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Mabel Smith Douglass



DOUGLASS

No where in this University have tradition and legend been so well preserved as at Douglass College. We have Sacred Path, Drink-a-Toast, mandatory house meetings, and the all-female student population.

Despite this web of encrustment, the students of Douglass are blissfully unaware of the historic origins there. Loree, Cooper, Nelson, Hickman, Corwin, and Gibbons are little more than names which have no meaning for the current generation, beyond some sort of superficial legend associated with them.

That is why this column is being published today, 40 years to the day after a college legend, Mabel Smith Douglass, the founding dean of the school, committed suicide by drowning.

She was a remarkable woman in life, but much more so in death. She took her life because of a mental breakdown. Her body wasn't found for 30 years, a period during which her death was attributed to accidental drowning.

It was not until the body was found - perfectly preserved in the cold, still waters of Lake Placid - that the real cause of death was revealed. Around her neck was a rope tied to a 50-pound anchor.

The Douglass death is but one chapter in a family story which published as fiction would be branded as ridiculous. Her husband, her two children, and her son-in-law all died prematurely, two by suicide.

WHEN THE BODY of Mabel Smith Douglass was finally found there were no known living relatives to bury it. The University claimed it and arranged for burial at the Douglass family plot of Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn.

The family pathos overshadows the brilliant personal successes of Douglass. She led the drive of the State Federation of Women's Clubs to establish the college and was named the first dean.

Enrollment of the New Jersey College for Women, as it was initially named, rose from an initial class of 54 in 1918 to over 1,000 students by 1933. A Phi Beta Kappa chapter was quickly established. Although her rule of the college and its students was perhaps a bit heavy-handed, she nevertheless charmed substantial amounts of funds for Douglass out of the state legislature. Upon her retirement, newspapers throughout the East ran editorials praising her for her accomplishments.

Her personal life, however, was fraught with tragedy and ill health. From two weeks after N.J.C. opened, when she almost died from a severe attack of influenza, until her death, Douglass was continually being described in print as 'frail,' 'delicate,' and 'ailing.'

Her husband, a prominent produce merchant in New York City, died in 1917, leaving her a rich widow. Undaunted, she took the deanship of N.J.C. and moved into College hall, then the residence of the dean.

It was there in 1923, that her son, a junior in New Brunswick High School, shot himself to death with his rifle. The reasons were never made clear publicly.

The toll of personal tragedy and the pressures of conflict with what was even then a centralization-minded University administration gradually ebbed her strength. She remained away from her office for several months in the spring of 1930.

SHE RETURNED for two more years and then, with increasing mental health problems, took a year's leave of absence starting in June, 1932. She never returned, although her resignation was not announced until the following May, about the time she suffered a nervous breakdown for which she went to a sanatorium in Cross River, N.Y.

Douglass owned a lush summer retreat, Camp Onodaga, on the shores of Lake Placid, and there she went to recover from her breakdown. On September 21, 1933, with company expected, she left her lodge about 1:30 p.m., telling her servants and daughter she was going to search for pretty autumn foliage for decorations. She never returned.

Her daughter did not become alarmed until about 4 30 p.m., when she called the state police. An extensive search centering in the nearby foothills was started. Rutgers President Robert Clothier immediately traveled to Lake Placid to aid in the search.

Her boat was found floating on the lake near Pulpit Rock, the deepest part of the lake. It was concluded after several more days of searching that she had fallen overboard and drowned. A memorial service was conducted and gradually the tragedy faded from memory.

In 1948 her daughter, now a widow by virtue of her husband's plane crash, summoned a minister to her New York City apartment, excused herself for a minute, and stepped out the window to her death.

THE NEW JERSEY COLLEGE for Women became Douglass College in 1955, to honor the fallen dean.

On September 15, 1963, members of the Lake Champlain Wreck-Raiders Club, exploring ledges on the bottom of Lake Placid, came across a remarkably well-preserved body 95 feet below the surface. The divers said there was a rope wrapped around the neck tied to an anchor with an estimated weight of 50 pounds.

The body was brought to the surface, although the anchor, which fell during the ascent, was never located. A week later, positive identification was made. A break in the upper arm of the body matched the location of a break Douglass received while recovering in the sanatorium.

Despite the rope, anchor, and the nervous breakdown, the 1933 verdict of accidental drowning was never changed.