

# UC Berkeley

## Journal Articles

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## AGGIE WOMEN: THE UNIVERSITY AT DAVIS

### Beginnings at Berkeley

THE UNIVERSITY'S COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE began in the basement of the first building, South Hall, 1873. By the turn of the century the college had weathered the storms of mismanagement, lack of popularity among prospective students, and too great a popularity with California's Granger movement—a movement that saw the lone professor, Ezra Carr, fired, and the president, Daniel Coit Gilman, so weary of the struggle that he left for Johns Hopkins. A new professor, Eugene Hilgard, arriving in 1875, brought science into the curriculum, won over the ex-Granger farmers and the state legislature, and made the college respectable and useful. The grounds of the Berkeley campus served for the experimental fields and dairy barns, orchards and vineyards. New jobs were opening up and agricultural subjects, if not final degrees, appealed to more young people. Hilgard himself noted an increase in the number of women in the agricultural science classes.<sup>1</sup> As in all other campus activities, the female agricultural student became the butt of jokes on the Berkeley campus and the 1899 *Blue and Gold* portrays her as the Dairy Maid par excellence.

### “Women at the University Farm” Ann Foley Scheuring<sup>2</sup>

Although the University of California has been open to women since its founding, few women appeared regularly on the Davis campus until broadening of the academic programs in the late 1930s.

Two women instructors were listed for the first short courses offered in 1908—Mrs. M.E. Sherman of Fresno, in horticulture and viticulture, and Mrs. A. Basley of Los Angeles, in poultry husbandry—but only two women were initially on the Farm School staff, the dormitory matron and the campus librarian. Later a school nurse and a stenographer joined them. In 1913 women staff and faculty wives established the University Farm Circle to promote friendship among women of the University community. Their activities included modest financial assistance for students in need of loans; in 1916 they disbursed \$129.

In January 1914 the first three female students from Berkeley arrived to spend a few months on the Farm. They resided in South Hall under the eagle eye of dormitory matron Mrs. Fizzell. “. . . [it] was a wet winter. We trudged from class to class thru rain and mud wearing boots and daring short skirts . . . mid-calf length, the fashion being ankle length hobble skirts. . . which we had sense enough not to wear . . . Everything about the campus was new and fas-



Our Co-ed, when the new School of Dairying is under “whey.”

1899 *Blue and Gold*.

cinating. We tried our hand at milking and plowing and every new arrival born on the place meant an excited visit to the barns.”<sup>3</sup> The girls were featured in a series of April 1914 articles in the *San Francisco Bulletin*. Of the three, Marguerite Slater received her B.S. in entomology in May 1915, and Gladys Christensen and Alice Robinson received theirs in agricultural education.

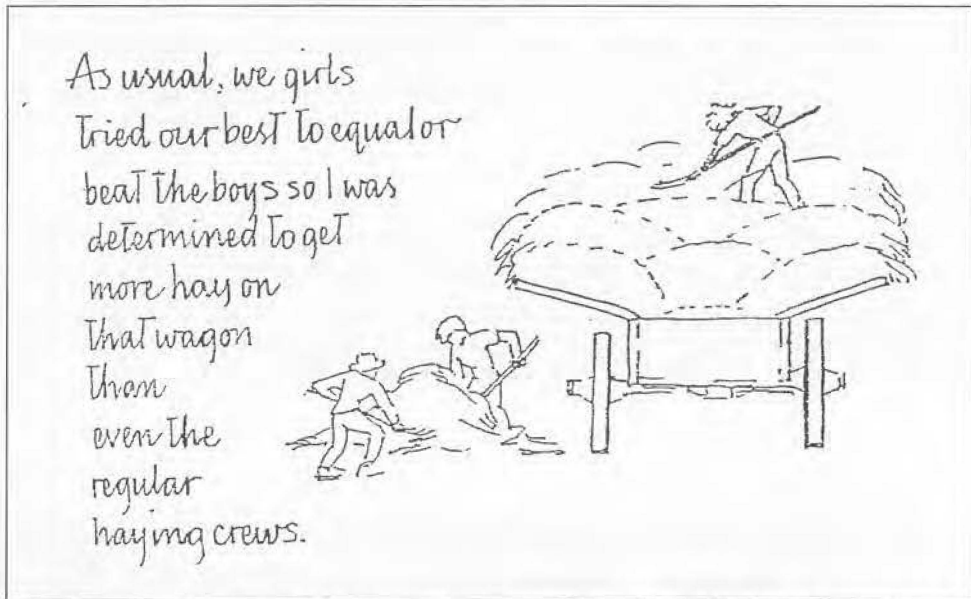
As in all wars, prescribed gender roles were altered by military needs during World War I. Because women were needed in active roles in food production, the University Farm offered two short courses designed for leaders of female farm labor teams, besides classes for machine milkers to help on labor-short dairy farms. In 1917, 31 women enrolled in farmers’ short courses, and in 1918 girls were admitted for the first time to the nondegree program of the Farm School. During that summer several “co-ed farmerettes” from Berkeley came to the Farm to demonstrate whether women could perform the nation’s farm work if the war continued to drain the country of men. Quartered on the hot top floor of North Hall, the girls worked eight hours a day at such disagreeable tasks as “cleaning chicken pens, thinning fruit in dusty gnat-infested trees, sorting onions in the hot sun, milking tail-swishing cows, hoeing corn in a sultry field swarming with mosquitos . . .” The foremen considered them quite capable of operating mowers, hayrakes, cultivators, and tractors, and performing field work like hoeing, thinning, or taking care of livestock. “At such work they were about seventy five per cent as efficient as a man and fifty per cent more efficient than the ranch hand available during the war. They were not suited to pick and shovel work, handling grain sacks, or heavy tasks . . . [but] the college girl farm hand was easily worth three dollars a day.”<sup>4</sup>

### Between the Wars: The Coed Farmerettes

During the 1920s, women were treated with hardly more dignity, as witness the description of her career by Viola McBride, one of only three “co-eds” among 300 students in 1925. She begins her 1994 memoir, “To those familiar with U.C. Davis today, it must be difficult to associate that teeming co-educational metropolis with what I’ve described here. But it WAS that way! We co-eds had a rough time.”<sup>5</sup> At Davis, in the ’20s, not much different than at Berkeley, females were “wanted all right but in the proper roles. What was a proper role had to be decided by the males—that was obvious. Co-ed Mary, for instance, had been promised a farm if she would go to the University & learn all the latest methods. This wasn’t a ‘Proper role’ for her? . . . [At least one professor] didn’t think so. . . . Actually, there was quite a movement for adding some courses to the curriculum [sic] for women so that they could attend U.C. at Davis & ‘Learn to be good wives for the Aggies’—Hmmm!—Domestic courses such as sewing, childraising, cooking etc.—Hm.”

McBride’s choice of courses was different: “Some years before, it seems, the University Farm had received a great deal of criticism because even four year course graduates, with fancy letters after their names, ‘didn’t know a thing about the simplest ordinary skills that any farmer or rancher should be familiar with’—disgraceful! To remedy this embarrassing deficiency Examination A was instituted. . . . If you didn’t pass it, you took a very basic course called Farm Practice until you could pass it. . . . we had, for Examination A, to plow a straight furrow, mow hay, rake hay, load a hay wagon and drive it to the barn (this all with horse or

mule teams), shoe a horse, saddle a horse, operate a Fresno scraper & and doubtless much much more I've forgotten." She passed, but took Farm Practice anyway because "it was a good course with a good prof. who didn't object to girls & I learned a lot."



From Viola Russ McBride, *The University Farm versus Co-eds*, circa 1926-27, [privately printed], 1994, 8-9.

### A Davis Professor: Katherine Esau, "The Grande Dame of American Botany"

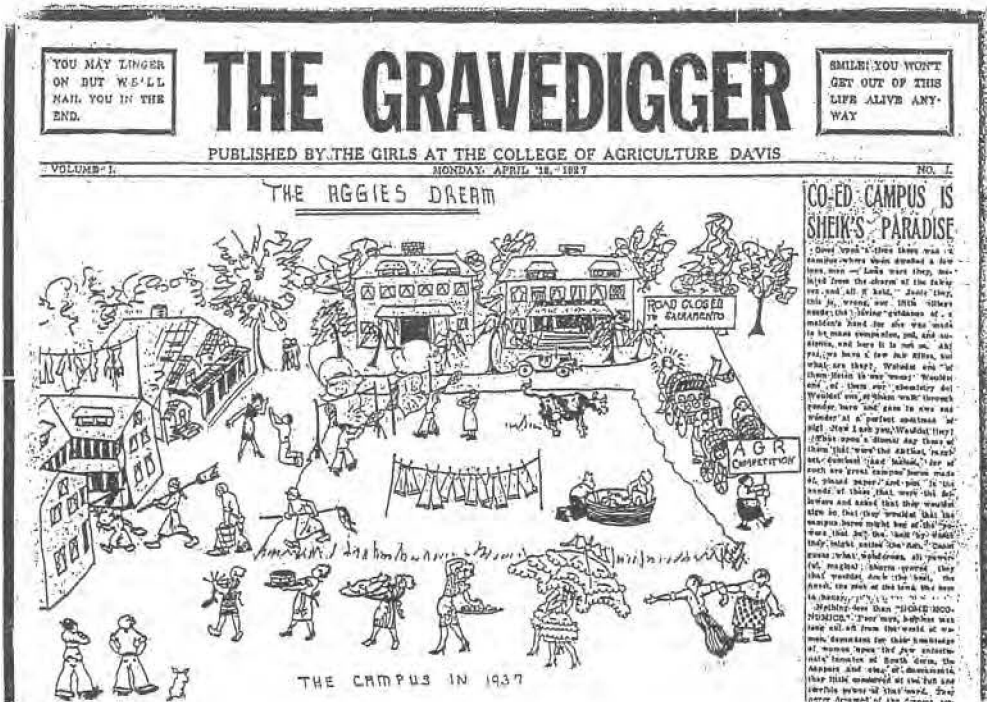
From the Ukraine to California and to two campuses of the University of California, Katherine Esau was known as one of the greatest plant pathologists of this century—which her lifetime encompassed.<sup>6</sup> Leaving Russia in 1918 after beginning studies in Moscow, she accompanied her Mennonite family to Berlin and then to the Central Valley, where she became an employee of the Spreckels Company, near Salinas, studying the production of sugar beets. With a truckload of beets and beet seed behind her car, she arrived in Davis in 1927 to begin academic research and graduate study, obtaining her Ph.D. (from Berkeley, as Davis did not yet have the authority to grant them) in 1931.

On the faculty at UC Davis until 1963, Professor Esau was known nationwide not only for her research, much of it conducted in very primitive, for today, surroundings and with not always the enthusiastic support of male colleagues, but also for her textbook *Plant Anatomy*, many times reprinted. She was asked to give the Faculty Research Lecture in 1946 while still an associate professor, and elected to the National Academy of Science in 1957.

About to retire after thirty-one years of teaching and research, Professor Esau packed her bags and moved to the Santa Barbara campus. Although retired, she continued her discoveries in cell anatomy and the use of electron microscopy; thus she was able, without teaching and administrative responsibilities, to accomplish more in that additional decade of research, than had been possible at Davis. In 1989 her years of productive work on plant cell structure and viruses was recognized with the award of the National Medal of Science. Her oral history, taken in 1985 by the UC Santa Barbara library's Oral History Program, can be found in the Shields Library, UC Davis, Special Collections. She died in 1997. —C.B.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For the history of the College of Agriculture at Berkeley see Ann F. Scheuring, *Science and Service* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 4-47.
- 2 The inclusion of "Women at the University Farm," part of a work-in-progress: *Abundant Harvest: A History of the University of California at Davis* by Ann Foley Scheuring, is courtesy of the author.
- 3 Letter from Marguerite Slater Messenger to Dean of Women Susan Regan, January 4, 1957. Documented in December 26, 1956 letter to Librarian Sarah Schreiber from May Dornin, Head of Archives, UC Berkeley Library.
- 4 *UC Journal of Agriculture*, January 1920.
- 5 This and the following quotations are from *The University Farm versus Co-eds circa 1926-27, Remembered, Written & Illustrated by Viola Russ McBride*, first edition [privately printed], 1994.
- 6 David E. Russell, ed. "Katherine Esau—a Life of Achievements" (University of California, Santa Barbara, Oral History Program, 1985), is the source for this biography. The quote "the grande dame of American botany," by Ray F. Evert, is from the *New York Times* obituary, June 18, 1997.



From Viola Russ McBride.