

3-5-97

U.N.C.

My four years at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill were happy years, producing among other memories a collection of varied short incidents, connected mainly by their occurrence in and around Saunders Hall.

I was among the first females on the faculty in the English Department. Most had more impressive credentials than I had, but we all experienced the same benign intolerance and polite, male Southern forbearance. Actually, it was only years after the fact that I recognized that some of my experiences were the result of the newness of the presence of women on the faculty. At the time, if I thought of them at all, I considered that I was receiving typical "instructor" stratification. Clearly, a lowly instructor of whatever gender did not receive preferential treatment. We had been added to the faculty because of the need for additional instructional staff to educate the large influx of GI bill students after World War II. Women were hired to make up for the deficit of eligible male candidates.

Many years later when I became acquainted with Allan Brown, the retired former chairman of the English Department at Virginia Commonwealth University, I discovered one day when he visited me in my office just around the corner from the English office, that he had been a student at UNC while I was on the faculty there. Neither of us had occasion to know the other, but we did have a great deal to share concerning Chapel Hill during our stay there in the late forties and early fifties. I hope I didn't show it, but I was shocked that Allan, then retired and therefore over sixty-five, was a *student* while I, years away from retirement, was *faculty*. His years in the service during the war accounted for the discrepancy. I shouldn't have been so surprised; after all, I had become accustomed in those early years to meeting classes where the majority of the students were older than I.

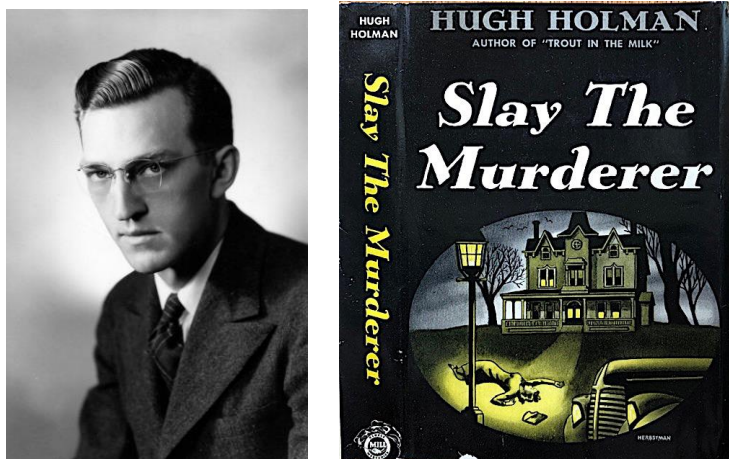
Immediately after Paul's and my arrival in Chapel Hill in 1948, I was assigned a desk in a large office containing ten other members of the English faculty and was invited to my first and only departmental meeting. Its purpose was to introduce the newly hired faculty. There was one other new instructor, Lily Antonicus, and three new assistant professors. The meeting was conducted by Dr. Clifton Lyons in a style so formal that I almost looked to see his striped trousers and morning coat. I was introduced as "Mary Frances Minton, nee Hickman, Master of English, and *sometime* English instructor at Southern Methodist University."

I gradually became acquainted with other instructors and three professors in Room 5, Saunders Hall. We were a busy crew, each meeting three classes on six days a week for the twelve-week quarter. I became acquainted with Lily Antonicus who was an early feminist, chafing because she had to use her husband's name professionally, "so how can anyone know *who* I really am?" She also announced that she had been born with her Ph.D., an announcement that successfully reminded me that my education was inferior to hers. We became fairly good friends in spite of that beginning. There was one other instructor in the room, also a female, Jessie Rehder. The other woman was Mary Claire Engstrom, a distinguished scholar in the literature of the Augustan Age, but destined

because of her sex never to progress beyond the assistant professor rank. In fact, because she felt that she was losing credibility in her professional life by remaining an assistant professor for many years, she requested a promotion to associate professor with no increase in salary. Her request was denied (on the grounds that the department could not afford a raise in salary and an associate professorship was inextricably tied in with the salary), and she resigned, a serious loss to the scholarly atmosphere of the department.

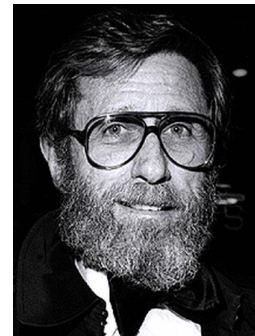


Another assistant professor, whose desk was right behind mine, was Hugh Holman. He was young and new but had a brilliant career ahead at UNC, first as chairman of the English Department and later as Chancellor of the University. We became good friends, he serving as my mentor in teaching but also introducing me to the joys of detective fiction. He had financed his graduate work for his Ph.D. at the University of South Carolina by writing a series of detective stories featuring a Shakespeare-quoting South Carolina sheriff.



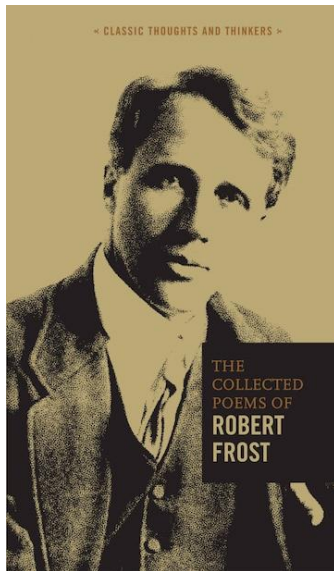
With one of two notable exceptions, all of our students were men. The graduate school admitted women, but on the undergraduate level only Chapel Hill resident women could attend class. The only woman student I had during my stay there was the daughter of the Dean of the Humanities Faculty. Years later when our children, the sons of the Dean of Arts and Sciences, were in classes at VCU, I was able to empathize with some of the boys' professors. It was an uneasy feeling that I never completely lost as long as she was in my class. I never heard a word from the dean nor did I ever have any need to see him.

In one of the temporary buildings erected to accommodate the great influx of students, I had a third-quarter literature class, in which one of the students was William Hammerstein, son of Oscar Hammerstein. He came to my attention quickly, not because of his name but because on the first day of class he was smoking a really obnoxious cigar. I pointed out that smoking was prohibited in the temporary wooden buildings and invited him to park his stogie outside after he carefully extinguished it. He was unfailingly polite, but when I commiserated with him because he had been unable to attend the opening of *Oklahoma!* on Broadway that fall, he claimed that he would probably not have gone to the premiere even if he'd been in New York. His lack of interest in musicals and drama was replaced after graduation by his making production of musicals in Hollywood his life's work. During his stay at UNC he was a close friend of Larry Peerce, son of the famous Metropolitan Opera tenor. Mark and Larry arranged for Jan Peerce to give a recital on the campus, much to the delight of the university community.



Other notable students included football players in an era when UNC was big in football, with its biggest name at the time being "Choo Choo" Justice. One of my students at SMU had been Doak Walker. He had been a charming student, but I was far from pleased when the roster I received for my first composition class in Chapel Hill bore the name of Charles Justice. He moved to another English class without ever attending mine, but I did have several other football players that fall. One of them was named Wilbur Mitten, making it almost inevitable that my class should call me Mrs. "Mitten." Having football players in my class meant that I received several visits each quarter from the assistant coach assigned the task of seeing that each player stayed academically eligible. I was glad that there was no problem with that group of students.

One of my favorite events during the years I was at Carolina was the semi-annual appearance of poet Robert Frost, who visited his friend Cliff Lyons, breaking his trip from New England to Florida in the fall and again in the spring when he returned north. He graciously gave poetry readings for the faculty and student body. He always carried a book or two to the lectern, but I never saw him open one. He recited all his poems for the evening, even the ones requested by the audience. His recitations were revealing, making the meaning of the poems clear without any needed explication. Later when he laboriously read his poem composed for the inauguration of John F. Kennedy in the cold wind of that inaugural day, I was glad that I'd been able to hear him in action when he had been younger and more vigorous.



One of my favorite stories from my UNC days happened on a warm spring Saturday, when Paul and I went to Wrightsville Beach for the day. I had a single Saturday class, which I met, although not many of the students did. I had hardly changed into beach clothes and begun walking on the beach, when I encountered three of the students who had missed my class. At first, they were excited because they were sure that my presence on the beach meant that I had not held my class that day!

During my stay in Chapel Hill, I became able to tell by the way a student talked which southern state he came from. The distinctions among Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South and North Carolina, and Virginia seemed very plain to me. By the time we had returned to Dallas for eighteen years before moving to Virginia, I lost that ability. Now I can sometimes tell if a person is *not* from Virginia. However, the memories of the student body and faculty at Chapel Hill as well as our graduate student friends, remain indelible and pleasant.