics. Several years elapsed before the program became a reality, but a survey course in foods and nutrition, open to any student in the University, was particularly popular in those early years. The years 1912-13 became a milestone in the history of home economics at Cornell as the department moved into its first building. It was at this time, 1913, that Mary Henry came to Cornell to study nutrition under Miss Rose.

Mary Henry was born in Denver, Colorado, on December 1, 1883. The first two years of her undergraduate study had been at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Returning home because of family responsibilities, she finished her degree at Colorado College, Colorado Springs. For several years Miss Henry taught English and history in high schools in Wyoming and Colorado. Coming to Cornell as a special student in 1913, she was a student teaching-assistant under Miss Rose. Miss Henry's potential as a faculty member was recognized by Miss Rose, who urged her to pursue advanced study at Columbia University. After graduate study at Cornell and Columbia, Mary Henry accepted appointment as an instructor at Cornell in 1915. She taught for the next seventeen years (1915-32), then relinquished teaching at the time of her appointment as assistant director of the college.

During the years that she taught, Mary Henry developed a five-hour course in nutrition, required of all students in the College of Home Economics. In the twenties the science of nutrition was relatively new and growing. Miss Henry's enthusiasm for the study of nutrition was felt by the students in her classes. Nutrition came alive as each student was required to keep a daily food diary with an evaluation of the known food components. The application of nutrition requirements to one's own daily life was a lesson learned as an undergraduate that has been retained through life by many of Miss Henry's students.

An advanced course for students planning a career in hospital dietetics was Diet and Disease. The principles of diet therapy of that time were taught. In addition, students were introduced to the literature; readings were required in the medical journals and publications as well as nutrition articles. Miss Henry encouraged students to read with an analytical mind, to evaluate the content of the materials being read, and to be thoughtful in the acceptance of information.

The goals Miss Henry set for students were high. She expected students to perform to their full potential. Inspiration to reach the goals was gained from her counsel and guidance. A person with dignity, she was respected by all students. Her relationship with them was reserved, but a quick, wry sense of humor surfaced in conversation and class.

With the appointment in 1932 of Flora Rose as the director of the New York State College of Home Economics, Mary Henry became assistant director (1932-40), then acting director (1940-41) following Miss Rose's retirement. She was named assistant dean with Dean Sarah Blanding in 1942. While having responsibility for various technical aspects of the director's and dean's office, Miss Henry had special responsibility for the administration of the resident instruction area of the program. She served as chairman of the Committee on Resident Educational Policy, of the Committee on Undergraduate Admissions, and of the Counseling Service.

As chairman of the Educational Policy Committee, Mary Henry was a dominant but not domineering leader in the determination of the educational development at Cornell during World War II. This leadership resulted in major changes in the undergraduate program in the late forties. In this development of new educational goals, her vision of the future was always seen against the background of the past, so that progress was evolutionary in character. She did not have a crisis approach to decisions that needed to be made.

One outstanding characteristic of Dean Henry's was recognized by those who worked closely with her and is strongly evident when one reads committee records and college reports written by her or under her direction. Her sensitivity both to people and to words was acute. She was indefatigable in her search for appropriate phrases to convey the flavor of the feelings of the faculty as well as the action being recorded.

Paying tribute to Mary Henry at the time of her retirement, Dean Blanding wrote of her coworker:

Mary Henry has been a distinguished member of this faculty for over thirty years. During all of these years her penetrating mind, her fine educational philosophy, her sound judgment, her sympathetic understanding, and her real devotion to the profession of home economics in its finest and broadest sense have permeated every division of the college's work.

Former students and faculty colleagues treasured Mary Henry's friendship. A person of patience, warmth, and gentle humor, she was a delightful mentor. Generous of her time, sometimes overgenerous of her energy in listening to ideas, complaints, and criticisms of others, she was still implacable in her honesty and in her willingness to sustain a position she believed in.

After her retirement she was able to renew her longtime interests in reading of political affairs, informal essays, and poetry. She could quote extensively from the latter, both serious and whimsical. Taking great pleasure in small things—a bird call, a colored pebble, a line of waving poplars— she would delight her friends by capping such a discovery with appropriate verse.

Mary Henry was predeceased by three sisters and three brothers. She is survived by several nieces, nephews, grandnieces, and grandnephews.

Jean Failing, Bernice Hopkins, Catherine Personius