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Welch Hall Weaves its History

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June Welch recalls the early days of Welch Hall, and the woman for whom it was named

As the campanile chimes in the morning air, Welch and Birch Hall residents hurry to their 8 o'clocks along the lane leading from the quadrangle of women's dormitories.

Women from Birch Hall have travelled this well worn path since 1925 when the first section of the dormitory was completed. In choosing a name for the hall, workmen thought of the lovely trees surrounding it and suggested its name. The women approved and the name Birch Hall became official.

Birch Hall acquired a new neighbor when a connecting dormitory was completed in 1929. This new hall was the first dormitory established especially for freshman women at Iowa State.

To honor Mary B. Welch, the wife of Iowa State's first president, the new hall was given her name. Welch Hall was divided into two sections, east and west. Birch Hall, temporarily losing its identity, became known as Mary B. Welch, East. In 1937 its former name, Birch, was reestablished and Welch Hall discarded its adjectives, east and west.

Mary B. Welch came to Iowa State College with her husband in 1869. Her dreams of teaching young women how to conduct a household with system, intelligence and grace were realized when she established the first classes in domestic science at Iowa State. Taking charge of the newly organized Department of Domestic Economy, Mrs. Welch found that there were no textbooks, trained teachers or established precedents to guide her.

She had no formal training in the art of cooking. Since there were few cooking schools in the United States, she went to England and enrolled in the South Kensington School of Cookery in London. Their course was planned to train prospective cooks for service in English households.

During her stay many amusing incidents occurred. English women couldn't understand why the wife of an American college president would want to learn to cook or to teach others to put a pie or cake together. People often asked, "What family are you engaged to work for and when do you receive your certificate?"

Returning to Iowa State, Mrs. Welch put her new found fund of information into practice. Work began in two basement rooms adjoining the dining room in Old Main. The college steward each day measured out material for a dinner for one table in the dining room of the same quality and quantity of foodstuffs as used by the college kitchen. The classes prepared and served the food under the teacher's instruction.

The freshman class learned to make nut bread, salads and desserts. Learning how to bake a cake was the goal of advanced classes.

Purchasing groceries was a problem. Mrs. Welch often made trips from the college into Ames in the combination passenger delivery covered wagon, nicknamed the "Black Maria." Groceries, kerosene and passengers crowded together in the swaying wagon always managed to survive the trip.

One of the rewards for Mary Welch's early work were the letters she received from married graduates expressing their gratitude. The girls often felt, at first, that time spent taking domestic science courses would be wasted. One enthusiastic girl declared after a successful lesson in desserts that when she married she was going to live on cream puffs and jellies. But when she had a home of her own she wrote that she had decided that, after all, bread and butter were better for a steady diet. Her husband was glad that she knew how to prepare both.