

Chapter 5

Harper's Early Career

1949 – 1960

In the middle of a snowstorm, a student was stranded at the Roanoke airport, 45 miles down the mountain from the VPI campus. Her roommate trudged through the drifts to Wallace Hall because she knew that Harper would be at work, even when most offices were closed, and she knew she could count on Harper for help. Hearing about the stranded student, Harper tossed the student her own car keys. The student was able to drive down the mountain and rescue her roommate. (College of Human Resources and Education, 1998)

Getting Established in Blacksburg

In January 1949, Harper drove to Blacksburg, Virginia, to begin a new chapter in her life. She lived in a small apartment in the Faculty Center (now the Donaldson Brown Center). Harper did not own furniture; but she soon befriended Mary Settle, who did. Settle was an extension worker specializing in home management and family housing. She was 25 years older than Harper and soon became like Harper's big sister. As a long-time employee of VPI and the state of Virginia, Settle offered Harper local contacts and, an abundance of knowledge about Virginia and the politics of higher education. Since Settle was already purchasing a house on a single income, the match was obvious. She offered Harper the furniture she needed and co-ownership of the new house (W. Baggett,

personal communication, May 25, 1999; A. Frame, personal communication, May 25, 1999).³ Harper gladly accepted Settle's offer.

At work, Harper entered a challenging environment where her supervisor, Dr. Mildred Tate, department head of the Home Economics, was trying to build a strong department despite severe restrictions on the education of women at VPI. In 1944, prior to Harper's arrival, the Virginia General Assembly consolidated Radford State Teacher's College (now Radford University) and VPI. Under this consolidation the VPI President was responsible for both campuses. However, provisions were made for the president at Radford to handle the day-to-day operations of that institution. This forced-marriage crippled VPI's Home Economics department. Under this consolidation, the name of Radford State Teacher's College changed to the Women's Division of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute at Radford (here called Radford). All undergraduate women were required to live on Radford's campus for at least the first two years. As exceptions, two groups of women were allowed to live and study on the VPI campus: graduate students; and undergraduates with majors in engineering, agriculture, biology, chemistry, industrial physics, and business. In general, women were allowed to take classes on both campuses and buses transported them back and forth between the two institutions. The Home Economics department at Blacksburg soon suffered under this legislation. Under the consolidation plan the Blacksburg and Radford campuses offered similar degree programs in home economics. Students graduating from the Radford campus were qualified to teach home economics in elementary or secondary schools. The curriculum

³ Harper and Settle remained housemates until Settle's death in the late 1970s. In 1970, Harper generously purchased Settle's half of the property, so that Settle could afford to receive 24-hour care as her health declined in her later years.

provided a broad background in all home economics areas. Students who graduated from the VPI campus in Blacksburg were qualified to teach in high school, to work as demonstration agents, or to find employment specifically related to their area of interest within home economics. The curriculum at VPI was more specialized (Harper & Howery, 1985).

In order to expand the home economics program at VPI's Blacksburg campus, Tate hired research-oriented faculty and developed a recruiting program for high school students. These efforts were not successful, as Tate and the faculty later realized. Many women were reluctant to move to Blacksburg after living two years on the Radford campus. This situation frustrated the research-oriented faculty, and many left after only a short stay at VPI. To counter this attrition, President Newman and Tate began negotiating three-year commitments from new faculty. The first three assistant professors hired with three-year commitments were Harper, Oris Glisson, and Willamay Dean. With these new hires, the faculty became more stable, and the scholarly reputation of the program increased dramatically (Harper & Howery, 1985).

As an assistant professor, Harper was responsible for teaching nutrition classes and conducting research in the Virginia Agricultural Experimental Station. Harper was an excited, energetic teacher who used real-world illustrations in her classes (A. Frame, personal communication, May 25, 1999; J. Phillips, personal communication, June 5, 1999; S. Strothers, personal communication, June 1, 1999). After World War II, many students were older, more mature, and more willing to question their professor than the traditional students of the past. Some faculty members found these nontraditional students difficult to teach; Harper enjoyed the challenge ("31 Years of Service," 1980).

In addition to teaching, Harper also conducted research in nutrition and planned workshops. For the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, Harper conducted nutrition research and published her findings in leaflets and agricultural publications. During the summer of 1954, Harper planned nutrition workshops that provided college credit for extension workers, teachers, and others interested in the field. She invited leading scientists and specialists in the field to discuss the latest research at these workshops. Participants enjoyed the workshop series so much they requested another, which she planned for the summer of 1957 (College of the Fields, 1987).

Doctoral Study

After three years of teaching, Harper was ready to claim the education leave she had negotiated with President Newman when she was hired. Harper believed that a doctorate in nutrition would prove important to her career in many ways. Foremost, she felt the doctorate would improve her ability to challenge and instruct her students (Harper & Howery, 1985). She also believed that in order to demand the best from students, the teacher must first give the students his or her best (Harper & Howery, 1985). Harper also believed that a doctorate would give her an opportunity to learn the latest information in nutrition. She felt that learning about the most current research was important to professors, teachers, and extension workers, because the people they taught deserved the best (Harper & Howery, 1985). Finally, pursuing a Ph.D. was also important to Harper because she felt she owed her students much more than instruction. Her students deserved a role model to help them aspire to higher goals (Harper & Howery, 1985).

Harper took a nutrition class at Cornell University in the summer of 1951 to prepare for her graduate work towards a Ph.D. Despite this testing of the waters at Ithaca,

Harper chose Michigan State University (Michigan State) for her doctoral study because Michigan State had a more prestigious name in the home economics field. Michigan State also offered course work in Harper's field of interest, nutrition theory and eating habits (Kuhn, 1955).

Michigan State also offered her financial support. Harper received the Douglas Fellowship and several other fellowships for graduate study. She took educational leave from VPI, moved to Michigan, and began work on her Ph.D. To supplement her fellowships, Harper also worked as a teaching and research assistant. These experiences helped her to refine her teaching and research skills while increasing her knowledge in nutrition. Harper met pioneers in the field of home economics such as Dr. Irma Hannah Gross. Gross gave Harper another example of a woman committed to something greater than herself. Gross was national president of Omicron Nu, the honor society for home economics, and she served as president of the Michigan Home Economic Association, the state branch of the American Home Economics Association (AHEA).

Friendships and Romance

Balancing teaching duties, research assignments, graduate studies, and involvement in professional organizations was difficult, but Harper managed. Harper forged friendships with other graduate students to form study groups. In these groups she also found support to make it through the rigorous program. Harper's study group friends turned into lifetime sisters who even helped her professionally in later years. One study group friend was Inkeri Suhonen from Finland. Suhonen was an international graduate student who fascinated Harper with her stories of the Finnish culture, family systems, and eating habits (S. Strother, personal communication, May 28, 1999). Suhonen and Harper

would discuss the material in class and study for exams together. Out of this friendship grew the international study abroad program Harper started in 1970 at VPI when she became dean (Harper & Howery, 1985; S. Strother, personal communications, May 28, 1999).

Margaret MacDougall was Harper's roommate and another graduate student in home economics (E. Taulbee, personal communication, June 13, 1999). Harper, Suhonen, and MacDougall studied often because Harper kept them organized and focused (G. Taulbee, personal communication, June 9, 1999). However, these three musketeers found leisure activities to enjoy as a group as well, including plays and good food. MacDougall became Harper's best friend at Michigan State and sisters for life (E. Taulbee, personal communication, June 13, 1999). MacDougall and Harper discussed everything, gave each other unsolicited advice, traveled home with each other to visit family, and even went out on double dates (S. Strothers, personal communication, May 28, 1999). When MacDougall began dating George Taulbee she asked her brother to take Harper out so, her best friend would not be alone. The brother, George MacDougall and Harper enjoyed each others company and decided to go out again and again. As shown in Figure 10, Harper appears happy as she prepared for her date with George. He was a member of the Canadian Army and was taking doctoral classes at Michigan State. Harper found him very attractive and began falling in love.

As the romance progressed, Harper tried to balance work with love, and initially she was successful. In addition to teaching, researching, and studying, Harper continued to lead special projects for VPI. Even while she was enrolled in summer school at Michigan State, Harper planned nutrition workshops at VPI. In 1955, Tate asked Harper



Figure 10. Harper getting ready for a date in 1955.

to serve as director of a regional nutrition research project. The project team designed nutrition research on preadolescent girls from Georgia, Louisiana, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Harper agreed to chair the project because it would benefit VPI. First, it would advance the reputation of nutrition as a research specialty at VPI. Second, it would give VPI students practical research experience. It was at this point that George MacDougall asked her to marry him (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 25, 1999; S. Strother, personal communication, May 28, 1999).

To marry or not to marry was a big decision for Harper – or for any professional woman in the 1950s – because marriage could impede her career (Solomon, 1985). Just as Harper was considering the marriage proposal, her best friend Margaret was excitedly planning her own wedding. Harper was the maid of honor and George was the best man (E. Taulbee, personal communication, June 13, 1999). Harper drove to Mississippi to seek her mother’s advice. Mrs. Harper urged her to find a solution that would let her focus on her career (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 25, 1999). In the end Harper reluctantly turned down the marriage proposal, saying that she didn’t think she could be a good wife because she wasn’t willing to compromise her career for marriage (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 25, 1999). By making this choice, Harper joined other strong women in her life, such as Dean Jessie Harris at University of Tennessee, Dr. Margaret Olhson at Michigan State, and Maude Wallace at VPI, all professional women who chose career over marriage.

Staying Focused

Even more dedicated to her work now because of the sacrifice she had made, Harper chaired and conducted the nutritional research on preadolescent girls from the five

states within the region. She organized the setup of the experiment, hired assistants to help with every aspect, and recruited participants for the study between the ages of nine and eleven years old. Planning this study took a year before data collection could begin in 1956. This research brought worldwide recognition to VPI and to the nutrition and foods faculty. It also helped to attract more prestigious faculty such as Dr. Geneviene Ho (1961) and Dr. Sanford J. Ritchey (1963) to the university. Harper claimed that this research increased her students' marketability in the job force (Harper & Howery, 1985).

While organizing the regional study, Harper conducted research for her dissertation, which was the first to establish the eating practices of young women. Harper found that in women, the calories consumed were inversely related to protein at younger ages. The study also included Black women and their eating behaviors, which was unique for a study at that time. She found that younger women had a rigid meal pattern of three meals per day. Older White women had a different meal pattern than younger women. However, Blacks were more permissive in the consumption of food with a less defined meal pattern than either younger or older White women. The study concluded that if the young women of 1956 maintained their eating habits into advanced years, they would have different eating behaviors compared to the elderly women of that time (Harper, 1955). Now, her study was complete, Harper only needed to write up her findings, defend, and be hooded.

Back in Blacksburg

Never one to wait around, Harper rejoined the VPI faculty in January 1956, three months before her Ph.D. was conferred. She began the spring semester as a full-professor, balancing teaching and completing her dissertation.

Harper believed that students learn both inside and outside the classroom. Acting on this belief, she served as an advisor to VPI's chapter of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). In 1956, Harper and another advisor took three VPI students on a YWCA weekend retreat. Harper had arranged for the young women to room with three other women their age from another university. To the surprise of the VPI women, their roommates were three Black women from Hampton University and Virginia State University. The VPI women were distressed and told Harper so. Harper quickly took the blame for not warning them that the retreat was integrated. Then she offered to room with the Black women herself. The VPI women were still angry but agreed to the original rooming arrangement. In the end, they were glad they did. They took pictures with their new friends and exchanged addresses. On the return trip the young women thanked Harper for not warning them. They said if they had known the retreat was integrated they would have refused to attend. In the end "they would not have missed it for the world" (Harper & Howery, 1985, p.42).

Harper believed in her students and demanded the best. She described them as intellectual, creative, and determined (Harper & Howery, 1985). Several students remember Harper as interested in and concerned for all her students. She always offered assistance with class assignments at any time. These students felt she truly cared about them and that she enjoyed her work (College of Human Resources and Education, 1998).

In addition to teaching, Harper also conducted research for the Virginia Agricultural Experimental Station as director of home economics research. Although Harper spent the first two years in this position focusing her attention on the regional metabolic study of children, a research project she began chairing while working on her

doctorate, she also occasionally published important research tips for home economists. The regional study that Harper began leading from Michigan was continued after she returned to Virginia. Despite Harper's extensive planning, she could not foresee everything. As part of the study each child's plate was carefully weighed and each item was precise in its quality, shape, and size. As one child observed the careful routine of the investigator, she announced that someone was needed to follow her to her room. When the investigator ask why, the child replied "Someone needs to measure my toothpaste. I have eaten a little every night before bed!" (Harper & Howery, 1985).

"All about business" is how one colleague remembered Harper during this time, as she taught, researched, and provided leadership and service in her discipline (L. Frame, personal communication, May 25, 1999). Harper held office in several professional organizations, including chair of the Research Section of the Virginia Home Economics Association (VHEA), and vice-chair of the Foods and Nutrition Section of the American Home Economics Association (AHEA). She also attended many conferences relating to nutrition, research, home economics, land-grant institutions, science, health and medical care, and education. While assisting her with additional contacts for her students, these activities also increased the visibility the home economics department she represented.

VPI and Radford... Still Problems

The stressful relationship between the Radford campus and the main VPI campus in Blacksburg had not been resolved during Harper's sojourn in Michigan. In 1956, the VPI home economics faculty were still frustrated. With enrollments continuing to decline at Blacksburg the VPI faculty were worried that the home economics program did not have sufficient numbers to continue to justify the number of faculty employed. The

faculty asked Tate to discuss the future of the discipline at VPI with President Newman. After this meeting, Newman agreed to ask the board of visitors to lift the restriction on enrollment of women in home economics at the Blacksburg campus. If the board of visitors decided favorably, this decision would allow women students the option of attending the Blacksburg campus and majoring in home economics for all four years. He also argued that lifting the restriction would help Virginia meet the forecasted need for home economics professionals in coming years. The board of visitors appointed a committee to study the matter (Harper & Howery, 1985).

The committee consisted of one not-so strong supporter of the VPI home economics department and four strong advocates of the program. Judge Moffett, executive committee member of the board of visitors, chaired the committee. After a year of study the committee recommended creating a School of Home Economics that would merge Radford's and VPI's departments (Harper & Howery, 1985).

Following this decision, Tate announced she was retiring. Tate had served VPI for almost 20 years, beginning with her first responsibility in 1937 to develop and administer the home economics program. She had also served as dean of women (Kinnear, 1982; Harper & Howery, 1985). In this role she had administrative responsibility for Hillcrest Hall and for the women who lived there. After the consolidation between VPI and Radford in 1944, her duties also included recruitment and dealing with frustrated faculty. By 1957, she was tired and ready to move on with her life.

President Newman knew how valuable Tate had been to VPI and its system of co-education. He tried to convince her to stay. Many students from various majors considered Tate a mother figure because of her involvement with Hillcrest and student

activities (I. Leech, personal communication, June 5, 1999). However, as the committee met to devise a strategy to form the new School of Home Economics, she continued to tell President Newman “no” (Harper & Howery, 1985). Tate was determined that she would be relieved of her responsibilities at the end of June 1957, exactly two months after the announcement of the proposed school.

A Reluctant Administrator

VPI had to locate someone to serve as interim department head and chair of the faculty consolidation committee, which consisted of members from both the Radford and VPI home economics departments. Locating a qualified person was not easy. First President Newman offered the position to Martha Creighton, director of the home economics education program for graduate students at VPI. Creighton was admired by many in the state. She declined the offer, however, stating that she was planning to retire within a year. President Newman then consulted with the Blacksburg home economics faculty. They suggested Harper. Harper had a doctorate and had research and leadership experience that would be a plus for the department. She, too, declined because she felt the promotion came too soon after completing her Ph.D. Harper also felt that the promotion would prevent her from teaching and research. “Persuasive” is how Harper described President Newman during this period of her life (Harper & Howery, 1985). Eventually, H. N. Young, director of Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, President Newman, and others convinced Harper to accept the position on an interim basis (Harper & Howery, 1985). On May 16, 1958, President Newman announced Tate’s resignation and Harper’s appointment as interim department head (Techgram, 1958, June 1, p. 1).

Harper's new responsibilities included helping the faculty make a transition on the two campuses and forming two committees of home economics faculty from both campuses to create a common curriculum. This curriculum would then be presented to an outside review team. Harper chaired the weekly home economics meetings on each campus as well as regular combined meetings.

Organizing the curriculum was difficult for the VPI group because they had functioned for several years without first- and second-year students. Radford, on the other hand, had a functional curriculum and smooth operations. Harper had to encourage and lead the VPI group to create a plan. At the same time Harper had to encourage the Radford group to make adjustments toward a common curriculum. VPI first formed functional areas within the home economics. Next, the committee decided on class offerings that would complement those offered at Radford. Harper then shared these ideas with the Radford faculty to try to form united goals (Kinnear, 1972). The departments to be housed on the VPI campus were Clothing and Textiles, and Related Art; Foods and Nutrition; and Management, Housing, and Family Development. Home Economics Education was to be housed on the Radford campus (Harper & Howery, 1985). Finally the School of Home Economics had areas of concentration and campuses designated for those areas (Harper & Howery, 1985).

Students saluted Harper in the January 1960 TECH-NIQUE for doing an excellent job combining teaching and her administrative role. They said she always found time for students, despite her busy schedule. One such student was Lelia, a senior graduating without a clue of what she was going to do. As Lelia was completing her studies, Harper returned from a professional conference and, as always, incorporated information from

the conference in her lectures (College of Human Resources and Education, 1998; R. Purdy , personal communication, June 12, 1999; L. Turner, personal communication, May 19, 1999). In this case, Harper discussed employment opportunities in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), a presentation Harper had just attended. After class Lelia told Harper that she had discovered what she wanted to do in life – work for the FAO. Harper quickly took Lelia to her office to gather information on skills and credentials she would need. They discovered to Lelia’s dismay that the work required a doctorate and twenty years of experience.

Harper refused to let Lelia give up. She suggested an alternate route: Lelia should earn a graduate degree in nutrition and gain experience working overseas. Lelia was excited again and began working with Harper toward this plan. They worked together for weeks preparing her application for a Fulbright Fellowship to Copenhagen. Lelia was accepted for a 1959-60 appointment. Then Harper suggested Danish language and culture classes to prepare her for her new experience. Before leaving for Copenhagen, Harper arranged for Lelia to meet the dean of home economics at the University of Wisconsin. The meeting resulted in Lelia receiving an “almost-immediate acceptance” into the doctoral program, with financial assistance (Harper & Howery, 1985, p.40). Lelia was well on her way to employment at FAO.

Still Searching for a Dean

While committees met and Harper worked, President Newman diligently searched for a qualified person to be the permanent dean of the consolidated VPI-Radford School of Home Economics. He was unsuccessful because potential candidates rightly perceived that the new dean would be confronted with too many problems. These

problems included organizing two different campuses, managing two sets of faculty, establishing a new program, recruiting students, creating professional security for faculty, and recruiting new faculty (Harper & Howery, 1985). The new dean would also have to adjust to a predominately male administration at VPI and a home economics department at Radford strongly influenced by their dean of women, Dr. Moffett, who was then also director of the department of home economics at Radford. Feeling frustrated, President Newman told the board of visitors, the home economics faculty members, and others that he had offered the position to over 50 people, including members of the external consulting team. Finally, in August of 1960 with the school's opening set for the fall, President Newman asked Harper to reconsider her decision and become dean of the new school. She told him that she would seriously reconsider becoming dean, but she would have to consult the faculty, other professional colleagues, and her mentor, Dr. Harris, now dean of the college of Agriculture and Home Economics at the University of Tennessee. She also told him that she would need qualified faculty to serve as department heads so that the school could run efficiently and smoothly. President Newman agreed.

This was a hard decision for Harper, and she examined her options carefully. She really wanted to teach and do research, but she knew the new School of Home Economics needed a strong dean, and that President Newman might not be able to find a suitable candidate. Harper first consulted members of the faculty to see if they would want her as their dean. Receiving encouraging remarks, Harper then sought the opinions of professional colleagues she held in high regard. They too encouraged Harper to try. Finally, Harper went to Knoxville and spent several days evaluating every aspect of the situation with Harris. Harris helped Harper to see various ways of approaching this dual

program and facility and encouraged her to “give it a try” (Harper & Howery, 1985, p.52).

“Do the best you can and go for the goal,” were the encouraging words Harper often told her students and words she lived by (I. Lynch, personal communication, June 5, 1999). Harper accepted the appointment and immediately began working with President Newman to decide on department heads. First they promoted Oris Glisson head of Clothing, Textiles, and Related Art. She had already developed an outstanding program within the ten years she had worked under Tate, while gaining national recognition as an expert in the area. Glisson’s straightforward approach would mesh well with Harper’s. Next they chose Mary Settle, an extension agent and Harper’s housemate, for head of Management, Housing, and Family Development. Her quiet personality, knowledge of Virginia politics, and leadership qualities were pluses to the group. Then Harper recruited Marian Moore from Iowa State University to lead Foods and Nutrition. Beth Jordan, supervisor for the Virginia State Department of Education for Vocational Home Economics in secondary schools, was appointed director of Graduate Home Economics Education at VPI. Finally, Ruth Hackman was named head of the Radford Department of Home Economics Education. Hackman was on educational leave completing her Ph.D. at the University of Tennessee at the time. Harper decided to handle Hackman’s duties at Radford herself until Hackman returned in January (Harper & Howery, 1985).

The new school was off to a good start (Harper & Howery, 1985). Faculty and students at VPI developed a recruitment brochure entitled “Home Economics is the Door to Opportunity” (spring 1960) to increase publicity for the new school. It was distributed

to high schools throughout Virginia and to the VPI admission office to mail throughout the United States. A new residence facility, the “Woolwine House,” was created for eighteen graduate students in home economics at VPI. It was a gift to the School of Home Economics by the Virginia Home Demonstration Clubs, under the direction of the newly appointed department head, Mary Settle. Three scholarships were also established to attract students to the new School of Home Economics (Harper & Howery, 1985).

As Harper led the establishment of the new school, her administrative role was both odd and difficult. Unlike any other dean on either the Radford or Blacksburg campuses, she had to report to both administrations separately. As the dean of the School of Home Economics, Harper reported to the Vice-President and Director of Graduate Studies, Louis A. Pardue, and to President Newman. But she also reported to President Martin at Radford. Harper was also different from other deans at VPI because she was the only leader whose department heads were all women (Kinnear, 1982).