Dorothy Ester Shank

City native teaching domestic science across U.S.

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Special to the Sun-Gazette

Lycoming County Women
by MARY SIEMINSKI, JANET HURLBERT

The Shank sisters were career women. Martha Shank spent her entire career in Williamsport as the first full-time female journalist for the Williamsport Sun. She was the subject of a previous Williamsport Women column on March 3, 2019. Her half-sister, Dorothy Ester Shank (1890 to 1966) pursued a career that included teaching, government work, publishing and executive positions in the private business sector. She took advantage of opportunities all over the United States. Dorothy was the daughter of Wilson W. Shank and his second wife, Lucy Updegraff Shank.

Lucy (1862 to 1956) was herself distinguished. She traced her ancestors to one of the oldest families of the West Branch Valley, landowners in the Reach Road area before the founding of Williamsport. Lucy was a school teacher prior to her marriage and then enjoyed the same pursuits as many other Williamsport women whose husbands provided the family with a good income.

Lucy was an active parishioner of Pine Street Methodist Church, a member of the Clio Club and a supporter of the Home for the Friendless.

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July 11-12, 2020

PHOTOS PROVIDED

Dorothy Shank as pictured in 1912 in the yearbook from Illinois Institute of Technology. This photo was provided by the archives at the institute, at left. Dorothy Shank, born in 1890, was the daughter of Wilson W. and Lucy Shank. Dorothy went on to have a career in teaching, government work, publishing and holding executive positions in the business sector. She was born in Williamsport, though her career provided opportunities throughout the U.S. She is buried at Wildwood Cemetery Williamsport. Dorothy was employed from the American Stove Company in Cleveland, Ohio, and she was responsible for the publication "Magic Chef Cooking," a recipe book designed to promote the Lorain Oven Heat Regulator. This product allowed cooks to spend less time watching food so they could regulate the gas flow.

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When she died at the age of 93, she was the oldest living alumna of Williamsport High School. Lucy spent most of her adult life at 330 Park Avenue. Her daughter, Dorothy, would lead a very different life.

'Girl makes good'

An interview with Dorothy appeared in the Sept. 4, 1949, issue of The Grit, entitled "Local girl makes good." Dorothy confesses to having been a rather poor student at Williamsport High School.

She did want to pursue higher education in the developing field of domestic science, however, and was within two days of leaving for Drexel Institute in Philadelphia when she received a telegram from Drexel informing her that she was not to be admitted after all. The school had more applicants than it could accept, and her scholastic record put her too far down on the list to qualify.

A cousin found the name of a school in Chicago: Lewis Institute. The school was the first in the country to grant an associate degree in domestic economy and would accept Dorothy even though classes had already begun. When Dorothy graduated from Lewis Institute in 1912, she was president of the Home Economics Club.

Home economics teacher, Dorothy's first teaching position, was in the domestic science department at Lasell Female Seminary in Auburndale, Massachusetts. The catalog introduced the discipline with the following statement: "Since the management of the household is to be the occupation of most women we believe that every woman should have the best theoretical and practical training."

The job also included teaching swimming, and since Dorothy couldn't swim she engaged an instructor for 10 days of concentrated lessons before her move.

As a faculty member she attended alumnae lunches in various East Coast cities, chaperoned the annual student trip to Portsmouth and voiced opposition to holding the first senior prom that would involve dancing with boys. Students declared that her battle cry was "Boil, Bake, Stew" and praised her role as dietician, providing nourishing meals to quarantined students during the 1918 influenza epidemic.

In 1917, Dickinson Seminary and Junior College, now Lycoming College, announced that Dorothy Shank would head up the newly established home economics department, a two-year program within the commercial department offerings. There would be classes in the manufacturing of clothing, nutritional value and digestibility of food, and knowledge of advantageous buying, right living and sanitation. Specific class descriptions mentioned the making of undergarments, invalid cooking and care of laundry.

After a short time, Dorothy returned to Lasell, and as her career developed over time, she communicated her activities in the "Personal" section of the Lasell Leaves. She would earn her bachelor's degree from Columbia University and study in Paris.

Food research, test kitchens and food shortages

More teaching positions followed, and the American Stove Company, Cleveland, Ohio, could boast that the director of its test kitchen had formerly been an instructor of food research in the Household Arts Department at Columbia University. Dorothy was responsible for the publication "Magic Chef Cooking" for the stove company — a recipe book designed to promote the Lorain Oven Heat Regulator. For the first time, cooks did not have to watch food while it baked so that they could regulate the gas flow.

World War II found Dorothy working in Washington, D.C., for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Bureau of Home Economics as head of the Food Section, Nutritional Bureau. Her responsibility was investigating food shortages.

Food editor

After leaving government service, Dorothy became a counselor to home economists around the country in her position as food editor for the publication "What's New in Home Economics." She lived in Chicago and later New York, eventually retiring as vice president of Harvey and Howe Publishing Company.

In 1962, Dorothy shared with Lasell the news that she was coauthoring another edition of a textbook for senior high school students. The book would be published by McGraw-Hill and entitled "Guide to Modern Meals."

She commented that "retirement is fun if you have the time for it."

Dorothy is buried in Wildwood Cemetery with her sister and parents. In that 1949 newspaper interview, she would observe that "Williamsport is still home to me." However, her diverse career which took her far from home, would be the envy of a 21st-century woman.

— Lycoming County Women, by Mary Sieminski and Janet Hurlbert, is a monthly column published on the second Sunday of each month the Sun-Gazette's Lifestyle section and is part of the Lycoming County Women's History Project. Sieminski is the former director of the Pennsylvania College of Technology Library. Hurlbert is Professor Emeritus of Library Services at Lycoming College. For information, email life@sungazette.com.