

## Chapter 4

### Harper's Life Before VPI

1914 - 1948

*Once Harper was so involved in giving instructions to her secretary that she missed her desk chair and fell to the floor. She never stopped talking as she climbed up again. (E. Oliver, personal communication, February 18, 1998; C. Smith, personal communication, February 18, 1998)*

#### Her Parents' Values

Born on August 18, 1914, in Jackson, Mississippi, Laura Jane Harper inherited her father's warm heart and her mother's strong determination. William P. Harper and Eleanor C. Harper carried baby Laura home from the hospital to their farm in Florence, seven miles outside of Jackson. The Harpers' farm was surrounded by an agriculturally based community that depended on the Harper store for groceries, farm supplies, and the only public telephone in town. Little Laura's community consisted predominately of white farmers and black farmhands who worked and lived in the area surrounding the Harpers' farm. Many community members felt Laura was a lucky little girl because her parents provided her with a good example of how to live (A. Spell, personal communication, May 30, 1999).

Laura's father was a Christian man who believed that a Christian should be kind, moral, and understanding every day. Unlike many White residents of rural Mississippi in the early 1900s, Laura's father was not racist. He treated Black neighbors as neighbors,

and he taught Laura to do the same. Mr. Harper believed that all people, regardless of race or nationality, deserved respect. He refrained from calling Blacks “boy” or “girl,” although it was common practice among Whites in the South at that time. He also demanded that his family reflect his beliefs and refrain from using those terms as well. Mr. Harper called everyone by first name. He believed this practice showed respect and made people feel special (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 25, 1999).

World War I occurred during Laura’s childhood. Due to inflation caused by the war some of Mr. Harper’s customers needed supplies or food but were unable to pay their bills. Yet Mr. Harper generously extended credit to those who needed it. One such customer was a local Black woman with three children. She worked cleaning houses in the neighboring Jackson area. Every week, she would come to the store for bread and milk to feed her children. Sometimes she was able to pay and sometimes she was not. Mr. Harper understood her family needs and suffered losses by not charging her for the food if she could not afford it (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 30, 1999).

When Laura described her father, she often mentioned another example of his Christian compassion. Mr. Harper overheard that a nearby Black landowner was planning to vote, and that others were planning to harm him and his family if he did. On election day, Mr. Harper left his wife in charge of the voting booth in the store and walked five miles to talk with the man, taking a risk that he might be unwelcome. After entering the man’s home, Mr. Harper shared his concern about what he had overheard and the danger the man and his family faced if the man acted on his right to vote. Mr. Harper spent the entire day trying to protect the lives of the man and his family by talking him out of

voting that day. Mr. Harper also encouraged the man not to give up on voting but plan to vote in the future when his life and the lives of his family were not at risk (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 24, 1999).<sup>2</sup>

While Mr. Harper taught young Laura how to treat people, Mrs. Harper taught her the importance of education. Laura's parents both attended college. Laura's mother attended Mississippi State College for Women for two years. Mrs. Harper taught elementary school in Florence, Mississippi, prior to her marriage. She enjoyed teaching both in school and in her Sunday School class. She was a patient and skillful teacher. For example, she taught one young boy how to read, despite his great difficulty that would probably be labeled as a learning disability today. The boy was a "genius in math" but simply could not read. Mrs. Harper saw something special in him and was determined in teaching him to understand reading. The boy later went on to become a politician whose mother felt indebted to Mrs. Harper for her patience and dedication (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 30, 1999).

Young Laura heard many of her mother's speeches on the importance of education. Mrs. Harper made whatever sacrifices necessary to ensure her children received a quality education. Laura began her education in the rural elementary school in Florence. However, as Mrs. Harper observed Laura's progress in comparison to other children who attended schools in Jackson, she decided to send Laura to the city schools. This was a difficult decision because of the extra cost. Because of her mother's

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<sup>2</sup> Another version of this story was told to the researcher with a different ending: the outcome was the Black man voted and Mr. Harper protected him. Although the outcomes are radically different, both versions of the story focus on Mr. Harper's care and concern for a man who was rejected by other White farmers in his community. The story recorded here is the version told by Laura Harper herself.

commitment to education, Laura was able to attend junior high and high school in Jackson (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 25, 1999; A. Spell, personal communication, May 30, 1999).

Laura's youngest sister, Wilma, also attended Jackson schools, but at an earlier age than Laura. Wilma transferred after third grade (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 25, 1999).

For the middle sister Margaret the family made an even bigger sacrifice. Margaret had artistic talent. Mrs. Harper heard that Gulfport schools had an outstanding art program. Mrs. Harper insisted, over her husband's objections, that Margaret live with Mrs. Harper's sister in Gulfport during the school year so she could attend school there after the fifth grade. From then until she entered college, Margaret only lived at home during the summers (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 25, 1999).

“Bossy, focused, and real determined”

Even as a child Laura demonstrated the seriousness and focus that characterized her adult life. Alfreda, Laura's cousin and playmate, recalls that Laura always decided when they would play dolls. Laura arranged the time they would play by calling Alfreda on the phone and quickly discussing when she should meet her at the Holly tree (A. Spell, personal communication, May 30, 1999). Because the phone was a service to Mr. Harper's customers, her conversations had to be short. Laura carried this quick conversational style into adult life. Among her later colleagues this style earned her the nickname “Quickest Phone in the East” (W. Lavery, personal communication, May 24,

1999). Laura was also focused in her play; Alfreda recalls that Laura set time limits for playing dolls (A. Spell, personal communication, May 30, 1999).

In addition to playful activities, Alfreda and Laura walked two miles to and from school everyday until Alfreda changed schools. Alfreda described Laura as “kind,” with “lots of energy,” and “generous” like her father during play. On the other hand, when Laura was at school she was “focused,” “smart,” and “driven” like her mother (A. Spell, personal communication, May 30, 1999). After the third grade, Alfreda’s parents sent her to school in Jackson with her older sister. The two little girls were no longer schoolmates but remained playmates until seventh grade in junior high school, when they were reunited in Jackson City schools.

Laura was five years old when Margaret was born and eight when Wilma entered the world. With new sisters, came more responsibility. Laura helped her father in the store and her mother with household tasks and childcare.

As Laura got older, she enjoyed school even more, and the Jackson schools gave her a solid educational foundation. At Central High School, she took classes in natural sciences and food preparation that provided her with areas of interest for college. Laura was busy with lots to do: chores, schoolwork, and after-school activities. Because she was so busy, her sisters began to view Laura as “bossy,” “focused,” and “real determined.” Margaret and Wilma reminded Laura from time to time that, although she was like their mother in many ways, she was not their mother (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 30, 1999).

During high school, Laura became active in the Rankin County 4-H Club. As a member of 4-H, Laura had opportunities to compete, make friends, build skills and



Figure 1. Harper (second from right on first row) at 4-H camp



Figure 2. Harper (indicated by arrow) at 4-H camp with her Home Demonstration Club.



Figure 3. Rankin County 4-H delegates attending 4-H State Council Meeting at Mississippi A&M College on August 5, 1930. Harper (first row, on left) is indicated by an arrow.

confidence, and gain knowledge about home economics as shown in Figure 1. Laura's 4-H group was an all-female club called the Home Demonstration Club (see Figure 2). This club allowed members to participate in activities such as cooking, sewing, canning, gardening, home improvement, and poultry raising. Laura competed in the county, district, and statewide demonstration contests in bread making and home improvement. Her sister Wilma recalls that Laura chose to enter the bread baking contest because her loaves rose well, looked good, and tasted good (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 24, 1999). Her friend Anne remembers that Laura would have preferred to enter the pie contest, but her lemon meringue pie always turned out too "soupy" to eat (A. Frame, personal communication, May 2, 1999). In addition, Laura was a delegate for 4-H at the 4-H State Council Meetings (see Figure 3).

In June of 1931, Laura graduated from Central High School as shown in Figure 4. She chose nearby Belhaven College for the next step in her education. Belhaven was affordable, it provided students with a moral education, and it offered a degree in home economics. (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 24, 1999).

#### College Years

The Belhaven College catalog listed classes such as theory and practice of teaching domestic science, dietetics, and advanced cookery as requirements for Laura's home economics degree (Gordon, 1983). Laura's courses gave her a scientific background in food that served as a specialty in the home economics profession. In later years, she said that Belhaven was where she finally learned how to make a lemon meringue pie properly (A. Frame, personal communication, May 2, 1999).



Figure 4. Harper's high school graduation day, June 1931

At Belhaven, Laura assisted the director of the library for extra income. She also gained valuable work experience in the academic dean's office as an undergraduate assistant. Frances P. Mills, the academic dean and faculty advisor of the Town Students Club, provided Laura with a good model for creating on-the-job learning environments and providing income and skills for students through undergraduate assistant positions. Harper later used this model when she was dean (L. Turner, personal communication, May 21, 1999).

Laura continued to be an active member of her 4-H group. When she was too old to participate, she then became a volunteer with the program, assisting the home demonstration agent. During college Laura was as energetic as she had been in the past. During college she participated in various clubs such as the Science Club, the Town Students' Club, the Home Economics Club, and the Education Club. During Laura's senior year, she became vice president of both the Home Economics Club and the Education Club. In Figure 5, Laura is photographed in the Belhaven yearbook, the Kinetoscope (1934) with her classmates. In Figure 6, Laura appears in the Kinetoscope (1934), as a member of several organizations. During her senior year, she became vice president of both the Home Economics Club and the Education Club. She remained a member and supported the other clubs her senior year, too (Kinetoscope, 1934).

Laura's classmates thought of her as outspoken and forceful. Laura's school newspaper, The Belhaven Miss (May 25, 1934, p. 1) included the following "senior characterization" of her: "Will the meeting please come to order? Ask our noble president. A pause—Laura Harper punches Pauline Williams on the knee and tells her three times to stop talking. All is quiet."



Figure 5. Belhaven's graduating class of 1934, photographed during their sophomore year. Harper is on the top row, indicated by an arrow.



Figure 6. Harper in the 1934 Kinetoscope. Beside the picture was listed the organizations Laura participated in and the each year she was active in the organization.

In 1934, Laura earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Home Economics and Chemistry. Her curriculum included a strong foundation in humanities and the sciences. Laura later reflected on her undergraduate degree as a model, when she served as academic advisor and dean at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. She often told students that this type of education enabled a home economist to make diverse contributions to the professional field (Harper & Howery, 1985).

### First Jobs

In the late 1920s, the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) encouraged women to become home economists in various businesses, serving consumers in manufacturing firms, utility companies, and laboratories. The AHEA also encouraged members to develop leadership skills, an understanding of different cultures, and a good foundation in the sciences to be effective pioneers in the field of home economics (Macleod, 1938). Because of the Great Depression, Harper was unable to find work in the field. Instead, she found a teaching position at rural Peabody Elementary school. She taught elementary students basic home skills for two years (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 24, 1999; A. Spell, personal communication, May 30, 1999). While teaching, she took additional classes in home economics and microbiology at Mississippi Southern University (College of Human Resources and Education, 1998). After her teaching position, she worked as a bookkeeper for a local ice-manufacturing firm for a year. This job was not the typical occupation for a Belhaven graduate in home economics, but Harper was fortunate to have any position in the Depression years. The job also helped Harper to develop skills in business and allowed her to send money home to help her parents with her sisters' education.

After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in home economics and chemistry, gaining experience in bookkeeping, obtaining an understanding of people, and receiving leadership training from her 4-H experiences, now Harper wanted a home demonstration position. She finally found this position with an ice manufacturer in Alabama. Later, Harper worked in consumer services as a home demonstrator for a utilities company now known as Georgia Power Company in Meridian, Mississippi. She continued to earn additional responsibilities and soon became director of Georgia Power consumer services. An independent, generous, kind, determined, and smart Harper, as shown in Figure 7, worked hard to assist her family and build her career (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 30, 1999). Macleod's (1938) description of the pioneers in consumer services in Mississippi perfectly fits the profile of Harper's early career.

While Harper was working, her sisters Margaret and Wilma were at Belhaven studying art and English, respectively. Their parents paid for Margaret's education. Laura herself supported Wilma (W. Baggett, personal communication, May 30, 1999). In 1945, Wilma graduated with honors from Belhaven. Despite the difficult economic conditions of the 1930s, and the financial dislocations brought to farmers by World War II, all three of the Harper's girls earned college degrees. Mrs. Harper's dream was fulfilled. Laura had completed her obligation to help educate her sisters, but continued to assist her parents through the tough economical times as Wilma and Margaret got married. In 1947, the family was in a better economic state, so Harper turned her attention to furthering her own education. Figure 8 shows a maturing Laura in this period. Figure 9 shows her playing with her nephew Allan before leaving for graduate school.



Figure 7. Harper after she graduated from Belhaven College and began working as a bookkeeper for an ice manufacturer in Alabama



Figure 8. Harper in her late twenties



Figure 9. Harper playing with Margaret's baby Allan on the family farm before going to University of Tennessee

## The University of Tennessee

In 1947, Laura packed up her things, said her quick good-byes, and headed to the University of Tennessee for graduate school. There she took courses in her major, nutrition, and also in home management. She worked as a graduate assistant, developing teaching skills and learning research methods. Harper was hard working, full of energy, and had a thirst for learning which left a lasting impression on her faculty members. Her reputation of being an exceptional graduate student continued many years after her graduation (J. Phillips, personal communication, June 5, 1999).

## Life Long Mentor

During Harper's graduate study at the University of Tennessee, she found her most enduring mentor, Jessie W. Harris. Before Harper arrived at Knoxville, Harris was promoted from director of home economics to vice-dean of the newly formed College of Agriculture and Home Economics (Montgomery, Folmsbee, & Greene, 1984). Harris was a fast thinker and an admired member of the university (J. Phillips, personal communication, June 5, 1999). While in Chicago, Harris found out she was the new vice-dean when she received a panicked phone call from an associate concerning ten thousand sheets of obsolete letterhead (Montgomery, Folmsbee, & Greene, 1984). Harris quickly solved the problem. She told her associate to send the letterhead to the printer to have the old address cut off and the new one printed on shorter sheets (Montgomery, Folmsbee, & Greene, 1984). She joked that "the faculty would just write shorter letters" (Montgomery, Folmsbee, & Greene, 1984, p. 231).

The institutional history of the University of Tennessee contains exactly one paragraph about Dean Harris. It begins this way:

The School of Home economics was combined with the College of Agriculture to form a new College of Agriculture and Home Economics, and the **vigorous and outspoken** director of home economics, Jessie W. Harris, once an undergraduate at UT, became vice-dean of the new college.... (Montgomery, Folmsbee, & Greene, 1984, p. 231) (emphasis added)

Harper herself had been outspoken long before she arrived in Knoxville. In Harris she found a kindred spirit, a mentor, and a model (Harper & Howery, 1985).

Before Harper received her master's degree in December 1948, she had received job offers for extension positions in Florida and Texas. With these offers in hand, she was invited to interview for a faculty position at VPI. Harper discussed each opportunity with Harris, who urged her to decline the faculty interview and accept one of the extension positions. Harper herself wanted to be able to decide between faculty and extension ("Retiring Dean," 1980). Despite her mentor's advice, she interviewed for the assistant professor position in foods and nutrition at VPI. As part of the interview, Harper mentioned to VPI President Newman her desire to pursue a doctorate in nutrition. Newman wanted her to promise she would stay at VPI for three years, if hired. Taken aback, Harper reluctantly said, "Well, I might not like the weather" ("31 years Service," 1980). Newman wanted a three-year commitment from Harper because the Home Economics Department had experienced a serious problem of faculty attrition.

In December 1948, Harper received her Master of Science degree in nutrition with minors in foods and home management. She accepted the faculty position at VPI. Included in her employment package was a January start date and an approved educational leave after three years (Harper & Howery, 1985).