2 The Great Depression and College Years

After the crash of October 1929, no one realized the country was in for a decade-long Depression, but we knew that times were hard. At Corvallis High School I was part of a movement to rent caps and gowns for graduation because we knew that many students could not afford suits and lovely dresses, and we knew many of the 147 students in our class could not afford to go on to college, even with room and board at home. We graduated in rented gray caps and gowns.

My senior year at Corvallis High School, I was news editor of the weekly school paper, The High-O-Scope. When it came time for Girls’ League to publish its annual issue, I helped. I now wonder how far back in time these Girls’ Leagues went, and whether they were related to the suffrage movement. Our Girls’ League tried to get representation on the student council but failed miserably. In debate, Elizabeth Price and I won our district, went to state finals, and lost to two boys from eastern Oregon. There was no gender segregation in debate in Oregon high schools. Most teams had both boys and girls on them. High school students were always boys and girls, not men and women.

I attended Oregon State College (Agricultural had been dropped from the school’s name) my freshman and sophomore years, walking the few blocks from our house at 333 North 13th. It rained often and I hated galoshes, so my memories are of wet leather-soled shoes, in which my feet were clammy and intensely uncomfortable. In college I repeated earlier activities, helping edit the daily Oregon State Barometer and participating in debate. There, women’s and men’s varsity debate teams were separate, and women’s teams had different questions, with one of the women’s questions usually related to the home.

Fortunately for me, my father could afford to send me to college. My only earnings came from grading papers for my history professor at forty cents an hour. I had a double major in education and economics,
but my father insisted I also take a year of mathematics with the engineers. I was one of very few women in those classes and got good grades. In English composition, my essay about my grandfather, Alof Larson in Snowflake, appeared in *Manuscript*, the campus literary magazine.¹ Professor Frank Parr, in education, arranged for a piece I wrote about school assignments to be published in *School and Society*. He also recommended for publication a book review I wrote of H. E. Buchholz’s *Fads and Fallacies in Education*. In my review, which appeared in the *Oregon Education Journal*, I noted that Buchholz advocated higher pay for men than for women teachers, so that men could support their families. I wrote that “women of the suffrage movement and the WCTU would express righteous indignation” at that suggestion. The final paragraphs of my review were continued over onto page thirty, which also included two unexpected pieces of information, in light of today’s feminism. Across the top of the page was a picture of county school superintendents in session at the Oregon State Department of Education on July 11, 1932. Fifteen of the thirty-four people were women, and the president was a woman. Certainly a much better showing than in later decades.

The second piece of information read: “The fourth Friday in October of each year has been set aside by legislative enactment as a day on which the schools of Oregon shall give recognition to the life and work of Frances E. Willard.” Willard, who lived from 1839 to 1898, worked toward prohibition, advocated for juvenile courts, social morality, and economic justice, and, in the words of the article, was also “a prophet of international peace through understanding and arbitration.” The State of Illinois had placed her statue in Statuary Hall, Washington, D.C., “the only woman thus far honored in this way.”² No wonder Willard’s picture hung in the hall of my elementary school. Remnants of the Progressive tradition lingered.

After two years at Oregon State College, I transferred to Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, where I completed my undergraduate work. I was eighteen years old and wanted to be outside the shadow of my professor father, an attitude which both he and my mother understood and encouraged. As I boarded the train, she said, “If you don’t get homesick it will be a tribute to me as a mother.” Frequent letters went back and forth.

BYU, a Mormon institution, did not charge out-of-state tuition, and we were already acquainted with two faculty women who had recently attended summer school in Corvallis and knew a Provo family who
might offer me room and board. My father also knew Lowry Nelson, then teaching rural sociology. I took a class from him but continued to major in education and economics. At BYU, I was elected president of the Associated Women Students and tried to get AWS represented on the student council, but failed. This was a repeat of what had happened at Corvallis High School with Girls’ League. I gave up, but one faculty wife was very upset and urged me to fight further for representation. She remembered the long battle in our country for women’s rights, but my generation had only token memory. I was on the women’s varsity debate squad and on the staff of the Y News. As in high school, one annual issue of the student newspaper was put out by girls. (We were girls at BYU more often than we were women.) This issue was part of “Girls’ Day,” and appeared May 5, 1933, as The Suffragette Issue of the Y News. My senior year I co-edited the special issue, which we named The Coed Cougar Issue of the Y News.

During my senior year at BYU it became obvious that, upon graduation, there would be no high school teaching position for me. Jobs were extremely scarce but I went ahead and did my teacher training at Provo High School, teaching economics and coaching the girls’ debate team. Unlike high school debate teams in Oregon, those in Utah were gender segregated.

I graduated valedictorian. Some of the women in our class had dropped out to get married, and many were engaged. A very religious Mormon family back in Oregon criticized me for not having found a husband at BYU—after all, it was an LDS matrimonial bureau. I had dated, but never seriously. Instead, I was bent on doing graduate work out in the world somewhere.

During my senior year, I had decided to do graduate work in consumption economics. With my father’s long-distance help, I sent out several applications for graduate school and discovered that most colleges and universities did not offer work in consumption economics. Iowa State College did, and offered me a twenty-five dollar per month scholarship. My father would send me enough money each month to make ends meet. So off I went to Ames, in the fall of 1934, by train in the chair car. It took three days and two nights from Corvallis, going through Omaha. Whenever the train stopped for the engine to take on water, a group of young men scrambled off the top of the cars to stretch their legs. The railroads let them ride on top, free, because they were looking for employment.
Graduate Study at Iowa State College

Iowa State, like Oregon State, was a land grant college, strong in agriculture and in home economics. Elizabeth E. Hoyt and Margaret G. Reid became my major professors. They were in the Department of Economics and Sociology, headed by Theodore W. Schultz, who many years later would receive the Nobel Prize. When I went to Schultz’s office to introduce myself, he said of course he knew me because he was a graduate student at Wisconsin in 1927–28 when our family was there. He recalled that when he came to our flat on Saturday afternoons to discuss economics with my father, we children were sent off with a dime each to go to the movies so the two men would have peace and quiet to talk.

Hoyt and Reid did not have offices with the men economists in Ag Annex, but were on the first floor at the back of Margaret Hall. I lived on the second floor. Built in 1894, Margaret Hall was a red brick building, French Renaissance style, with a tower at each corner and a gargoyle peering down from a roof edge. It stood near the library and near the home economics building.

When I arrived in Ames I put my money into a bank. “Don’t keep it in your dresser drawer,” my father cautioned. “It isn’t much, but keep it in a bank.” Soon afterward the bank declared a moratorium and closed itself up. I had two dollars and thirty-seven cents in cash, and I had to eat. So I went to a grocery store over on Lincoln Way and asked for credit, which was given without hesitation. And that was how I got the milk and the bread which I kept in Margaret Hall, with the milk keeping cool on my window ledge between window pane and screen. After a while the bank re-opened, and I resumed eating my noon meal at the college cafeteria.

To earn my fellowship money, raised from twenty-five dollars to sixty dollars per month, I taught principles of economics to home economics undergraduates. All Iowa State students were expected to take a three-course sequence of introductory economics. The Division of Home Economics offered a separate listing of these courses for its own students, a convenience I later recognized as gender segregation. Was it discrimination too? I doubt that Hoyt and Reid would have seen it as discrimination because their courses were as rigorous as those offered elsewhere on campus. The first two courses used F. B. Garver and A. H. Hansen, *Principles of Economics*, the same text used across campus. The third course was consumption economics, the new field in which Hoyt and Reid were pioneers. Home economics students provided a much wider enrollment for consumption economics than would have been
Left: Alison Comish, 1934.
Right: Wynne Thorne, 1933.
Below: Margaret Hall, Iowa State College.
possible otherwise at Iowa State at that time. Indeed it was because of home economics that consumption economics became part of the curriculum at Iowa State, as explained by Elizabeth Hoyt:

In the days when home economics meant to most people only cooking and sewing, Dean Anna E. Richardson of Iowa State College perceived that home economics must take account of the principles of economics as they relate to the use of goods and services, that home economics itself is, to a large degree, applied consumption. It was she and not the economists themselves who in the first instance made it possible for the study of consumption to have exceptional opportunities for its development at Iowa State College.  

Ironically, although home economics had initially sheltered consumption economics, on July 1, 1987, the Iowa State College of Home Economics lost its identity and became the College of Family and Consumer Sciences. The board of regents forced this decision saying “it was difficult to effectively market the college to prospective students and faculty under the old name.”

At Iowa State when I was a student in the 1930s, home economics freshmen had their own chemistry courses as well as introductory economics. Dr. Nellie Naylor, in charge of these courses, had written the text, *Introductory Chemistry with Household Applications*.

My friend, Bertha Fietz (Carter), a graduate student living in Margaret Hall, was aghast when she came to campus and learned she would be teaching freshman home economics chemistry because her own undergraduate work had been all “pure” chemistry—systematic, inorganic, analytical, organic, etc. But she found Dr. Naylor’s approach—for example, the chapter on leavening agents in baking—made sense. Bertha appreciated the practical application of fundamental principles.

During my own time at Iowa State I did not encounter gender segregation in my graduate courses. I took courses with men in economic theory, history, and statistics and often was the only woman. I was fortunate to have Hoyt and Reid as my major professors. Elizabeth Hoyt was the first woman I ever met who graduated from Radcliffe, which meant she had taken Harvard classes. She knew Greek, Latin, philosophy, and anthropology, subjects of which I was ignorant. My own land grant college education had not offered these. And she had traveled around the world! She joined the faculty of Iowa State College in 1925.

Hoyt grew up in Maine and kept her community ties by spending her summers at Round Pond during her long life. When she was ten
years old her mother died, and she kept house for her father and brother. As she got older, she earned money for education by selling buttons from door to door and working as a secretary. Hoyt was one of the first scholars to combine anthropology and economics. Her doctoral dissertation, *Primitive Trade*, was published in 1926, soon after she completed it at Harvard; forty years later it was reprinted as a classic. Her second book was *The Consumption of Wealth* (1928). I read my father’s copy before I left for Ames. Her third book, *Consumption in Our Society* (1938), was published while I was at Ames, and her three other books followed.

Hoyt believed in standing up for one’s own ideas, as indicated by her preface to *Primitive Trade*:

The author expresses her gratitude to those members of the Faculty of Harvard University and Radcliffe College who generously assisted her in the development of her thought, even when, in some instances, it ran counter to their own: to Professor A. M. Tozzer in anthropology, Professor R. B. Perry in philosophy, and Professor A. P. Usher in economic history.  

These were giants in their fields, yet she dared to disagree. Often, when I stopped by her office, Hoyt would be sitting at her desk, leaning forward over her folded arms, thinking. She read broadly and sometimes brought to class slips of thin paper on which she had typed (using carbon papers so we could each have a copy) a statement from some author, which illustrated a point she was making. This was how I first learned about Lewis Mumford, Ralph Adams Cram, and Lafcadio Hearn.

Hoyt considered empirical studies important, but she was always looking beyond them to meaning and significance. Her theory of consumption used the idea of basic human interests: the sensory, social, empathetic, aesthetic, intellectual, and technological. In her final book, *Choice and the Destiny of Nations*, published in 1969, Hoyt described antagonisms capable of destroying humankind. She noted that knowledge of technology had increased more than other knowledge, and nowhere had the bits and pieces of human knowledge been brought together. She suggested that the concept of choice could bring together the diffuse contributions of the behavioral sciences, and she built her book on this concept.  

Hoyt was a great influence on me because she cared about values. Not all economists would countenance inquiry into values because they assumed ends as given, defining economics as “the science which
studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses.” This was Lionel Robbins’ definition in an essay published as a thin little book, in London, in 1935, an essay which carried great weight among Iowa State economists.8

Puzzling aspects of the Depression had led to great concern about America’s capacity to consume, the title of a study by the Brookings Institution, which emphasized purchasing power as a factor. Hoyt suggested I write a paper naming additional factors such as time and energy. She liked what I wrote and arranged for its publication in the American Economic Review.9

Margaret Reid was not only a colleague of Hoyt’s but also her close friend. Reid had joined the faculty of Iowa State shortly before I arrived and had just published Economics of Household Production, her doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago, written under the direction of Hazel Kyrk. In this book Reid recognized that no history of household production existed, so she depended mainly on economic history. For the twentieth century, she used sources such as Middletown, the United States Census, and studies of homemakers’ use of time, done in the late 1920s by home economists under sponsorship of state Agricultural Experiment Stations and the Bureau of Home Economics of the United States Department of Agriculture.

Using the framework of economics, Reid considered factors affecting household tasks, and the cost and value of goods produced. She wrote of scientific management in the household and asked, does family production pay? In the United States, in 1930, approximately 14 percent of women classed as homemakers were gainfully employed. Reid wrote of barriers to women getting well-paying jobs and argued that families must weigh the costs of a woman going out to work. She urged that part-time jobs be developed for married women who needed gainful employment but whose household tasks kept them from becoming full time.

It was a great advantage to Reid to have the framework of economics because she could say that the family has particular values of its own, and that the economic approach combines scarce resources with alternative uses to meet the goals of the family. She did not presume to tell families what they ought to do. For example, she wrote: “Waste and economy can be judged only with reference to the ends which are desired. So long as families desire to live in independent homes and eat at a family table, the economy of boarding homes or a central community dining-room has no place in consideration of possible alternatives which might eliminate waste.”
Apparently Reid was thinking of Charlotte Perkins Gilman whose book, *Women and Economics*, published in 1898, advocated common dining rooms. Gilman was the leading intellectual of first wave feminism in our country, but Reid rarely used the term “feminist.” Yet Reid was addressing some of the same questions the early feminists had asked. However Reid said hers was a middle course, seeking to be objective without “muddying the waters” by tying arguments to particular kinds of extremes. She was concerned about the effects of household production on the status of women—the title of one of her chapters. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) had a Committee on the Economic and Legal Status of Women, which endured for several decades. “Status of women” was a respectable concept, whereas by 1930 the term “feminism” had acquired a negative connotation. To denote her middle position, Reid spoke of entering the lists with no point to prove. She urged examination of extreme positions. I have gone back over her references to find out if extremes were included, and they were. It’s really a great reference list and contains important early feminist writers such as Gilman and Olive Schreiner.

At the conclusion of *Economics of Household Production*, Reid spoke of the reactionary and the revolutionary, saying that in both groups emotion rather than reason dominated. Yet Reid herself recognized that society regarded women’s position as inferior. “Traditional husband-wife relationships have been based on the inferiority of women and superiority of men.” “Increasing scientific knowledge does not support the idea that women are inferior. To continue such an idea is to add fuel to fires already kindled.” She recognized discrimination and spoke of sex discrimination in toys and in types of activities for children, and discrimination against hiring married women. She was well aware of gainfully employed mothers’ need for child care. But Reid was not an activist. Only second-wave feminism, much later, would refuse to draw a sharp line between reason and feeling, and would insist on activism.

At that time there was feminist activity across the continent, though rarely so labeled. Veronica Strong-Boag, who researched and wrote about life on the Canadian prairies in the 1920s and 1930s, told of the frequency with which farm journals and prairie newspapers carried letters from women seeking information on child care and birth control, and asking what to do about abusive husbands. They wrote of heavy work loads, both on the farm and in the house. Strong-Boag argued that this was a persistent if often un-self-conscious feminism. These women wanted information on their legal right to egg and milk money, and on
their rights to children and family property when husbands died or deserted them. Grass roots and elite women were bound together in seeing the need for help from husbands, household science, and government. They urged passage of married women’s property acts, divorce reforms, and mothers’ pensions. These attempts to redress inequities, Strong-Boag suggested, were feminism at its most pragmatic, but feminism “could make only small gains in face of recurring economic crisis on the farm and deep-running anti-feminism in the country at large.”

For Iowa in the 1930s, Reid tackled the matter of rural housing, publishing two bulletins on the subject. Among her findings was that only one in five farm homes had a bathroom, only one in four had electricity, and three-fourths of the families carried culinary water an average of ninety-four feet. These bulletins were sponsored by the Agricultural Experiment Station and the Iowa Extension Service, and by two federal agencies.

With regard to the Iowa Extension Service in those depression years, Theodore W. Schultz once wrote me, “While at Iowa State I was favorably impressed by the Home Economics Extension program. It contributed more of value to women as they made choices in a changing economy than did the agricultural extension program for men.” He once told me that his wife, before she married him, was teaching high school with a contract that specified, “If you get married you are fired.” After a time she did marry him and gave up teaching. I remember Schultz saying that his wife paid for the suit he wore to the wedding because, as a graduate student, he didn’t have any money.

My master’s thesis, directed by Reid, dealt with urban housing and was entitled, “Credit Facilities Extended by the United States Government for Home Ownership and Modernization.” After I collected the material, it came time to write it up. Typing in my room in the early morning kept my roommate awake, so I retreated to the attic to be greeted each dawn by grackles on the window sill. They had iridescent black feathers and raucous voices. I typed steadily, hour after hour, draft after draft. Innocent dorm-dwellers thought the attic was haunted.

Actually it was a handy attic. Early on I had strung a clothes line there to dry the clothes that I washed by hand in the communal bathroom on our floor. Automatic washers and driers did not exist. The Maytag washer with a wringer, manufactured in Iowa, reigned supreme in many Iowa homes. Although Reid doubted that individual washing machines used weekly were economical, they were the people’s choice. Of course our dorm had no Maytag. The water in Margaret
Hall was hard, and my white blouses and underwear yellowed. The real problem, though, was hair. The only source of soft water was the hand pump at the sink in the ramshackle kitchen on the first floor. I pumped water up from the cistern into a bucket. Since this water was rain and melted snow that ran off the roof, it was yellowish green and smelled musty. But it was soft. I took my bucket of water into a utility closet, which had live steam that could be coaxed out of a pipe. I put the pipe into the water, and when my water was heated, I carried it up flights of stairs to my own floor to wash my hair in the communal bathroom. Farm women were not the only women carrying buckets of water in Iowa in the 1930s!

On June 10, 1935, I received my master’s degree and wrote home: “There were about 12 doctors’ degrees and 30 masters’, with 500 or more bachelors’ . . . Two women received Ph.D.’s—and I sat near them and kept hoping that someday I could have one, too.” Even before I graduated with a master’s, Hoyt and Reid agreed with me that I should go on for a doctorate. If I became a Ph.D. candidate at Iowa State, I would be the first woman in economics to do so.

It was customary for doctoral graduate students in economics to go elsewhere for a year to take more economic theory and gain a perspective different from that at Iowa State. Reid suggested I go to the University of Chicago. Hazel Kyrk, under whom she had studied, was still at Chicago. She would accept me as a graduate student and could arrange a small stipend and a waiver of tuition. Perhaps I would decide to remain at Chicago to finish a Ph.D.

Graduate Study at the University of Chicago

I spent the summer at home in Oregon and, in the fall, went to Chicago where I did, indeed, learn a great deal. In 1923 Hazel Kyrk’s own doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago had become a book entitled *A Theory of Consumption*. I carried my father’s copy with me to Chicago, with his wavy underlining done with fountain pen. More recently Kyrk had written *Economic Problems of the Family*, the text in a course I took from her.

Helen Wright taught me methods of social investigation, especially with regard to poverty. I took anthropology from A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, who wore a monocle. When he emphasized a point he opened his eye wide, the monocle fell out, and he caught it in his hand. Paul Douglas taught labor problems and chain smoked. When there was a winter
storm, he went over to his first wife’s house and shoveled her walks. Frank Knight and Jacob Viner taught economic theory. Students had a hard time keeping up with them. Charner Perry taught philosophy of value, and edited the journal *Ethics*.

I lived in Green Hall, the graduate women’s dorm. Reid had lived there during her graduate work, just a few years before me. It was a dark gray Gothic stone structure, similar to neighboring campus buildings. Maids changed our beds and waited on table. I had never known real servants before. They were young women from Ireland, saving enough money to return home to marry. They were great favorites of Sophonisba Breckinridge, honorary head of Green Hall, who had lived there ever since coming to the University of Chicago at the turn of the century. Dinner in the evening in the dining room was a pleasant affair, eight to a table. Every three weeks we drew names and rotated tables, so everyone had a chance to sit at Miss Breckinridge’s table. She was indeed a distinguished person. A biographer has written:

> Her students attest to her warmth, enthusiasm, and brilliance in the classroom. The combination of toughness and sensitivity she urged on students and colleagues was her own most distinguishing characteristic, manifested alike in her deceptively delicate ninety-pound frame, in her pale, thin face and sharply etched features surmounted by a mass of dark hair, and in her graceful but commanding treble voice tinged with the southern accent she never wholly lost.  

When I knew her, Breckinridge was seventy years old, had white hair, and was amazingly vital. She held a law degree, had been professor of social economy, and most recently dean of the School of Social Service Administration. In 1912, with Jane Addams, she was partly responsible for the Progressive Party’s endorsement of bills regulating the wages and hours of women’s employment. Miss Breckinridge, as we called her respectfully, had always taken up the defense of women in academia. She wrote in 1933, “Two great land grant colleges are denying the right of married women to continue in employment or the right of the academic woman to round out her experience by marriage.” She went on to say that a dean of women (married) who was replaced by an unmarried one had appealed to the AAUW of her state, because there was no League of Women Voters or Woman’s Party.  

(I wonder what tools these women’s organizations had in the 1930s to fight discrimination. They lacked Title IX and affirmative action, which we have today.)
Those of us who lived in Green Hall became acquainted with several remarkable people whom Miss Breckinridge brought to dinner. One was Marion Talbot. In 1881 Talbot and her mother had helped found the Association of Collegiate Alumni, which later became the American Association of University Women (AAUW). When the University of Chicago opened its doors in 1892, Talbot was on the first faculty as dean of women and assistant professor of sanitary science. In 1905 Talbot became head of the new Department of Household Administration and brought Breckinridge onto its faculty to teach economic and legal aspects of family life. Talbot had a long career at Chicago, during which she fought relentlessly for the right of women students to an equal education.\(^{18}\)

The sisters Grace and Edith Abbott also frequently came to dinner at Green Hall. They were in their late fifties, but being so young myself, I regarded them as elderly women. They had been at Hull House with Addams, and in the early years of the century had worked with Breckinridge to combat unscrupulous cab drivers, lawyers, travel agents, and operators of fraudulent savings banks and employment agencies who preyed on the immigrants arriving in Chicago in great numbers. When I met them in 1935, Edith Abbott was dean of the School of Social Service Administration, and Grace Abbott had just become professor of public welfare, after serving in Washington D.C. in various capacities, heading the Children’s Bureau and helping to write the Social Security Act. Earlier Grace Abbott had participated in the successful Illinois suffrage campaign of 1913, and went with Addams to the International Congress of Women at the Hague in 1915.\(^{19}\)

An extraordinary visitor was Frances Perkins, secretary of labor to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In my letter home, April 26, 1936, I told about getting ready for the dinner at which she would be present. “We are wearing our best clothes, waving our hair, shining our shoes, and everything.” It was indeed a flossy dinner. We were served, for dessert, three kinds of ice cream on our plates, something unheard of during the Depression. I was fortunate to sit across from Perkins at dinner and shall never forget the story she told about Roosevelt. Perkins sat near him at an official dinner at which he was to speak. He leaned over and said, “Frances, before I rise to my feet to give this talk, remind me to buckle my braces. If I forget, I will fall on my face and it embarrasses Eleanor.”

Perkins had worked hard for protective legislation for women in New York, a crusade which brought success after the tragic fire at the Triangle Shirt Waist Company in 1911. When Roosevelt became governor
of New York he appointed Perkins to the state Department of Labor, and when he became president, made her United States secretary of labor. She had great influence on major legislation in favor of collective bargaining, retirement pensions, wage and hour laws, and unemployment benefits. The president often referred to her as Madame Perkins because she had kept her own name although married. Later on, her political enemies would say that keeping her own name was evidence that she was a communist. Susan Ware has described the New Deal network of twenty-eight women working in Washington D.C., who were concerned with social welfare issues and sought to place women in positions to influence policy. Among these were Perkins, Grace Abbott, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

In my letter home I wrote that Perkins was not a feminist. Perkins believed that if the Equal Rights Amendment passed, it would annul protective legislation for women. Breckinridge, Talbot, the Abbotts, and Eleanor Roosevelt agreed with her. It is a quirk of history that the Woman’s Party, pushing for the amendment, took on the label of feminism, and the proponents of protective legislation refused it. Only today is the New Deal network considered to be feminist in a broader sense of the word. Ware has written that “this network of dynamic, intelligent, and committed women worked together as feminists for the advancement of their sex. Without them, the needs of women in government, politics, and relief would have been overlooked. These women worked together as social reformers for the preservation of democracy in a time of economic crisis [the Great Depression].”

When I was at the University of Chicago campus, pacifism was a hotter issue than feminism. Japan was occupying Mongolia. Italy, under Mussolini, invaded Ethiopia, and Hitler was rearming Germany. The world teetered on the brink of another war, and most Americans wanted no part of it. Students planned a campus peace conference, and I was one of eight delegates from Green Hall chosen to attend. Miss Breckinridge’s note to me, written February 26, 1936, reads: “I want to congratulate you on your election as a delegate from Green House to the Peace Conference to be held next week. The House will be very safe, we are sure, in the hands of the delegation selected. We know that you realize the very real tribute that was paid you and the responsibility that rests upon you as spokesman for one of the most dignified and responsible organizations in the Quadrangles.”

We knew there would be delegates with communist leanings, and, sure enough, a resolution was put forth blaming wars on the American capitalistic system. The Young Women’s Christian Association delegates
and most of the eight Green Hall delegates threatened to bolt the conference if such a resolution passed. This would deprive the conference of its overall strength. The resolution failed. The Chicago Tribune was highly critical of the conference. Publisher William Randolph Hearst was on a hunt for communists, with a list that included President Robert Hutchins of the university, as well as Susan M. Kingsbury, who chaired the AAUW Committee on the Economic and Legal Status of Women.

After the peace conference, the students demanded a peace strike to be held the third week of April. The university administration would not permit a demonstration outdoors, or a parade, but promised the field house. Prior to the peace strike, and hoping for a parade, 107 students, of whom I was one, filed through the library at four-thirty, on our way to the president’s office. President Hutchins was not there, but we met with a dean and presented a petition with seven hundred names. I wrote home about this and said I thought that, on the whole, the University of Chicago students were against the peace strike or were completely indifferent. Out of that meeting with the dean came the decision that we could parade as long as we remained on university ground. The city police had orders not to protect peace strikers anywhere. We could not have any outdoor ceremony after the parade.

At the field house there were many speeches from everyone. Communists, socialists, laborites, one professor, and one reverend spoke. Seventeen hundred were at the meeting, but only seven hundred were in the parade. We marched four abreast along campus walks. There was one news reel camera filming us, and half a dozen newspaper photographers and reporters. I wrote my folks that, if they saw newsreels of the University of Chicago strike, I had on a gray coat but so did scores of other people. I wrote that it was all very peaceful because the fraternity boys who were against the strike had promised not to throw rotten eggs, as they did the year before.

At Chicago my closest friend was Eleanor Parkhurst from Chelmsford, Massachusetts, with degrees in English and sociology from Wellesley. She came to Iowa State the same time I did, and was a graduate assistant to Elizabeth Hoyt. After a year at Ames, we both moved on to the University of Chicago, where we lived on the same floor of Green Hall. She enrolled in the university’s School of Social Work and sometimes took me with her on assignments such as visiting court hearings.21

Another friend at Chicago was Fawn McKay who was working on a master’s degree in English. A native of Huntsville, Utah, she was attending the University of Utah when I was at BYU. At Chicago, since
we were both LDS, we attended the Mormon branch meetings held in a small chapel across the Midway, and together we taught the women’s class, using what we were learning in our university classes. It was exciting intellectually, and we felt appreciated. Fawn lived in Foster Hall, and we sometimes met on the basketball floor when Green played Foster. These were extremely slow basketball games because women were not allowed to run the full length of the floor. Neither of us was aware of what our future held. Before long she met and married Bernard Brodie, a political scientist. Fawn Brodie became a fine writer. Her first book, *No Man Knows My History* (1945), was critical of the Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith, and resulted in her excommunication by LDS Church authorities.22

As my Chicago year neared its close, Hazel Kyrk found an opening for me at Goucher College in Baltimore, which she wanted me to take in the fall, suggesting that after five years of teaching I should return to complete a doctorate at Chicago. I did not want to wait five years. The University of Chicago was much more strenuous than Iowa State, and I wanted to complete my degree quicker than that because I was thinking of marrying Wynne Thorne, who was then completing his own graduate work in soil science at Iowa State. (More later about how I first met Wynne.) Kyrk regretted that I did not want to teach at Goucher, but generously found me a three-week summer teaching job at Colorado State College beginning in August. At Fort Collins I taught consumer marketing to school teachers, many of them Texans escaping the Texas heat. All the students were older than I, a fact which some pointed out. I was twenty-two. I earned three hundred dollars and considered it magnificent pay.

Finishing the Degree and Beginning a Marriage

In the fall of 1936, I was back at Iowa State to take more economic theory, read lots of economic history for a minor, and prepare for my preliminary exams. This time I had a single room in Margaret Hall and typed undisturbed. My closest colleague was Virginia Britton from Akron, Ohio, also a student of Hoyt’s and Reid’s. Virginia undertook a small research project about employed women with children. She went to downtown Ames and asked the managers of various stores and two small manufacturing plants for the names of women with children who were in their employ. She visited these women and asked them to record how they spent their time for a week. No such study had been attempted before.
Virginia was one of many people whom I knew, on and off campus. I was particularly struck by the warm friendship among students, student wives, faculty and wives of faculty. Just as Breckinridge, Talbot, and the Abbotts had belonged to AAUW, so also did Hoyt, Reid, and wives of the male economists at Iowa State.

I recall one of Schultz’s economics seminars in which a faculty wife spoke on household budgets, and I was impressed with the respect that the men accorded her. Women were so outnumbered among economics graduate students, that I sometimes felt myself a lesser individual, though I wouldn’t admit it. I, too, had my turn speaking at the economics seminar. I wrote home on May 3, 1937:

I worked on the seminar report, the relation of consumption to economics, and gave it on Thursday. It was given in the Modernistic room of the Memorial Union, where we have our seminars; a very ugly room. It went over all right, apparently, because I harangued the agricultural economics graduate assistants so much (to get even with remarks they have made on consumption) that they were roused to speech. And the faculty members, economics and sociology, asked lots of questions and laughed at the proper places. Once in awhile when I got stuck, Miss Reid would nod her head yes, to a question that I didn’t think I could answer, and at different crucial moments, Miss Hoyt and Miss Reid each came in with a short discussion to set the people right and help me out a bit. My, but they are two wonderful women.

When I arrived at Iowa State the fall of 1934, I promptly became part of the LDS group. I was usually the only Mormon woman graduate student. Sometimes there might be two of us, but never more. The vast majority of men graduate students on campus were single, but some Mormon men were married and had children, a fact that worried the Iowa State administration because fellowships paid only fifty or sixty dollars a month. Mormons came together on Sundays and had lively Sunday school lessons, each of us taking a turn at teaching. Watching over and caring a great deal about us was the Cannon family. Professor Clawson Y. Cannon, head of dairy science, and his wife, Winnifred Morrell Cannon, were from Utah; they had three sons and a daughter. The Cannons invited us all to their place on holidays, and arranged other social gatherings. Our picnics were fun and I was delighted that a Mormon wife, Lorna Reeder, was the best softball player, even better than the men.
The first time I went to Sunday school, I met Wynne Thorne, an unmarried graduate student in soil science from Perry, near Brigham City, Utah. He graduated from Utah Agricultural College in 1933 and had been in Ames a year when I arrived on the scene. Graduate students across campus came together at “midweek dances” held in the Memorial Union. I went to these, sometimes with Wynne, sometimes with a graduate student from Corvallis. I was corresponding with another boyfriend from my Oregon State College days, who had gone on to Harvard, and I was also writing to a boyfriend from my BYU days. None could afford marriage, but they could afford to send me roses on Valentine’s Day, much to my delight.

After my year at Chicago, Wynne convinced me he would make a better husband than “those other chumps,” as he labeled his competition. By then he had completed his Ph.D. and was on the Iowa State soil science faculty. Wynne was one of those rare people who give one a deep sense of security. “He has cement inside of him,” said one of my women friends. At the same time he was always fascinating to talk to. It was pleasant just to be in the same room with him, and he made it clear that he was in love with me. By spring 1937 we had decided we would get married in the summer. We hoped to have children but not till I completed my degree. When I told this to Elizabeth Hoyt, she said, “Oh, shoot!” commingling in her tone of voice her disappointment but also her blessing. She proceeded to get books on birth control out of the locked shelves of Iowa State College’s library and loaned them to me. It was strange indeed that such books had to be locked up—all because of the Comstock law of 1873. I find it appalling that contraceptive use by married couples was not legalized until a 1965 Supreme Court decision, and it was 1972 when it became legal for unmarried persons.

That summer I taught at Iowa State to have something to add to my vita and to earn money to pay my dental bill. Margaret Reid was writing *Consumers and the Market*, and I read and commented on her chapters as she turned them out. It was a busy six weeks. And suddenly summer school was over. Some of the faculty predicted I would never complete my dissertation, but they did not know how stubborn I can be.

Wynne and I were married August 3, 1937, and he accepted a position at Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College (Texas A & M), a land grant college, not coeducational. We took up residence in College Station and watched the cadets—all students were required to take ROTC—drill in small groups on the road in front of the duplex in which we lived. I used the college library to gather material
Above: Eleanor Parkhurst, Beulah Porter, Alison Comish.
Right: Alison and Wynne Thorne at Texas A & M.
for my dissertation, my wedding-ringed left hand held up to ward off over-friendly students (always male) in the library stacks. My thesis was a library project on evaluations of consumption in modern thought.

Texas A & M was not a cordial world for professional women. There were only a handful on campus, mostly in extension. One was Jessie Whitacre, a graduate of Oregon Agricultural College who had been dean of home economics at Utah Agricultural College from 1918–23. At College Station she became our good friend, and we became aware of the strong network among home economists at land grant colleges.

In the spring of 1938, I left College Station for two months to return to Iowa State to work further on the dissertation. Reid was not there; she was on leave attending the London School of Economics. But Hoyt was there. Both of them were advising me on the dissertation. I lived again in Margaret Hall, this time on the third floor above the ancient swimming pool, small but still used.

On the evening of April 9 at around nine, I heard fire engines, and looking out my window, saw three engines down below me. No one rang a fire alarm. Most of the residents were out on dates because it was Saturday night. I hurried down the hall to see if there was smoke anywhere. There was. It was rolling out the elevator shaft. A young woman in a tub in the bathroom called to me, “What’s happening?” and I said, “This place is on fire! Get out and get some clothes on!” She did. I dashed back to my room and gathered up a large stack of manila folders containing the materials for my dissertation. I discovered that my mind had frozen, and I had one great impelling urge to flee. I couldn’t remember where the fire escapes were. The only reason I even went back to my room for those manila folders was because, when our family lived in Madison ten years before, and Papa was working on his doctorate, the man across the way from us had kept his own dissertation material in a briefcase by the front door and instructed his wife and children that if ever the flat caught fire, they must be sure to carry out the briefcase. “Save the thesis!” had been imprinted on my mind at age thirteen and now stood me in good stead.

But my stuff wasn’t in a briefcase. It was a large stack in my arms, so large that two top folders fell, as the bathtub-person (now clothed) and I dashed down the stairs together. Smoke filled the stairs. I wanted to pick up my fallen folders, but my arms were so full I knew if I bent over I would drop everything. So I cried out to her, “Help me!” but she
only said, “No, no, save yourself!” and dashed on down the stairs. So I left the two folders to perish and saved myself.

Once outside the building, we were prevented from returning by college men who had earlier searched the rooms for occupants. Shortly thereafter, my part of the third floor crashed down, filling the swimming pool. It was fortunate I had not returned, but I lost my typewriter, wristwatch, clothes, suitcases, quilts—all my things had perished. It was a great loss. There I stood in pajamas, robe, and slippers in the chill night air, teeth chattering from cold and fear. I telephoned the Cannons, and they took me in for the rest of the weekend. I wore their daughter Winnifred’s clothes, which fit well except the shoes were too narrow.

On Monday I was given a room in the freshman dorm. The fire also destroyed the contents of Hoyt’s and Reid’s offices. Reid had a file of materials for a textbook she was planning to write on housing. It would have been the first college text on this subject, but she never wrote it.

To make a long story short, I made a very brief trip back to Ames, in December 1938, to defend my dissertation and to receive the Ph.D. at the winter commencement ceremony. I wore Dr. Cannon’s academic robe, and I was the only woman to receive a Ph.D. at that commencement. Although my diploma says consumption economics, the history of the Economics Department says it was the first Ph.D. granted in general economics. I think because until then doctoral degrees had all been awarded in agricultural economics.

President Charles E. Friley’s commencement talk included a statement about trends of the time and the need for women to have intellectual pursuits as well as the importance of home life. Reid wrote that talk for him. And Margaret Reid placed the hood over my head and onto my shoulders. For me, for her, and for women it was an important moment.

I returned to Wynne and College Station. Six months later our two years at Texas A & M were over because Wynne had accepted a position at Utah State Agricultural College, his alma mater and also my father’s. In September 1939 we went to live in Logan, and I began my forty years as a faculty wife there.

Looking back I realize I cared enough about equal rights for women that I tried to get Girls’ League and Associated Women Students onto the student council. I didn’t call myself a feminist; the term was in eclipse. The fact that I stubbornly pursued graduate work and was the first woman to earn a Ph.D. in economics at Iowa State showed that I believed women were entitled to advanced education, and I believed there were opportunities to secure it. I realize, however, that in those
years of economic depression I was extremely fortunate in my opportunities. I also believed that a woman could have a Ph.D., marriage with children, and some kind of employment. Such an arrangement was nearly impossible for generations of women before me. As for social justice, my graduate year at the University of Chicago was an eye opener. It was a privilege to know women who were part of the Progressive movement and path-breakers in social work, and who substantially influenced New Deal legislation.