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Dr. Margaret Wragg Sloss: A Biography

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Dr. Margaret Wragg Sloss was certainly the “queen” of the veterinary college, and it was a title she earned through many dedicated years of hard work and service. The many honors and awards she received speak for themselves, but Dr. Sloss was much more than her honors and awards would indicate. She was a bright, active, determined, always helpful woman who commanded the great respect and sincere admiration of those who knew her.

Margaret’s incredible story began in Cedar Rapids, Iowa on October 8, 1901. Her family was large, consisting of 8 children. Margaret was the third youngest. When she was nine, Margaret’s family moved to Ames where her father had accepted a job as Superintendent of Buildings at Iowa State College. Her father believed that this job would help make it possible for his children to get a higher education, something he and his wife felt was very important.

The family moved into a house on campus. Since there were very few other children on campus with whom the Sloss children could play, they spent their days playing in and around the campus buildings. Across the street from the Sloss home sat the new Veterinary Quadrangle. Margaret found much delight in this structure and its activities. She told many stories of long afternoons watching surgeries there. In those days, one of her favorite people was Old Dad Gray who was the caretaker of the clinic. She described him as “a tolerant fellow”. She’d follow him for hours and he would even, on occasion, let her ride along on calls.

Margaret’s parents were conservative Scotch people. They were hard workers who took great pride in their work and had very high moral standards. These characteristics Margaret learned well and maintained throughout her life. Margaret’s father had another great influence on her personality. He was a charming, witty man who was described in a letter to Margaret from her good friend Annie Laurel Elder as follows:

“A very wonderful man, and he also did grand things for the college and its people.”

In this same letter Annie wrote quips which she recalled Margaret’s father as having said. These amusing stories were reminiscent of ones Margaret so often shared.

A vivacious women, Margaret had a story or joke to relate on every topic. She was the life of the party and a delight to all she met. These characteristics were evident early in her life, and she used them to her advantage later as a teacher and speaker. Her humor made her a popular speaker at many events including her memorable address at the 1972 Veterinary Medicine graduation ceremony.

High school graduation, in 1919, sent Margaret off to Iowa State College where she began her long, successful academic career. Margaret was a very good student, but she was also extensively involved in extracurricular activities.

Athletics were at the top of the extracurricular list for Margaret. In her collegiate days, she earned 6 varsity letters including two apiece in basketball, field hockey, and tennis. She was the Iowa State College champion of both doubles and singles tennis. Dr. Sloss also loved sports from the spectator’s view. She was an avid fan in college and continued as such throughout her many years at Iowa State. A member of the Cyclone Century Club, she even donated money for astroturf in the new stadium. Margaret sincerely loved athletics and was a true “sportsperson”.

Yet, athletics weren’t the only activities Margaret was involved in during her college days. She acted in several plays and directed one. As an outlet for her social energy, she joined the sorority Alpha Delta Pi. She was also on the Bomb board, in the women’s “A” fraternity, and a member of the

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YWCA.

Following graduation from ISC in 1923 with a degree in zoology, Margaret began her career as a technician in the pathology laboratory at the veterinary college. While holding this position, she requested permission to take a physics course. She was hoping to apply for medical school and this course was a prerequisite for admission. The request was answered with a resounding “no” by President Herman Knapp. It’s not quite known how, but after four months of struggling, Margaret did manage to get permission to take the courses she needed. So, in 1925, she entered The College of Medicine at the State University of Iowa.

Margaret returned from Iowa City a year later. She had done well in medical school but had decided that it wasn’t what she wanted. Her old position in the Pathology Department was quickly reclaimed, and she was even given a $300.00 per year salary increase. She continued as a veterinary technician for two years, then was promoted to Assistant in Veterinary Pathology. During this time, Margaret was busy working on her M.S. in Veterinary Anatomy which she was awarded in 1932. Her master’s thesis was entitled “The Microscopic Anatomy of Sus scrofa domestica”.

The next degree Margaret set her sights on was a D.V.M. She had been greatly encouraged by C.H. Stange to continue her education, and she fully intended to do so. The admissions committee had other ideas, and they denied her admission. Margaret, being the determined and clever woman she was, wouldn’t take no for an answer. After some research, she discovered that the land grant charter, which gave the land for ISU, stated that admission to the college could not be refused on the basis of sex. Upon learning this, the admissions committee decided to reevaluate Margaret’s application, and this time they decided to accept her.

During her years as a veterinary student, Margaret continued her work in the pathology lab. She became an excellent photomicrographer and willingly spent a great deal of time teaching her art to others both in the veterinary college and elsewhere on campus.

In August of 1938, Dr. Margaret Sloss made history when she became the first woman to graduate from Iowa State College with a degree in Veterinary Medicine. She was the 27th woman in the U.S. to attain this degree. As was consistent with the feeling of the time, no real attention was given to this great accomplishment, especially by the university. Margaret was making new rules which weren't being well received by either the men...
Women like Dr. Sloss provided a cornerstone upon which women of the future were able to build their careers. Ironically, she never considered this out of the ordinary. As she stated during a speech: "Women in Veterinary Medicine have a true interest in science and medicine and should not be discriminated against in their choice of profession any more than men who choose what society terms a woman’s profession." Margaret truly felt that there was nothing special about a women pursuing a career in the field of her choice. She never considered herself a "women’s libber", yet her activities were brave and progressive.

Margaret did many things to help women in the veterinary profession including helping to found the WVMA of which she was president for two terms. She was instrumental in helping women to be accepted into Iowa State on a level equal to that of their male counterparts and also served on the admissions committee for many years. She gave speeches and published many articles on the topic of women in Veterinary Medicine.

As an instructor, Dr. Sloss was helpful but always demanding. Being a perfectionist herself, she expected nothing less than perfection from her students. She believed in a pragmatic education which incorporates knowledge of principles with practical experience. In charge of the clinical pathology lab for decades, she instructed junior and senior veterinary students in basic clinical pathology techniques. Margaret’s sense of humor extended into the classroom, and made nearly every moment entertaining for her students. Many people say her wit was unmatched by anyone they've ever met. Students didn’t always like Margaret’s fun yet demanding teaching style, but once they were in practice, they truly appreciated it.

Margaret’s scientific work was a serious subject for her. She was a practical, fundamental scientist with an incredible base of knowledge. In her day, she was one of the top veterinary parasitologists and clinical pathologists in the country and published extensively on both topics.

Her willingness to help and her deep rooted knowledge made her a beloved mentor and special friend for many pathology graduate students. One of Margaret’s contributions to veterinary education was a course she designed and taught for wives of senior veterinary students. She did all of the preparations for this course in her own spare time. The class was a ten week night course which taught fundamental care and use of microscopes, and basic laboratory techniques for skin scrapings, hematology, fecals and urinalysis. It was a valuable course which was greatly appreciated by women who were enrolled.

There was no doubt about Dr. Sloss’ ability and dedication. Yet when it came time for promotion, she was repeatedly passed by. She remained an assistant professor from 1943 until 1958 when Dr. Frank Ramsey petitioned Dean Merchant asking that she be promoted to associate professor. She remained in this capacity until 1965 when, at the age of 64, she finally became a full professor which she remained until her retirement in 1972. The sole reason for the delayed promotion was the fact that Margaret was a women. Amazingly enough, she never became bitter about the discrimination, and remained a dedicated instructor throughout her years at Iowa State.

In the early part of her career, Dr. Sloss received two very high honors. The first was in 1940 from Carrie Chapman Catt who had compiled a list of the one hundred women in the U.S. who were successfully pursuing a career not open to women 100 years earlier. Margaret was on that list and was invited to the Women’s Centennial Congress to receive her recognition. Then in 1944, she was invited by Eleanor Roosevelt to attend a White House luncheon for women in science. She was unable to attend either of these events, but she was thrilled by the recognition. These awards were only the beginning of a long list of honors bestowed upon Margaret. In 1973, she was awarded the highly honored degree of Professor Emeritus, and her years of hard work were aptly recognized.

Margaret didn’t let her extensive commitment to the university stop her from pursuing other interests. She had a wide variety of hobbies, including cooking, wood carving, athletics, and theatre. A letter from Gertrude Reis Kelly is an accurate summary of Margaret’s varied talents and interests:

“I’ve been telling the family about all the other things you can do besides be a scientist and a doctor — such as collect stamps and do wood-carving and make ship models and take colored pictures like an artist to say nothing of golf and “little theatre” hobbies.”

Margaret’s club involvement was also extensive. She was in such clubs as The Order of the Eastern Star, professional societies, social sororities, and various honorary societies. She held officer positions in
many of these organizations at various times throughout the years. She was also an active member of the Collegiate Presbyterian Church which her father had helped to found in the living room of the Sloss family home.

Margaret’s dedication went beyond community and professional activities and into her home. She chose to devote her life to caring for her mother. Margaret never married, and many people have hypothesized that it was because of her career. Yet those closest to her say that after her father’s death, she felt obligated to care for her mother. It was a sacrifice she never openly regretted. She was the family spokesperson, and her siblings all looked upon her with great respect.

Margaret lived a long and fulfilling life. She knew what she wanted and had the drive and perseverance to obtain it. She was a true individual and a great humanitarian. Perhaps summing up her life was best done by Dr. F. K. Ramsey in his “This is Your Life” speech at her retirement party. It goes as follows:

“Few daughters of Iowa State have contributed more to their church, this community, our university, and the state, than you. We are trying so hard to convey our gratitude and respect we have for you. You will always be our queen.”

And so she shall.

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