

9-18-95

Lide Spragins

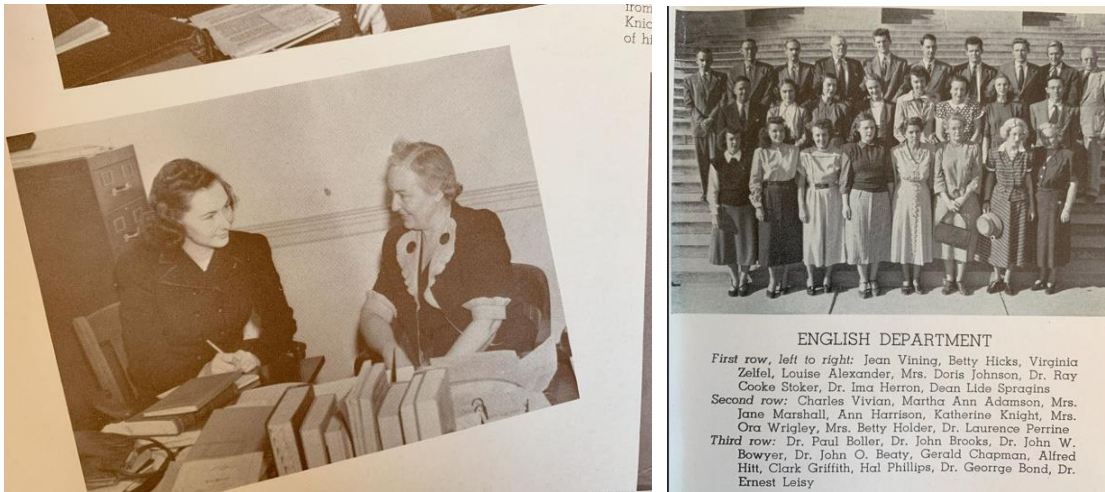
I suppose the title "Dean of Women" no longer exists, but when I was an undergraduate it was a formidable title in the person of Lide Spragins, dean of women at Southern Methodist University. She was still there when I returned years later as a graduate student and member of the faculty.



I did not think that she looked a day older when she was a colleague than she did when I was an undergraduate student. Not unattractive but far from attractive, she was a palpable presence. Her iron gray hair was always strictly disciplined, as was her iron bound physique. She was not heavy, but she was far from slim and willowy. I seem to describe her in double negatives, but eventually I came to know her as an admirable, capable, and caring administrator with a not unpleasing personality. But you can see that I seem to describe her in double negatives. I certainly never saw her as a neutral in neutral terms.

When I was an undergraduate, I was generally in awe of any person in authority, and Dean Spragins probably led the list of such persons. My association with her was limited; as a town student I had no occasion to break any of the many existing dormitory rules. As sponsor of an honorary organization I belonged to, once she asked me to introduce a speaker at one of our meetings. The mere idea was enough to terrorize me, but I never questioned that I would do her bidding. On that first occasion I performed adequately but with trembling voice and quaking knees. Since then, I have generally either flatly refused to introduce a speaker or argued about my fitness to do so, but I've never since made an introduction that I didn't recall Lide Spragins' mild, automatically confident assignment, not a threatening image of her, but one that assures me that I'll do the introduction with dread.

Dean Spragins was a once-a-year presence at one of our open sorority meetings. We always planned carefully the menu of the supper and hoped that the food and the conversation would be suitable. Most of us were neutral about her. We didn't dislike her but we certainly didn't want to antagonize her in any way. Some of us were obliged to dislike her just because she was dean. Looking back, I think I really did her an injustice. She must have enjoyed her job as dean (she certainly held the position a long time), and I am sure that she liked most college girls.



It was when I returned to SMU as a graduate student and teaching assistant in the English Department that my relationship with Dean Spragins changed to that of a kind of colleague. Our first contact with her was to discover that her season ticket at the football games was directly in front of Paul and me. She chatted amiably before the game and during the half intermission, but I was painfully aware of Paul's exuberant participation in the sport of football. To add to my concern was the fact that Doak Walker was beginning his spectacular career as a quarterback for the Mustangs. He was an exciting athlete, inspiring most fans into ecstasies of cheering to celebrate his amazing running and passing abilities. I tried to concentrate on monitoring and containing Paul's exuberance but became as excited as he until I witnessed him beating on the Dean's hat, still on her head. I guess she didn't mind, for she didn't interrupt her own cheering. At any rate, his enthusiasm didn't dampen her friendliness.

Although I managed a first-name relationship with most of my colleagues who had formerly been my faculty, I never was able to progress beyond calling the Dean Miss Spragins - or nothing at all. The climax of my ambivalent relationship with her came when she engaged me in a lengthy conversation at a crowded reception, shortly before Paul and I left SMU to continue graduate study in North Carolina. The reception was held in the large Grand Ballroom in the Student Center. Miss Spragins was a hardy conversationalist who zealously pursued to the conclusion her train of thought. On the crowded floor, she began invading my space, getting very close to my face. (It was actually the first time I had been aware of my need to be a certain distance from the person I was talking to.) As she stepped closer, I unconsciously stepped back, increasing the space between us until I felt comfortable. She soon closed the gap, and we continued

our social dance until I became aware that she had backed me almost completely around the perimeter of the ballroom. I suddenly realized that she must have been somewhat hard of hearing and, in the noisy, crowded room needed the tighter space in order to hear any reply I made. Then I was able to stand still and, for the first time, I could see her as a person, not as an institution. I felt comfortable and relaxed in her presence for the first time and began to enjoy her as a nice human being. She had just moved into her first home and was delighting in telling me about the joy she had in furnishing all the rooms for herself after years of living in a home furnished by her mother. I found it easy to visit her a couple of times when we were back on campus, but she always remained "Miss Spragins" to me, never "Lide."



Miss Spragins does the honors at Alpha Lambda Delta tea.