

# "She Openeth Her Mouth With Wisdom; And in Her Tongue is the Law of Kindness"

—Proverbs 31:26

Some there be whose personalities are such powerful agencies for the good that, whether physically present or not, their's is a rich bequest constantly available to those would profit from it.

Edna Mitchell, in physical terms, left for an appointment with her Maker on August 8, 1963.

Edna Mitchell, in spiritual terms, will not have left this campus several dozen college generations hence.

From all constructive viewpoints, she is on extended vacation. People like her do not "die".



There once were three sisters, known to the Elizabeth City community as Jane and Phoebe Overton and Fanny Burke.

Fanny married a gentleman named Hugh Cale. Cale served as a Pasquotank county commissioner and Mrs. Cale as a school teacher. Later her husband went off to Raleigh where as a member of the North Carolina State Legislature he saw to it that an important Bill was introduced—A Bill which grew from a piece of paper to an Elizabeth City State College.

Meanwhile, Cale's in-laws, Phoebe Overton and her husband, saw to it that the family was enlarged and in due course undertook to rear their daughter, Mary.

Mary V. Overton became a grown woman, married Samuel W. Harris of Hertford County, and on December 10, 1901 they became the proud parents of a daughter named Edna Cornelia.

What would be more natural than Edna's schooling taking place at the institution established by her great-uncle's husband? There the teenager finished in 1917 those courses available to her (two years of high school), under the aegis of a certain Peter Weddick Moore. Edna Harris then emulated her great-uncle, Hugh, and also went off to Raleigh.

Her "Bill" there however, was not a legislative enactment but a bachelor of science degree from Shaw University which she won in 1923 after six years of work. With this in hand, Edna promptly came home, applied to and was accepted by Dr. Moore as a teacher at her first alma mater.

Twenty-one years old Edna Harris began demonstrating loyalty to her school from the beginning. Quietly as was her manner, but inexorably as was her fiber, she also began insisting from the beginning upon her students' giving their constant attention to self-improvement.

The young preceptress felt that "others should live up to that" the institution stood for," to quote her sister, Blanche (Mrs. Harold Newell), herself an alumna of Edna's school.

Or, to use the quotation and characterization by the student editors of *The Normal Light* (yearbook for 1926): "Young ladies and gentlemen you just ought to get this: You can't fool Miss Harris; she knows when you study and marks accordingly."

Edna Harris did part-time library work, taught a foreign language, taught English, and was once chairman of the English department. She turned up in 1929 as an advisor to the *State Normal Banner*. In 1936 she was an advisor to the S. N. S. (State Normal School) Monthly. Later she would become the institution's director of publications and a professor of English. Love for the beauties of her native tongue and for printer's ink had come to the forefront; there it stayed.

By now, John Bias was her president since Peter W. Moore had become President Emeritus; and by now, Edna Harris had become Mrs. James Jefferson Mitchell (December 23, 1936).

By December 1948, Harold L. Trigge had served as president, former Denn Sidney D. Williams had succeeded him, and a journalistic effort some seven years old had begun to improve upon its preceding issues under the advisanship of Mrs. Mitchell. This newspaper was then called the *State Teachers College Newsletter*.

In November 1950 Mrs. Mitchell enlarged the Newsletter; in December 1958, she did so again (this time to its present size); and in October 1960, she became advisor to the *Compass*, a name change having first come among the student body, Student Council and with the administration and President. The next issue of the *Compass* bore its own medallion, designed by Hugh Bullock, Art Instructor.

If the publication expanded or *Compass*, so its staff also expanded, both quantitatively and in terms of geographical sphere of operations. For the latter, Mrs. Mitchell made sure that selected students journeyed each March to Columbia University (source of her A. M. degree) for annual conventions of the Columbia Scholastic Press Association. (The *Compass*, or Newsletter, had been a member of the Association since 1951.)

More important however, is the fact that since that date as well as before it, many a student had experienced professional and personal growth by being directly associated with the paper and through its activities, with Mrs. Mitchell. "She always advised students to retain faith in self and in God, strongly opposed mediocrity and encouraged excellence on the part of the student," wrote Thelma Howard, now a senior.

Such thoughts, shared widely, help explain Edna Mitchell's being hailed by students in a page one newsletter item (March, 1948) or honored by the Women's Government Association.

in May 1960 as "a person who has made a contribution and example for the students of... (the college) to follow."

These are some of the tangibles; what of the intangibles? This is always the difficult question to answer satisfactorily but perhaps the poem on this page helps indicate answers. Perhaps the following excerpt from the program for her last rites also helps:

In her forty years of service she became known as a master teacher and counselor, became senior member of the faculty in years of service, and earned a special place of highest personal and professional regard among administrators, alumni, faculty and students.

It is most striking that here was a woman who could gather nothing but accolades during her earthly sojourn under every president this institution has had. It is difficult to hear a hard word about Edna Mitchell.

Blue-janed laborers and faddish sophomores; children who knew her and sophisticated doctors of philosophy; whoever it is, the reminiscence is pleasant.

This also implies that Mrs. Mitchell was active on and off campus. It says, as the spiritual has it, that This Little Light o' Mine was allowed to shine wherever Edna Mitchell went. One may quote the obituary again: "Early in her life she showed great talents, keen interest and constant

willingness to work with those around and the Elizabeth City Alumni Chapter the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

With all these activities, Mrs. Mitchell was yet closely knit to her family: her daughter, Sylvia Clare of Philadelphia; her sisters, Mrs. Pearl Shannon and Mrs. Blanche Newell of

Elizabeth City; her brother, Rufus Harris of Clarksville, Virginia; and certainly her husband, James J. Mitchell of the P. W. Moore High School Faculty.

Nor did academic pursuits suffer. As highly thought of as a teacher as she was as a newspaper advisor, she sought additional experiences from which her students might become legatees. These experiences included advanced graduate study at Sarah Lawrence College, Antioch College and New York University.

There came, finally, August 12, 1963, a time when an overflow of persons who would do homage, gathered in the building wherein was her office and named for him who first employed her. These persons heard J. S. Bach, other composers, spirituals, speak through music those things which strong men and women could not put entirely into words.

Isaac A. Battle, president of the General Alumni Association, the Reverend J. E. Trotman of St. Stephen's Baptist Church, Miss Quencie E. Ferebee of the Trigg Elementary School (Elizabeth City), President Ridley and the Reverend Dr. J. R. R. McRay of Mrs. Mitchell's own Corner Stone Church, all gathered to express as best they could those things which Professor Mitchell meant to



Edna Cornelia (Harris) Mitchell, Director of Publications; Professor of English. December 10, 1901; August 8, 1963

others and the organizations they represented; to express those thoughts occasioned in bold relief by her sudden and shocking death.

She once heard in real a group of Elizabeth City high school organ students and felt they should be heard on campus. They performed in June 1963. Two months later, subdued in mind, they returned, this time to play the organ while she lay in state.

Others of them returned to sing in the choir of her beloved church; still others "just wanted to be on hand" for the last rites as a gesture of respect.

The Corner Stone Choir joined in the snug ely with the College Choir both directed by her close friend, Evelyn A. Johnson, who years ago came to the College upon Mrs. Mitchell's initial persuasion.

On Sunday, September 15, 1963, there came perhaps the most succinct summary of her life given by President Walter N. Ridley as he addressed the class of 1967 during its Candlelighting Ceremonies: "She was a light to those around her."

Thelma Howard, a faithful worker on the *Compass* staff recently selected these words to characterize her mentor:

A face serene . . .  
A word of thought . . .  
Such high esteem this leader sought to give to those around her.  
In cognizance of so much that she was, and is, to this publication, the *Compass* thinks that it can do no less than try to perpetuate some rays of that "light" of which Dr. Ridley spoke; no less than try to build higher on 'How Firm a Foundation' Edna Harris Mitchell had wrought.

Requiescat in pace

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With Miss Felicia Anderson of Virginia State College (center) and Mrs. Walter N. Ridley.

her. These qualities she carried into her chosen profession of teaching. A lifelong faithful member of Corner Stone Baptist Church, she was a dedicated contributor (to) and supporter of the entire program of that Church. She was a constant and tireless worker in community organizations. She held offices, from time to time, in the Matrons Social Literary and Art Club, the Faculty Women's Club, the Cheerful We Club, the National Association of College Women's Clubs

To Mrs. Mitchell  
Mrs. Mitchell, now has come the day  
That I must be on my way.  
Still in my mind, you will remain.  
'Cause life without you won't be the same.  
Thoughts of you will still linger on—  
'Tho my College Days are almost gone.  
With you as my guide  
I shall march on with pride.  
In search for a loftier throne.  
Although my work here is ending,  
I have just reached my beginning.  
For I have much to say yet—  
That is — YOU — I shall NEVER FORGET!  
—Clarence E. Biggs



COMMENCEMENT, MAY 1963 (MRS. MITCHELL IS THIRD FROM LEFT)

At Columbia University, March, 1963