Grand Valley Review

Volume 8 | Issue 1 Article 8

1-1-1993

lcie Macy Hoobler: Nutritionist and GVSU Icon

Sheldon J. Kopperl
Grand Valley State University

Icie Macy Hoobler: Nutritionist and GVSU Icon

SHELDON J. KOPPERL

The Grand Valley State University community should already be familiar with the *name* of Icie Macy Hoobler, who, as charter member of our Board of Control, is remembered by a portrait in the library and a residence center named in her honor. What many of our colleagues may not know is that Hoobler was a first rate nutritional biochemist, who largely developed the research that determined the food needs of normal infants and children; and who, in so doing, led the way for women to become more widely accepted in the scientific community.

Macy was born in 1892 in rural southwestern Missouri. Her parents, although they had little formal schooling and lived as farmers, valued education and made sure that their four children would have the opportunities that they had missed. By the time she had received her AB degree in music in 1914 from Central College for Women (Lexington, MO), Macy had convinced her parents that science was her true interest; they allowed her to earn her BS degree in chemistry at the University of Chicago, where she was influenced by her informal mentor, Mary Sherrill, a chemistry instructor at Randolph-Macon College, who was studying for her Ph.D.

In interviews Macy always emphasized the role of mentors--male and female--at vital points in her career, who provided the support she needed to boost her confidence in her ability to succeed. Another such individual was one of her instructors at Chicago, Julius Steiglitz, who urged her to return to his laboratory to pursue her doctorate in "pure" chemistry after first completing a master's degree at the University of Colorado.

While this was an attractive offer, she later decided to obtain her Ph.D. at Yale under the direction of perhaps America's greatest early researcher in physiological chemistry, Lafayette B. Mendel. As a woman Macy would stand a better chance of employment in a nutrition-related field (so the conventional wisdom went) because of its connection with home economics. Although her thesis topic had no connection with her later studies, she vividly remembered a lecture by Mendel on the lack of knowledge about the nutritional value of milk, a void which she would later fill.

Although she enjoyed contact with students and would have thrived in academia, she recognized that full-time faculty appointments in the sciences for women were limited; consequently, she accepted an offer of the directorship of a new research program at the Merrill-Palmer School in Detroit, an institution for educating young mothers. She remained in that position from 1923 until her retirement in 1959.

Among her most significant scientific investigations were methods for testing human, cow, and goat milk for composition and comparative value; for the metabolism of women and children and the growth of infants and children; and for the influence of certain dietary factors on nutrients of mother's milk. Another connected major area of research was bone development studies. In what today is considered a hazardous approach to the question, Macy took large numbers of X-rays of a series of children at frequent intervals to measure the increase in bone size and changes in bone appearance. In the 1920's and 1930's when the work was being done, the dangers of radiation were not known.

Her research group was also responsible for a variety of other nutrition studies on such subjects as the amino acid composition of milk and animal tissues and their variation in foods; the gastrointestinal studies of children; the amount of vitamin C in orange juice; and the composition of human blood cells. This latter study resulted from collaboration with Dr. Thomas J. Cooley of the near-by Children's Hospital. Much later she published two highly regarded popular books on her research emphasizing the practical information that such studies provided. The first was titled *Chemical Anthropology*, by which she meant the long-term significance of metabolism, diet, and growth. This resulted directly in the government's setting many dietary standards for children at various stages of development and for pregnant and lactating women. The second book, *Hidden Hunger*, was written in conjunction with the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences.

Honors came in considerable quantity to Macy. In 1930 and 1931 she served simultaneously as the first female chair of an American Chemical Society (ACS) local section (Detroit) and division (Biological Chemistry). Later in that decade she was elected secretary of the American Institute of Nutrition and became its president in 1944. She received the Frances Garvan Award from the ACS in 1945 as the year's outstanding woman chemist and was president of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters in 1947-8.

Despite these accolades, her gender limited her acceptability by much of the male intellectual community during the World War Two era. On one occasion, she was the guest of honor at a dinner at her *alma mater*, the University of Chicago, in the late 1930's. Since women at that time were not permitted in the main dining hall, she was forced to dine "with the hired help" in an annex until plates were removed and the main speaker, Dr. Macy herself, was scheduled to appear.

In 1938 Macy married Dr. Raymond Hoobler, former director of Children's Hospital and long-time friend, who was recently widowed. He died in 1943. After her retirement in 1959, she remained a consultant until 1974, and for the remaining ten years of her life, she kept current in her areas of interest, including science and the fine arts, and built a beautiful retirement home in Ann Arbor, less than a mile from the Medical School campus. In view of her lifelong interest in education and her involvement in political activities, her selection by Governor George Romney to serve on the Board of Control of the newly chartered Grand Valley State College (1960-1968) was a fitting climax to a career of service.

Her autobiographical memoirs were privately published shortly before her death as *Boundless Horizons* (Exposition: Smithtown, NY, 1982). No full scale study of the scientific content or historical significance of her nearly 200 published papers has been undertaken. One of my long-term goals is to fill this void.