

# Mary Elizabeth Ford

*March 23, 1907 — August 11, 2002*

Mary Ford was born in Fostoria, Ohio, the only child of Mary Nestlerode Ford and William H. Ford. She graduated from Wellesley College in 1932, and received a Master's Degree from the University of Toronto in 1933. She spent a year as a school psychologist in the Toronto Department of Public Health, and then moved to the University of Minnesota to pursue a Ph.D. degree in Child Clinical Psychology. During her years at Minnesota, Miss Ford held several different professional positions. For three academic years, she was a Research Assistant in the university's Institute for Child Welfare, and then spent a year as a teacher in the Institute's nursery school. In 1937–38, she was Director of the Nursery School and Kindergarten and School Psychologist at the Northrup Collegiate School in Minneapolis. In 1938, she moved to Cornell as Instructor in the Department of Child Development and Family Relationships in the New York State College of Home Economics. Five years later, she completed her doctoral dissertation, "The Application of the Rohrschach Test to Young Children," and was promptly promoted to Assistant Professor.

Professor Ford entered with energy and enthusiasm into the varied activities of a rapidly changing department. In her best-known published work, *Youth, Marriage, and Parenthood*, she collaborated with a senior member of the department, Lemo D. Rockwood, on a questionnaire study of the attitudes of 364 Cornell University juniors and seniors toward sex education, premarital sex behavior, marriage, parenthood, and divorce. Two thirds of the students were enrolled in the course on Marriage and the Family taught by Professor Rockwood; roughly half were men and half were women. With its 28 tables and extensive discussion, the book provides a snapshot of the attitudes of a select group of young people at the beginning of World War II.

After promotion to Associate Professor in 1946, Mary Ford was primarily occupied with teaching. At the undergraduate level, she taught courses on Methods and Techniques of Research, Methods of Child Study, Advanced Child Development, Behavior Problems of Children, and Participant Observation of Children enrolled in the Cornell Nursery School. Her course on Exceptional Children became an immediate favorite with undergraduates—so much so that she was forced to limit its enrollment. At the graduate level, she served as thesis director and chairperson of many special committees. Although the department offered no formal training in clinical child psychology, Professor Ford maintained her interest in this area. She was certified as a Clinical

Psychologist in New York State and approved as a diplomate in clinical psychology by the American Psychological Association. She was promoted to full Professor in 1953.

Within her department, Mary Ford became recognized both for her consistent fair mindedness and as an advocate for gradual institutional change. Home economics, for 60 years a bastion of higher education for women, was coming under attack for its preoccupation with preparation of women for their role as homemakers. Her background and training in psychology provided no basis for a commitment to home economics as a professional discipline. So she supported many faculty appointments that gradually changed the character and the interests of the department. Almost none of the professorial faculty appointed during these two decades had any previous association with home economics.

Mary Ford's professional life changed dramatically in 1964 when she became chairperson of her department. The previous chairperson, Alfred L. Baldwin, had served as its institutional leader for eleven years. His departure left many faculty wondering: Where do we go from here? With almost no exceptions, they chose Mary Ford as their best guide to an uncertain future.

The 1960s were an exciting time for everyone concerned with early childhood education. Professor Ford provided administrative support for her colleagues who were enthusiastically taking part in the national Head Start program and helped ensure that her department established a position of leadership in this field. At the time of her retirement in 1967, Dean Helen Canoyer wrote of her:

*“Although the Department of Child Development and Family Relationships is composed of ‘prima donnas,’ Dr. Ford not only was able to win their cooperation and respect, but was actually able to motivate them toward more production than previous Heads were able to do.”*

Nevertheless the challenges to home economics as a component of higher education had not diminished. At Cornell, President James Perkins appointed a high-level college study committee to examine the place—if any—of home economics in the university. Mary Ford, at the request of Dean Canoyer, served as chairperson of a steering committee charged with coordinating faculty responses to some of the recommendations of the president's study committee. Dean Canoyer tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade her to continue as an active faculty member beyond the age of 60; however Mary Ford was adamant and became Professor Emeritus in 1967.

In retirement Professor Ford devoted herself to many philanthropic activities. She had been a member of numerous college and university committees as a faculty member. Now she had more time for community service and, among other positions, became a board member of HOMES and the Tompkins County Health Planning Council.

She was a member of St. John's Episcopal Church. In later years, Mary Ford's health declined. She moved to Kendal at Ithaca shortly after it opened in 1995 and died there in August of this year. There are no known survivors.

*John S. Harding, Jean Failing*