

Martha Leighton Tracy

July 4, 1901 — March 18, 1981

Though sightless at the time of her death, Martha Leighton Tracy never lived in darkness and was never without friends or humor.

A native of Newbury, Vermont, Martha was graduated from the University of Vermont with a Bachelor of Science degree in home economics in 1923. For the next four years she taught home economics in Burlington and was assistant state 4-H leader at the University of Vermont from 1927 to 1939, at which time she assumed the same position at the Pennsylvania State University. In 1946 she joined the administrative staff of Cooperative Extension at Cornell as assistant professor in extension service and assistant state 4-H Club leader. She became associate professor in 1948 and professor and associate state 4-H Club leader in 1954. She retired on December 31, 1962.

Martha was well known nationally and served three terms as a trustee of the National 4-H Foundation. She was also a member of the National Advisory Committee for the International 4-H Farm Youth Exchange Program, the National 4-H Policy Committee of the National Association of State Land Grant Universities and Colleges, the Steering Committee for the National Research Project on the Developmental Needs of Youth, the National 4-H Health Committee, and the National 4-H Citizenship Committee. She was a longtime member of the extension honorary society, Epsilon Sigma Phi, and in 1956, in recognition of her work with the international programming for youth, she received one of the society's first awards for effective leadership. Before the development of many foreign exchange programs, Martha was responsible for programming young adults from thirty-seven countries in over 250 host families in the state. Simultaneously, 4-H members or 4-H alumni were programmed in six-month visits to thirty-three different countries. This brought to the inhabitants of rural areas and small towns and villages throughout New York in these early post-World War II years an increased understanding of world situations and a recognition of the similarities among all peoples in the world.

Martha was responsible for orientation and in-service education programs for all extension home economists with responsibility for 4-H youth development programs in the state. She had tremendous influence on them and her colleagues at Cornell and elsewhere. She was a goal-oriented person—highly organized, meticulously prepared, and extremely clear and effective in her efforts. Her dignity and propriety made her a legend. But at no time did they overshadow her humor, warmth, understanding, and sincere concern and helpfulness, which she freely extended. Personally and professionally she was a model and a guide for all.

Martha had many hobbies: she was a wood-carver, a photographer, an inveterate bird-watcher, and was heavily involved in enameling, bridge, and travel. She had a large number of domestic and international friends and maintained correspondence with many of them.

Martha enjoyed, and never forgot, her Vermont heritage. She faced issues and problems forthrightly and was usually successful in solving them in their early stages. When she learned that loss of eyesight was a certainty, she sought help from the Association for the Blind and relearned home and living skills so that she could retain her independence and maintain her own home.

Oversize bridge cards, felt tip pens, and practice trips around her home prepared her well for the time when she needed these new skills. The determination, strength of character, and realistic assessment of her strengths and limitations that served her well in her professional life served her equally well in retirement and disability.

As Professor Wilbur Pease said at the time of her retirement, “Her awareness of the needs of youth and her desire to help them develop and make the most of their opportunities have inspired all who have worked with her.”

Martha died in Newington, Connecticut, of cardiac arrest and is survived by her husband, Robert, whom she married in 1972.

Mildred Dunn, Edward A. Schano, George J. Broadwell