

# Catherine J. Personius

*August 5, 1904 — October 31, 1994*

Emerita Professor Catherine J. Personius joined the faculty of Home Economics in 1930, when Martha Van Rensselaer and Flora Rose were co-directors. She provided a continuation of strong leadership in the college until she retired as Coordinator of Research in 1966. When she came to Cornell, a new building was in the process of being erected and before she retired she helped develop plans for a new addition.

Catherine was born in Elmira, New York and graduated from Elmira College in 1925 with a degree in home economics and chemistry, subsequently joining the staff as foods instructor. In 1928, she completed a M.A. degree at Teacher's College, Columbia University and then accepted a teaching position at Hampton College in Virginia for two years. She was at Cornell during the thirties, a time best remembered for the depression, and joined the Home Economics staff first as an Instructor, later as a Research Assistant, or as a supervisor of the Home Management House. At the same time, like others of her generation, she studied for a doctoral degree, not in home economics, but in the field of biological chemistry, bacteriology, and physical chemistry. It is little wonder that she learned to manage time and resources, a prelude to her later career where she assumed a large range of responsibilities. After obtaining her degree from Cornell in 1937, she joined the faculty as an Assistant Professor. From 1940-43, she was an Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and then was invited back to Cornell as Professor and co-Head of the Department of Food and Nutrition and a year later as Head. In 1947, she added two more responsibilities—Coordinator of Research for the College and Assistant Director of the Experiment Station. She was the first woman at Cornell to hold the latter position and one of two in the entire United States. These responsibilities she carried until her retirement. Thus not only did she have a significant role in the development of the Department of Food and Nutrition but she also influenced the direction of the College, most significantly in development of research programs.

She provided strong leadership for the Department in teaching, extension and research. Not only was she a dedicated teacher herself but she encouraged department faculty in a commitment to teaching. She was instrumental in developing courses that emphasized the physical and chemical properties of major groups of food products in relation to their utility. During most of her career at Cornell, Catherine continued to teach. She came to know the seniors well and was instrumental in encouraging them in various career paths. It is perhaps significant that she was honored in 1976 by a scholarship in her name endowed by two former students, a mother and daughter,

giving us a glimpse of her impact over a generation. It is perhaps less well known that CJP, as she was known by the faculty, took time from her busy schedule to address the needs expressed by some upper level students, namely that they have the opportunity for additional depth in subject matter and be allowed to pursue individual projects in the laboratory—and the opportunity was provided. This actually became the basis for the Honors Program in Food and Nutrition started in 1961. There seems little doubt that she was ahead of her time encouraging the involvement of undergraduates in research.

Catherine was equally committed to encouraging extension and research programs in the department. In the late forties she participated in a weekly radio program, “What’s New in Home Economics”, where she interviewed different faculty members about research programs. She also worked with the Nutrition Council, a state-wide association, and in alternate years provided leadership for a program at Cornell where recent research findings were made available to state based health professionals. She was more diligent than many in reviewing the various publications which were developed in the department. She also served as an Administrative Advisor on many regional research projects in the Northeast. She had a knack of posing just the right questions to steer diverse individuals toward a common goal, and was one of the most effective people in this role and was sorely missed following her retirement by those who had the benefit of her guidance.

One of the lasting influences on the college was probably her encouragement of research-based personnel as an addition to the faculty. Using her role as Coordinator of Research, she encouraged departments to seek individuals with discipline-based research and to encourage these individuals to adapt their research to the needs of the department program. She believed that while Home Economics was the focus of the college, the strength was in utilizing the education of those who were in areas basic to program areas in the college. She believed that students needed to understand basic principles that would enable them to use knowledge intelligently, to think analytically, critically and constructively when facing new situations.

Although her schedule did not permit extensive involvement in her own research, she was, nevertheless active with a number of research areas, and worked with graduate students. Further, during the war years, and shortly after, many new methods of food preservation and utilization were studied as part of the war effort. Her published work is found in *Food Research*, *Cereal Chemistry*, *Food Technology* and *Journal of Home Economics*. She was recognized throughout the country for her leadership in research.

The many demands on her did not deter her from responsibility to the university community. Among her commitments were Long-Range Planning, Review of University Calendar, Executive Committee of Center for

Housing and Environmental Studies, Governing Board of Social Science Research Center, Board of Control of Cornell United Religious Work, Board of Trustees Cornell Research Foundation, and the Faculty Council. It is perhaps illustrative of her career that she was the first woman to be a faculty representative on the Board of Trustees where she served from 1959-64.

At the national level, she was appointed to a number of committees, including the Executive Committee for both the Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, and the Home Economics division of the Association. She also served as member of the U.S.D.A. Advisory Committee on Home Economics Research, the Commission on Home Economics and as an advisory member of the N.Y.S. Nutrition Council.

She belonged to a number of professional organizations including American Home Economics Association, American Association of Cereal Chemists, Institute of Food Technology, American Chemical Society, American Association for the Advancement of Science, among others. She was also a member of honorary societies such as Omicron Nu, Phi Kappa Phi, Sigma Xi, Phi Tau Sigma, Alpha Lambda Delta (honorary member).

She decided to retire at the peak of her career, long before any of us thought she should. After a year or so of involvement at the national level, she returned in leadership roles in the community. She was active with volunteers at the Tompkins County Hospital, and had a regular schedule there. She served as treasurer for the Directors of the Ladies Union Benevolent Society, an organization concerned with housing of the elderly. She was active at St. Paul's Methodist Church where she taught a Sunday School Class and helped with a day care program for children. In 1979, she moved to Horseheads, New York near her family home. Here she worked with nursery school children where interaction of the older adults and children was beneficial to both. Catherine once said that Flora Rose was a person of enthusiasm who would try anything once and that Martha Van Rensselaer was a very effective leader. Catherine had qualities of both.

Throughout her life she retained a strong interest in activities at Cornell. Her greatest regret being away from Ithaca was the loss of interaction with former colleagues and the opportunity to take advantage of Cornell events. Although during her career at Cornell she was involved in what can only be described as a rigorous program, she still took time to encourage students and faculty. She routinely did more than she asked of any of us. She perhaps exemplified the motto "Freedom with Responsibility". As faculty members we had leeway to develop different pursuits and interests with the understanding (never expressed) that we had a responsibility to both

the department and to the college. By those who knew her, either as a student or a colleague, she will long be remembered and she has significantly influenced our lives.

*Henry Ricciuti, Mary A. Morrison*