

## **Mary Frances HopKins, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, (2nd editor) 1983-1986**

I was a child during the depression, and I suppose in one sense we were poor, but no one seemed to have any money, so we didn't feel poor. I was an only child, raised by my mother and grandmother, as my mother and father divorced before I was born. My mother supported us by working as a secretary for the State government. The pay was low, but it offered her flexibility. If she needed to take off to take care of me, she could. We lived in an apartment at the Pentagon Court, right across the street from the State Capitol. It consisted of four large buildings shaped like a pentagon, with the Mississippi River a short distance away on the open side. The two-story buildings had thick walls, huge columns, and wide galleries. It was first a fort, then dormitories for LSU until the campus was moved in the twenties. When I lived there, if you worked for the University or for the State, you could rent an apartment at a low rent. At the beginning of the War my grandmother sold her car, afraid she couldn't get tires or gas. As it turned out, she could have named her price had she waited, but we didn't know that. My mother could walk across the street to work, and I walked to grammar school about a mile away, then rode the bus to the lab school at LSU.

I was the first member of my immediate family to have a college degree, though we had lots of cousins with MD's and other degrees.

The Pentagon was a wonderful setting in many ways, primarily because so many other children lived there. I think there were thirteen of us in high school when I was, plus some younger and some older. There was a big open courtyard and we'd play football, softball, baseball. It was much like a small town. Because there were so many of us already there, other friends came, knowing they could always pick up a ball game. We'd play football with anywhere from 3 to 21 on each side with players ranging in age anywhere from 3 to 21.

Other kinds of influences in my early life also relate to that childhood neighborhood. I was very close to one family there. In fact, when I married, the father gave me away. Then there were three children, a girl and boy older than I and a girl just younger. When I needed reference books, I could always go over there and use theirs. We stayed close, and to this day in Baton Rouge I'm liable to be called by the name of the older sister. The father was head of a Department with the State, then a banker, very successful in business, and very generous. That whole family influenced me enormously.

I think partly because we were so competitive growing up and partly because I was far more insecure than I realized, I became a real "striver." I had to be the head of the class, president of everything, kind of a super achiever. In retrospect, it's a bit embarrassing to realize how badly I needed to please.

My mother died just after her 93rd birthday. Until a month before she died she lived alone, drove her own car, was on no prescriptive medication. She's always been totally supportive of my activities, but I finally realized she was not at all a "women's libber." One might think that as a single mother in a low paying state job, she would be concerned with the status of women. However, the masculine world, a patriarchal society, was confirming for her. A single mother was not expected to have money, a house, or a car. She was never timid; in fact, she was far more assertive than I am. She stood her ground against anyone, was never intimidated. But she approved entirely of the traditional roles for women. Her total commitment to being a mother certainly was a blessing for me. I think she might have been more comfortable if I'd been a

grammar school teacher instead of a college professor, but she was thrilled that I got to spend my life doing what I love doing, and that I've had some success, and all that. She appreciated it; she just didn't quite understand it.

Performance became a part of my life early, in grammar school. Those of us who had loud voices (do you know Grace Paley's "The Loudest Voice"?) would get speaking parts regularly. And you had to be shorter, or at least not taller, than the boys. I was shorter than most boys until high school and had a voice that could be heard in an auditorium, so I had lots of big roles, even though I was no actress. But I could be heard, and I could memorize. Much the same range of experiences happened to me in high school. I did plays and oral interpretation, then had the lead in the senior play. I never sang a note, but if it was a speaking role, chances are I did it.

I very much enjoyed these activities and by the time I reached high school, I was in a speech club and we went to state rally every year. I took all the speech electives, but at that time I intended to major in chemistry when I got to LSU because I loved math and science. What pushed me into English and speech to this day I'm not sure! But I know why I was an Education major—so that wherever I lived with my husband I could get a job. I took the same number of hours in English and in speech. I didn't major in speech because I thought I wasn't a good enough actress, and in those days everyone was expected to do it all.

In fact, I never decided that I was "good enough," but I decided that it wasn't important. So I ultimately earned a Master's in speech. My graduate education was a somewhat casual path. By then I had two small children. But we lived close to LSU, and I could get there for classes. I had various assistantships; then after I had the Master's degree I sometimes had a temporary position on the faculty. Someone would have a leave or a grant, and it's not easy to hire people to teach from September to November, or to March. But there I was. So I kept on in the Department where everyone else had a Ph.D. That led me to decide I should have one too. Later, under the influence of folks like Beverly (Whitaker Long) I realized that getting a doctoral degree was not simply a matter of meeting requirements; it was a commitment to a profession. Financial support by way of an NEA dissertation fellowship was the final motivator. I had to finish the dissertation because I accepted the \$2500 stipend. At the time PhD's were in short supply; many folks remained ABD.

The year I earned the Ph.D, the department had an opening for an assistant professor but no budget to fund it, so I went to work as an assistant professor at the same salary I had had as an instructor two years earlier. They probably could not have hired any other Ph.D for what they paid me. It was fortunate for the University that that I was there, married, and didn't have to support myself or a family therefore could accept a job at those wages. That got my foot in the door, though. In those days the University recognized performance as appropriate scholarly activity, or at least as an appropriate supplement to traditional scholarship; you didn't have to publish widely to build a professional career. So, I remained. Then my colleague Francine Merritt and some other women started a committee on the status of women. As a result of their work underpaid women faculty received substantial raises. I always felt a little guilty about that because of the way I came to the faculty. It wasn't that they paid me poorly because I was a woman, but I could afford to take the job because I was a married woman. In other words, I don't see the University at fault at all in my case. Here was a job I could afford to take because I didn't have to earn my own way. Then somebody comes along and shakes a finger: "Oh, you can't pay a woman that low, you've got to raise her salary." Of course, I was happy to get it. I certainly had earned it but I always felt the University got a bad rap.

It's a bit difficult to sort out why I went to the University planning to do chemistry and wound up in English and speech. We took a battery of placement exams, and my scores were in the ninety-ninth percentile in every quantitative and scientific test, not quite that high in verbal. Perhaps there is something to a claim that we all perform against ourselves. What I really wanted was perhaps not what I was best at.

It wasn't really any kind of stereotyping that pushed me away from science. I always took that as a challenge. I took all the science classes in high school and was valedictorian of the class. In Louisiana when I was a senior in high school, we had the Pepsi Cola scholarships. In fact, I think Pepsi Cola gave two scholarships in every state. They paid all your tuition wherever you wanted to go, and gave you travel money and books—everything. They were wonderful opportunities. I think five percent of each graduating class could compete. In my school three of us took the initial test; then fifteen finalists in the State took a second. I was one of the finalists. The two boys from my high school who took the test with me both earned doctoral degrees in nuclear physics and chemistry. No, attitudes about girls in science never intimidated me. In fact I kind of got a kick out of being where girls seldom were. Of the fifteen finalists, two earned the full scholarships and ten received fifty dollars. That's what I received. I never knew whether I came in third or twelfth.

So it wasn't stereotypes that drove me to speech. I have always loved to read and liked to perform. I just did what I loved. And the truth is that you did well in English in those days if you knew grammar, which for me always came easy, so there I was. I've often wondered what would have happened if I'd gone into chemistry.

I find it challenging to think about words I'd choose to describe myself. But I've always wanted to answer the question of what kind of animal I'd like to be. No question. I'd want to be a dolphin. They're so graceful and so free and have no enemies. That would be wonderful. What kind of person am I? I guess the people I've always envied, for a while without realizing it, then later becoming aware of my feelings, are the people who seem to be in the place that was right for them, whatever their role—housewives, professional women, artists, whatever. I've always admired people who are really good at what's right for them. I want to feel I'm in the right spot for me and doing it well. And I'd like to be a person people want on their team.

Before being nominated for the presidency of SCA I had a number of leadership roles. I was on the Administrative Committee as a member of the finance board, and I chaired what was then the Interpretation Division. I was vice president then president of SSCA. And I had some administrative experience at the university. By then I was chair of the department. I had been Assistant Dean of the Graduate School. That experience made it possible for me to chair the department. I think I would never have survived as chair if I hadn't had that much administrative experience in the campus community and come to know people and understand at least somewhat how things work.

I've served on and chaired many campus committees, which taught me important lessons. One year the Graduate Council decided to review all the full members of the graduate faculty, those members who expected lifetime tenure in that capacity. This time everyone was evaluated. People who had not published in ten years lost their seats on the graduate faculty, or were given probationary terms. I realized I knew a lot of these people who were dropped because I'd met them on various committees. That's why I knew the non-scholars. People who like to work with people seemed to gravitate toward the committees instead of the lonely work of research and scholarship. And doing all that committee work, though it's a good way to get to know the university community, takes lots of time.

When I was thinking about running for President I didn't have specific projects in mind, but some goals were clear. First, I had to decide why I would want the job. One consideration, certainly not original with me, was making sure women were being taken care of in the association. And particularly that young people were, that we encouraged and developed young scholars. I really wanted to make SCA a "user-friendly" association, to do a number of things other people have also worked for, to make it less formal, less rigid.

Certainly the status and maintenance of the area of performance studies was also important. That's one reason I was willing to chair the department at LSU and eager to do my job in NCA as well. I wanted to insure continued legitimacy and respect for the work in our field, and I believed being president would be a help.

Thinking of the symbolic meaning of the presidency, I do clearly see that there is one. There is the matter of the source of authority; being president confers an authority of position. Thus your values gain authority. I have always wanted to protect the liberal arts side of our field. I, of course, never wanted to protect the liberal arts by eliminating those whose emphasis is science, but to be sure the arts are not lost. In part that is what I wanted to do in a presidential role. LSU has a strong liberal arts tradition, and I wanted to maintain that by carrying the tradition forward, making sure it remains in the market place.

I'm not sure about my qualities of leadership. I don't think I'm so much a leader as a very good follower. Sometimes I follow so closely behind the leader, I look like a leader. As I noted earlier Beverly Whitaker Long has been an enormous influence, along with Gresdna Doty, my colleague at LSU. They've been my role models and mentors and to some extent much of what I did was follow them. Overall, I just happened to follow some very good people. Certainly my leadership does not involve breaking boundaries.

I think I was older than most people who run for president. I was at least 60. And as I thought more about that election, which I lost, I see it as an example of how the powers that be protect me. The spring I would have been planning the convention was an austerity year at LSU. They eliminated the budget for all long distance phone calls, mailings, photocopying. Can you imagine trying to plan a convention under those circumstances? In some ways, I won by losing. I also have to admit that the chief attraction of being president is being a past president! I may differ from some women presidents in another way. I was and still am married. We celebrated our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2002.

One of the issues considered this (wo)mentoring project is whether women leaders in NCA encountered any credibility problems. I don't think that happened to me, but I have noticed an interesting phenomenon since being nominated. A couple of times after I lost the election I've been on or chaired committees that select people for various positions. I heard folks say, "Oh, so-and-so lost the election. She/he should be favored for this job." I recall saying, "I can tell you from personal experience there's no precedent for that." And of course every year we add to those who did not win; we can't all be appointed to top jobs. But I don't think that was a problem of credibility. I have been in committee meetings or other situations where it seemed that things had already been decided by others, but of course that feeling is hard to prove. And it's a rather small complaint. I can recall many more times when I felt strong support.

I had children before I earned the MA. Indeed, I'd had my daughter and was in a play the summer I was pregnant with my son. He was in a play before he was born! Later he was in "All the Way Home" when he was in the second grade. I guess the point is that sometimes my career offered good opportunities for my children, but also I'm afraid my family has sacrificed a

lot, more than I thought at the time. Robert Beloof said that one of the problems with being poor when you're a child is that your needs can't be dealt with immediately; caring for them always has to be postponed. That may have happened to my children. Though we were not poor, there were times when fighting forest fires at work took time away from family. Certainly I love them and they knew it; they weren't neglected, but could have had more psychological and emotional support.

Thinking of influences on my professional life: It's clear as I noted, Beverly Whitaker Long was a major influence. I've often thought if I had not known Beverly, if I had gone to some other school and been associated with someone else, I'd have lived a very different life. I've never been one to strike out on my own, and be a pioneer.

Beverly and I met as graduate students; we went to our first convention together in something like 1966. First Beverly and then Gredna got Ph.D.s. I followed the next year. From them I got a strong sense of professional commitment, a sense of "if you want to be the best, then it is important to keep on trying to be the best." That means looking beyond the local scene. This view was important to me since I'm an LSU creature: I not only got all my degrees there, I got my high school diploma from its lab school. I went to public grammar school, but everything else was at LSU. I credit Beverly and Gredna for helping me avoid being overly provincial. Their influence was pivotal. We had remarkable figures at LSU—people like Waldo Braden, C. M. Wise, G. W. Gray, all national figures. But as an undergraduate I took them for granted. I didn't really know or appreciate their prominence.

An important influence outside the field of speech was Carolyn Hargrave, a professor in the College of Business and, while I was chair, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Provost. She's an able leader from whom I've learned a lot, but we were too different for her to be a role model. More influential in a way was Virginia Purtle, Assistant Dean of Arts and Sciences during my early years as chair. Though we were not entirely compatible, she was always personally supportive. She said, "If you're going to be a woman administrator, you really need to cultivate what they call not warmth but 'coolth.'" I never did that because I didn't want to be that kind of administrator and I thought if that's what it takes, I don't want the role. But she did impress on me the need to be tough-minded and realistic.

Other people in the field taught me much and offered strong support. Bob Jeffrey and Sam Becker come immediately to mind. Both were highly successful by any measure, and both were always compassionate and generous. I remember too what an inspiration Anita Taylor was. And I still especially appreciate her speaking at a pre-convention conference in performance studies. Jane Blankenship and Patty Gillespie always made me feel like a peer in their group, and they both offered level-headed advice and strong support.

Do I have regrets? I suppose one always does. I'm sorry not to have been president. I wish I had written something that had a profound influence, that offered us new and significant directions. I wish I had produced some change for the better in the national association. But my participation has felt rewarding, and I have felt supported. So any regrets seem trivial compared with the benefits I've reaped.