

Mary Landon Russell: An uncommon woman

Williamsport Women

By JANET
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Special to the Sun-Gazette

The Williamsport Women column has featured women of courage, who were ahead of their time — and even feature women with scandal in their backgrounds.

Often, these are women who we would have liked to meet and consider friends.

Many Williamsporters alive

today did have the opportunity to call Mary Landon Russell, a Williamsport native and music extraordinaire, a friend, and likely all who knew her would agree that there was never anyone quite like her.

Russell's veins flowed with music from both sides of her family, and early on she decided music would be her career path.

The 1931 yearbook from Williamsport High School published "Song of '31," words and music by Mary Landon.

Russell taught and played into her 90s, making the most of a long life (1913-2008) that spanned many changes for women.

Etiquette for women

Russell joined an increasing number of women at the time who were pursuing higher education.

She was a day student at the former Williamsport Dickinson Junior College, now Lycoming College, who walked to class from her nearby home on Washington Boulevard and was required to take an etiquette class.

She was used to this, having had instruction for girls at Williamsport High School designed to develop correct social habits and encourage the

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Shown in this photo from the Lycoming College archives, is the 1938 Double Male Quartet of Williamsport Dickinson Seminary posing with their accompanist, Mary Landon. Members, from left, are Alfred Koozer, William Gehron, Millard Neff, Glen Russell, Robert Karalfa, Ariel "Jack" Jackson Warner, Carl Heim and Earl Kerstetter.

Lifestyle

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Above left, Hazel Dorey and Mary Russell are shown in this photo from the Lycoming County Historical Society performing with the Williamsport Symphony during the 1950-51 concert season. Shown in the above right photo from the Lycoming College Archives is Mary Russell in 1985 being honored for "50 years of golden music service" at Lycoming College during an anniversary recital by present and former students. Shown, seated from left, are Dennis Richmond, '73; Mary Landon Russell, '33; and Frank Richmond, '69. Standing from left, are John W. Shannon, '68; Jane Kyte Landon, '55; Onaloe Barton Nixon, '62; Barbara Shemp Paden, '60; Cora Sue Canning Horacak, '57; Steven B. Opdall, '87; Jeffrey A. Seeley, '77; David L. Dearing, '78; Edward K. Erb, '79; and John G. Ravert, '72.



PHOTOS PROVIDED

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young women to be happier and more agreeable, as well as more effective citizens.

Russell dutifully wore a hat and gloves when shopping in downtown Williamsport — a sure sign of a cultured young lady.

Breaking rules

In an oral history interview, however, Russell confessed to breaking a few rules while attending Williamsport Dickinson Junior College.

Students of the opposite sex were not allowed to talk with each other outside of class, but Russell and some of her friends found a place to do so in a secluded spot in Old Main.

Dancing was definitely forbidden. However, if students closed the blinds in the fraternity rooms in the Hilltop Gymnasium and kept a look out for Dr. Long (then-president of the college), they could dance the afternoon away.

No student could keep an automobile on campus, so Russell hid her boyfriend's car in her parents' garage.

When she graduated, the 1936 yearbook read: "When we think of music, we think of Mary — and vice versa. And, of course, we'll never forget that irresistible giggle."

Professor and academician

Russell was to become a revered professor and academician.

First, she continued her musical education at Susquehanna University Conservatory of Music.

Her next goal was to return to Williamsport and teach at Williamsport Dickinson Junior College. Music was historically considered an honorable profession for a woman and it was one of the few places on a college campus where women faculty could be found.

Dr. Long was not so sure that any additional music teachers were needed, but Russell shared that she pestered him until he hired her. Some summers were spent gaining additional instruction at Eastman School of Music and The Juilliard School. Eventually, she earned a master's degree from Penn State University.

She would continue teaching at Lycoming College, achieving the rank of associate professor, retiring at the then-mandatory age of 65, but teaching on a part-time basis until she had served 62 years in the music department — making her one of the college's longest-serving faculty members.

Russell left the faculty briefly during World War II when she married Glen Russell. She and her new husband were pictured in the 1942 issue of Life Magazine after their wedding at West Point Chapel.

Within the first year of marriage, though, her husband was killed in a training accident and she returned to Williamsport to rebuild her life. This time it was Dr. Long who asked her to

rejoin the college faculty.

A history of music in Williamsport

It would be difficult to find a music group in Williamsport during Russell's lifetime that did not include her name. She was one of the original members of the Williamsport Music Club, assisted in the formation of the Williamsport Civic Chorus, accompanied most musical groups at the college and in the community, soloed with the Williamsport Symphony, and was a frequent organizer of and performer in her beloved duo-piano concerts for four and eight hands.

A lasting contribution was her 1957 thesis, "A History of the Music of Williamsport," which received the Mayor's Citation from the City of Williamsport for its unique contributions recording the musical history of the city (available at <https://archive.org/details/historyofmusicof00russ>).

As part of her research, she conducted interviews, examined programs, and spent countless hot summer hours reviewing historic newspapers in an unairconditioned James V. Brown Library with her student assistant, Kay Huffman.

The history has been referred to often as organizations trace their roots. In 1966, Russell coordinated a cast of over 100 players in a musical dramatization of this history in Brandon Park.

Russell's choice of a thesis

topic illustrates her sense of fun. She said in a newspaper article that she spotted an old program from a 1902 Sousa Band concert presented at the Lycoming Opera House.

It wasn't the concert selections that inspired her, but the program that reminded the audience to "Please refrain from throwing peanuts and spitting tobacco juice on the floor." This started her considerations about how culture and the arts found a place in this lumber-booming area.

The Chaminade

Of special note in her thesis is the section about female musical groups. There was the Ladies' Vocal Club (1880s) and later The Lincoln's Ladies Band (1915), consisting of 22 ladies all dressed in smart uniforms.

A club for women singers, The Chaminade, enjoyed more than 30 years of studying songs and giving concerts, receiving much praise for their artistic singing. The Chaminade was also the first club in town to volunteer its services to raise money for war needs during World War I.

The Williamsport Music Club, begun in 1937 and still active today, was started to help women acquire a broader knowledge of music and musical literature, and to promote a greater appreciation of music in Williamsport. In the early years, the members sponsored musical study groups as well as music clubs for young girls.

An uncommon woman

Superlative adjectives were used to describe Russell, and many community and college honors were bestowed on her. She was a traditional woman in so many ways — you would never have referred to her as Russell.

Yet she exhibited great strength and had her own brand of leadership, which might be termed enthusiastic persuasion.

Whether with a musical or a community group, she delegated by assuming that everyone wanted to do things for the greater good and for personal fulfillment. And people did not want to disappoint her.

Russell knew the art of friendship not only with her peers, but also with her students. She stayed in touch with them long after they studied with her, and they remained devoted to her.

Truly, Mary Landon Russell was an uncommon woman and a musical treasure for the Williamsport Community.

Hulbert, guest writer for this month's Williamsport Women column, is a professor emeritus of library services at Lycoming College. The Williamsport Women is typically written by Mary Sieminski, a retired librarian and manager of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection.

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