

Mary Geisler Phillips

May 13, 1881 — January 25, 1964

Mrs. Mary Geisler Phillips was a beloved member of the staff of the New York State College of Home Economics for eighteen years, and she kept closely in touch with her friends at the College through the fifteen years following her retirement. As editor, writer, and friend she contributed generously and importantly to the College's work and aims. Upon her retirement in 1949 she was made Associate Professor Emeritus of Home Economics.

The wife of Everett Franklin Phillips, Professor of Apiculture in the College of Agriculture from 1924 to 1946, Mrs. Phillips was already familiar with the College of Home Economics when Miss Van Rensselaer, aware of her abilities, offered her the position of extension instructor in 1931, to work on a series of radio scripts. The following year she joined the college editorial office, working as an assistant, part-time, to the editor for the next ten years. She became assistant editor of the College in 1943 and in 1944 acting editor. In 1945 she was made editor and in 1947, after the Department of Extension Teaching and Information had been established in 1946 as a joint enterprise of the Colleges of Agriculture and Home Economics, she became also Associate Professor of Home Economics in that Department.

Mrs. Phillips was graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1902 and spent the next year there in graduate study in biology and chemistry. Prior to her marriage she taught those subjects for three years in the High School for Girls in Philadelphia, studying also for part of this time. From 1924 to 1930, as assistant editor for the National Research Council, she worked on the Botanical and later Biological Abstracts.

Her marriage to Everett Franklin Phillips in 1906 opened new doors. Drawn to one another in part by their mutual interest in biological sciences, they maintained this interest, as shown in her writing, throughout their life together. As senior apiculturist for the United States Department of Agriculture and later Professor of Apiculture at Cornell Dr. Phillips' work grew to world-wide fame. He became more and more in demand as a speaker at national and international conferences. Mrs. Phillips frequently accompanied him on these travels and on others, which he made as United States representative of Rotary International. She came to know people of all walks of life, many of them world leaders, and knew the customs of homes and families of many lands. She could speak as well as read a number of languages.

Her skill in writing was nurtured in the early years of her marriage when she assisted her husband in preparing his book, *Beekeeping*, and translated many articles. In these years too her ability as a writer of children's books took form. Her first book, *Honey Bees and Fairy Dust*, published in 1926, resulted from stories that she told and wrote for her children in answer to their questions about bees and what their father did with them. Her active career as a writer for children continued into the years of her retirement.

Ant Hills and Soap Bubbles followed in 1927, *Spider Webs and Sunflowers* in 1928.

The D. C. Heath Company of Boston became interested in her ability to present science to children and published school editions of these titles in 1929. She edited and revised two series of science books for children for this publisher, *Glimpses into the World of Science*, and *Nature by Seaside and Wayside*.

Many are familiar with her name through her short stories for children that were published in *Youth's Companion*, *St. Nicholas Magazine*, *American Boy*, and *John Martin's Book*.

The last two of her eleven books for children appeared after her retirement: *The Makers of Honey* in 1956 and *Dragon Flies and Damsel Flies* in 1960, both published by Crowell. She contributed also to the bee journals, two articles appearing as late as 1962.

Throughout her years in the editorial office of the College of Home Economics she continued to do free lance writing in addition to her daily work, adding to her writings for children many magazine and newspaper articles on subjects of interest to homemakers.

Her work as an author was tied closely to her love of her home and family, and her unusually successful career supplemented her success as a wife and mother. She is survived by three sons: Everett Franklin, Jr., of Darien, Connecticut; Howard G. of Alexandria, Virginia; and William T. in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Mrs. Phillips' work as College editor used not only her ability as a writer and editor but also her teaching skills. She conducted writing and radio workshops and taught units in several classes at the College. She worked with community organizations on their publicity programs. She assisted extension staff and students with their writing problems. Her enthusiasm and friendliness were infectious. She had a way of making people feel that even small accomplishments were important ones. The head of the Department of Extension Teaching and Information, in a letter to the Dean of the College of Home Economics, wrote in 1949: "In my opinion, Mrs. Mary G. Phillips has performed a service to the College of Home Economics that would be difficult to surpass. Her capacity for doing excellent work and for making and keeping friends cannot be exaggerated."

"Mrs. Phillips was always willing to do just a little more than was expected of the editor of home economics. . . . Her energy seemed boundless and she played a large part in helping to improve and enlarge the informational activities of the College. Her work is appreciated not only by those who work with her here at the College, but by the home demonstration agents and homemakers throughout the State."

The students and the community knew her in still other ways. As an alumna of the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority, she was instrumental, with other Ithaca alumnae, in arranging for the present chapter house. In 1949 the members of Psi chapter in Ithaca gave a reception in recognition of her work for the sorority and in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of her initiation. At that time she was president of the Psi Chapter Corporation Board and past president of the Alpha province, which includes Cornell.

In Ithaca she was active in educational and literary organizations, contributing generously through her own work and creativity.

Her enthusiasm for continuous reading and study was evident, even in her statements on a routine "personnel" form. In 1940 she wrote, "I let no year go by without some special study just to keep my mind limber. This year I am attending lectures twice a week in Insect Behavior and once a week attend a class in Spanish." Her mind was always "limber," as she read widely and far beyond her first loves of biology and languages. To talk with her about a book was to find new inspiration.

The picture one retains of Mrs. Phillips is one of vigor, warmth, and generosity in all her work and personal relationships. At the memorial service held in Sage Chapel, the Reverend James Moore, a long-time friend and fellow member of the Cornell staff, who conducted the service, spoke of a recent visit which he and his wife had with Mrs. Phillips, of her gaiety, and hospitality, and thoughtfulness of them. "We went," he said, "to see if we could be helpful in any way. As we walked back to the car a phrase kept running through my mind — 'not to be ministered unto but to minister'." This, in essence, is the spirit that pervaded the life of this gifted friend and co-worker.

G. Eric Peabody, Mary F. Henry, Esther H. Stocks