**UNCG CENTENARY PROJECT ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

INTERVIEWEE: Mabel Coltrane Merritt

INTERVIEWER: Richard Bardolph

DATE: 1981

[Editor's note: Dr. Richard Bardolph, history professor emeritus at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro interviewed Mrs. Mabel Merritt in 1981. Below are Bardolph's notes regarding the interview. The audio and transcript for the oral history interview and page one of the notes were not transferred to University Archives in 1991. The narrative begins with page two of his notes.]

…supervision of J.T. Matheson, its superintendent. Before long, in addition to acting as principal of the practice school, [Mr. Robert] Merritt was also teaching on a regular basis one or two psychology courses in the general college program, courses formerly taught by Julius Foust. Summer sessions at Columbia University added further to his competence in educational psychology, but by 1913-1914 his health began to falter; and by 1916, the tuberculosis that eventually took his life in 1919 when he was only 41 forced him to withdraw from active service. As his replacement he recruited young J.S. Highsmith [Editor's note: the correct name is James Albert Highsmith], the principal of the Pomona Mills High School; and it was Highsmith, who later took a Ph.D. in Psychology at [George Peabody College], who completed the founding, begun by Merritt, of a formal Department of Psychology. Merritt was, by all accounts, a masterful teacher and something of a pioneer in the emerging science of psychology. Robert [Merritt] Jr. remembers that his father sometimes took his small son to class to illustrate some of the principles of the psychology of learning.

Mrs. Merritt herself was a Methodist minister's daughter, one of six children, whose parents were determined that all of them secure a college education. Like all children of Methodist preachers, Mabel was shunted from school to school, typically modest, short-session one- or two-room affairs; but her secondary schooling—as was true of so many of the Normal's [State Normal and Industrial School, now The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] first generations of students—was acquired at an "Institute," a private, academy-type institution of the sort that was extremely common in the days before free tax-supported, public high schools became the rule. Mabel was so thoroughly "prepared" by her Institute in Roxboro, [North Carolina] that she was granted advanced standing when she was admitted to Greensboro College in 1901. The Normal had not yet come to be regarded as a college of choice for Methodist preachers' daughters, so long as there was space at "GFC" (Greensboro Female College).

Speaking of Greensboro College Students, Mrs. Merritt says "they thought the Normal was a good school, to be sure, but that the elite went to schools like G.C. [Greensboro College] It was cheaper to come to the Normal… when I was at Greensboro College, there were a great many who were there for the 'finishing;' but many did not stick to the course and graduate."

Thanks to her advanced standing and to her industry and intelligence, Mabel managed to complete the program with the class of 1903, but because of certain technicalities was not awarded a regular diploma, the anomaly was finally corrected in 1981 as one of the first formal acts of the college's new president [Dr. James S. Barrett was president of Greensboro College from 1981-1984] when the matter was brought to his attention by the school public relations director Fred Jones, at the suggestion of the UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] Alumni Office.

School teaching is an old story with the Merritt clan. Not only were Mr. and Mrs. Robert A. Merritt (and for a time Robert Jr.) school teachers; relatives on both sides of the family had graced the profession, including Mrs. Merritt's maternal grandfather William Trigg Gannaway, a long-time professor of classical languages at Old Trinity College (now Duke University) where he also served as acting president during the last two years of the Civil War.

Recalling her earliest days as a young faculty wife, and even as a student at GFC, Mrs. Merritt remembers that a very substantial number of girls from families in very modest financial circumstances were enabled to attend the Normal because of its spartan schedule of expenses, its aggressively fostered opportunities for self-help jobs, and, above all, by the state's program of subsidizing students who promised to teach in the state's public schools upon graduation. She confirms also the recollection of other college students of her generation that strongly democratic flavor of the campus, its emphasis on service, and its irreverent skepticism about the value of putting social graces above no-nonsense liberal arts training were magnets that many students and a growing number of parents found hard to resist.

The years 1914-1919 were dark ones for the struggling little family as Mr. Merritt gradually gave up his professional duties, then as his life slowly ebbed away. In the happier earlier days, Robert Jr. was chosen as mascot of the Class of 1907 [Editor's note: Robert Jr. was mascot of the Class of 1909] and J. Fred (who died in 1980 after a distinguished career as a Greensboro physician) was mascot of the Class of 1910, a testimonial, one may assume, of the closeness of the Merritt family to the larger campus family. The ties with the college slowly attenuated as the years after Mr. Merritt's death advanced, and as the boys eventually went off to college. But the plucky young mother had many friends on the faculty and staff, not the least of whom was Mrs. Charles D. McIver who continued to make her home in the old McIver campus residence (just inside the college entrance at the head of College Drive) until her death in [1944]. By the time of her own retirement as a public school principal in 1950 Mrs. Merritt had, I suppose, lived longer in the immediate college community than anyone else in the institution's history; and, of course, it is certainly true now, when she must be considered one of the richest sources of the school's earliest memories.

We are especially fortunate to be able to draw upon her recollected details of the college's physical setting. She lived on Spring Garden Street, hard by the campus's west boundary. The street was in fact earlier known as White Street, but was re-named Spring Garden for the series of remarkable fresh water underground springs along its route. One of the finest of the springs bubbled up on the lot on which the youthful Merritts built their home in 1908. They had bought the plot from Professor E.J. Forney [commercial department faculty and college treasurer], who lived in the handsome house (still occupied) on the lot immediately to the west of the Merritt place.

Forney was so fond of the spring water on his lot that the instrument of sale to the Merritts was made to reserve to him full rights to the water; and, thus provided, he piped the water upward into the attic of his own house, in a large storage tank. By inaugurating this

gravity-fed system in his house, Forney became one of the first in the area to enjoy running water, for at that time the Forney and Merritt lots still lay outside the city limits and were not yet provided with water and sewer service. Indeed, the city limits until about 1920, it seems, were in part defined by a line running north up College Avenue, so that the Old Main (now Foust Building) was inside the city, while the Students' Building and Spencer Dormitory lay outside.

The city trolley lines ran up and down Spring Garden, reaching out to Pomona, and cars were switched directly in front of the Merritt place, a circumstance that the motormen improved on hot days by a quick stop at the Merritt's spring for a refreshing drink. The trolley cars, which of course also operated on other city routes—notably up Tate and Market Streets, and up Elm [Street] from the Old Railway Station to the Court House at the Market "Square"—were typically of the windowed variety, but some were entirely open to the summer's breeze as passengers sat on the long benches that ran length-wise in the car.

Shortly after her husband's death, Mrs. Merritt began her 32 years as principal of the Pomona Mills (later Hunter) School, a county school in those days, but conveniently accessible, thanks to the trolley. During her years at the Pomona School her ties with the college were reinforced by the annual summer sessions she attended—no less than twelve of them—to add to her credentials as a master teacher. To her chagrin, she never found it possible to complete all of the requirements for the master's degree, because the stipulation that a portion of the program be taken "in residence," was, in her case, unthinkable so long as she was needed at home to look after the house and her growing boys. She recalls with a chuckle, that the campus swarmed with teachers in those early summer sessions because the Greensboro campus was from the beginning almost universally regarded as a sort of West Point for the training of the state's teaching corps. The institution's fierce pride in its reputation led it sometimes into an almost passionate hostility to suggestions for the establishment of additional teacher training schools—like Eastern Carolina Teachers College, for example.

Mrs. Merritt adds that the Normal's hearty pride in its role as the state's chief producer of teachers also took the form of hostility to suggestions to create other teacher training institutions elsewhere in the state (as in the case of plans to establish Eastern Carolina Teachers College). "The Normal didn't much want to see such a school at Greenville. They thought it might take away some of our students," she says.

Modern denizens of the campus are still occasionally surprised to hear that as late as 1920 the street now called Aycock [Street] was still being referred to as Dairy Street, so named because of the college's splendid dairy barn and herds, which supplied enough milk for the whole college population with a surplus from which sales were made to surrounding households as well. Some of the consumers, the Merritts among them, kept the milk cans cooling in the spring-fed "branch" in the Spring Garden area.

A large dairy barn (Robert Jr. remembers it as an impressively handsome one) surrounded by pasture land, stood, in fact, on the present site of Mary Howard Shaw Dormitory until it was replaced by one a little farther west (hence Dairy Street?); and later still this barn too was succeeded by a still larger one which the school operated near the Guilford College community. When it was still on the campus grounds, the dairy farm with its herds of cows, its horses, and a large pigeon loft, was a favorite place for the Merritt boys to visit.

Behind the range of buildings that were now filling up the west side of College Avenue, beginning with the frame McIver residence in which the widow of the Founder lived out her long life, the landscape was dominated by woodland, pasture, and open fields, and the casual stroller walking westward to Dairy Street, found himself suddenly and quite literally out in the country.

Mrs. Merritt remembers too that downtown Greensboro in those years was "a very pretty place," and a busy one, where one of the most familiar sights was the drummers, breezing into town on the train, swinging off the cars with their sample cases at the Railway Station, and then crowding onto the trolleys and fanning out to the hotels and wherever it was that these bustling merchant princelings foregathered.

Finally, our interviewee left us in no doubt that she reveres the memory of the college's first builders. She was especially warm in her tributes to Dr. [Julius Isaac] Foust, whose long reign as president began just a few months after the Merritts came to Greensboro, and whose quiet strength, she believes, made him supremely the right man for his post; and to E.J. Forney, who was for a time the Founder's private secretary, and who became in time the institution's treasurer, and perhaps the most gifted and successful teacher of commercial subjects (notably shorthand) in the South of his day.

[Editor's note: The following paragraphs seem to be extra notes that Richard Bardolph intended to reorganize into the rest of the narrative.]

Robt. A. Merritt Jr. who grew up as a boy on the edge of campus remembers how delighted he and his brother were to visit the dairy barn and the herds. Also the excitement when automobiles began to appear before the roads were ready for them. He says that Kenilworth Street, then known as McKinley Street, ran southward across Spring Garden and continued uphill across the railroad tracks. One day, a local doctor who had one of the first automobiles (this was about 1915[?]) came careening down hill in the muddy, rutted road after a heavy rain and came to grief in a miry pothole. When the discomfitted physician swore under his breath but loud enough for little Robert to hear, Robert reported the incident to his mother and was startled to have his mouth washed out with soap.

A correction: not only were Robert A. Merritt Jr. and J. Fred Merritt mascots of senior classes (1909 and 1910), their little sister, who subsequently died in childhood, was also the mascot of about 1915. (Pictures of these honorary class members are in the yearbooks; I remember seeing the picture of Fred, looking very much as he did 60 years later. R.B.)

It quickly becomes evident that Mrs. Merritt's favorite word for CDMcI [Charles D. McIver] is "enthusiastic," or "enthusiasm." And she obviously considers J.I. Foust to be at least his equal though a very different sort of man. It should be remembered though that she is remembering CDMcI [Dr. McIver] largely through Mrs. McIver, her very close friend whom she associated with until the Widow McIver's death; but the Merritts came to Greensboro only a month or two (I think) before McIver's death. Of Foust she says "He didn't show his enthusiasm like Dr. McIver, but he was steady, and he was very capable. He did a lot for that college, and he stayed longer than anybody else."

Mrs. M. taught school for two or three years before her marriage; after her husband's death she was principal of Hunter (formerly known as Pomona) School for 32 years.

She has the typical things to say about Miss [Sue May] Kirkland [lady principal]. Says "Miss Kirkland made those girls walk a straight line (laughs heartily here as if remembering some specific instances) but she did have a good effect on them. They didn't have any goings on."

Recalling the available entertainments on campus in the early days, Mrs. M. says there was a heavy reliance on local talent, and they supplied "some very pretty concerts." The relatively new (built in 1904) Students' Building provided the auditorium for outside lecturers and entertainers, for both town and gown. The list included some occasional opera companies, working under rather severe limitations, including, she thinks, an underdeveloped taste for that sort of thing in little old Greensboro. Once when she came late to one of these performances and couldn't get a seat, Mr. A.J. Angle motioned her to come and take his place (presumably beside Mrs. Angle), Mrs. M. very politely but firmly demurred, but when he kept insisting she realized that he was eager to make his escape. Early in the performance one of the heavies on the cast bellowed so strenuously (she thinks it was an edited down production of *Aida*) that the audience was nervously startled; but after she sat down the evening progressed more smoothly. But there could be no doubt that Mr. Angle "was only too happy about the chance to get away".

Mrs. Merritt's recollections about the Normal's more democratic atmosphere, as compared with the state's private colleges for girls are strikingly confirmed in Dr. Foust's formal reports in the first decade of the Merritt's connection with the school. A fierce promoter of the college's interests, and a sturdy defender of its proud, if youthful record, Foust disclosed in his report for the 1912-1914 biennium that in the first twenty-two years the Normal had graduated 717 young women, and that all but 33 of these were teaching or had taught in the state's public schools. In the same report he records that in the first two decades, more than half of all the students enrolled were daughters of farmers, and that throughout the period more than half of the enrollment was accounted for by students "who according to their own statement would not have attended any other North Carolina college."

The state was obviously reaping a rich reward from the policy of remitting tuition charges for students at the Normal who promised to teach after graduation. But that generous and far-sighted measure was not without its own problems; Dr. Foust pointed out in his reports that a student body so democratically recruited brought in almost no tuition revenues for the school, a severe strain on the budget which the General Assembly did not always fully compensate from other resources.

Mrs. Merritt (who will be 97 on Feb.1, 1982) is surely our most valuable source on various aspects of the college's early history; the more so because her mind is still incredibly clear, and because she expresses herself so loudly. (She has some physical problems, respiratory, I think, in speaking, but the tape was made runs more than an hour and we do not lose a single word; literally, not a single word.) Her "authority" derives especially from the fact that she and her husband came to the college community in 1906, when McIver was still alive (though doomed), and she has lived on the very edge of the campus for 74 (!) years. In addition, as a graduate of Greensboro College, and long a graduate student in summer sessions at the Normal, and as a Normal faculty wife, she is in a unique position to compare student life on our campus with that of other, primarily denominational, colleges for women. North Carolina was well supplied with these; there were three good ones in Raleigh alone: Peace, Meredith, and St. Mary's.

[End of Notes]