

Diminutive, Popular U.T. El Paso Professor Reflects Joy Of Living

The nicest things (and people) often are wrapped in small packages. A singular example is Mrs. Grace Knox Smith, assistant professor of English at The University of Texas at El Paso. In fact, her personality is one of such warmth and friendliness that it demands referral to her on a first-name basis (and besides, the name "Grace" is uniquely applicable.)

To those who haven't met her, some of her past activities such as driving a team of mules or single-handedly laying a brick patio might induce a mental picture of Grace as the hefty, muscular type. Not so, for she's a diminutive and chic 5 ft. 3 in., weighs 105 lbs., and is endowed with a generous quota of boundless energy and an intense interest in people and things.

The mule-driving incident occurred in the early 1930's when Grace, as a freshman at the College of Mines and Metallurgy, took the reins and drove a wagon, drawn by four mules, all the way up Mesa from downtown to the campus. Although she now describes herself as having been a "giddy, scatter-brained coed," the mule-driving stunt could hardly fall into the category of "giddiness," since it had the definite purpose of benefiting the college.

As Grace explains, "The students were tired of emulating mountain goats by scrambling and leaping over rocks and boulders to get to their classrooms. So we pulled this stunt to get publicity which, in turn, would bring to the attention of the Texas State Legislature the need for paved streets to and on the campus." The stunt paid off, evidently, since the streets were paved soon after.

A graduate of the College of Mines and Metallurgy, Grace received her Master's degree from Texas Western in 1940, one of three of the first students to be awarded the newly instituted degree.

She then spent some years teaching at Houston Elementary School until 1952 when she returned to Texas Western as assistant professor of English. When asked how elementary teaching stacks up against college instructing, she says, "I loved teaching the children in grade school. The only trouble was that I loved them all so much I was a terrible disciplinarian, and the children were smart enough to know they could take advantage of me."

She's never had disciplinary problems with her students at U.T. El Paso, however. One might say she and her students constitute a mutual admiration society. The Greeks on campus have twice awarded her the title "Outstanding Faculty Member" and in 1965 she received the same honor from the Associated Women Students at their annual Honors Night event. Asked what her reaction was, she said, "The tears dripped," then added that those three awards were perhaps more gratifying than any of her other achievements because, "they brought home to me the realization of my deep satisfaction and con-



MRS. GRACE KNOX SMITH

ment with my profession."

She is delighted that today's students are so aggressively determined to become involved in the current problems and mores of the nation. She says, "They're much more exciting and interesting than was the 'silent generation' of a decade or so ago. They not only respond more readily, they endeavor to educate me. For example, my poetry and drama class last year discussed freely such topics as the 'necessity' of nudity and profanity in various stage productions. Also, they tried to convince me that 'open dormitories' should be established with the future possibility of allowing roommates of both sexes. We had quite a debate on this subject and, needless to say, I was against the idea."

Grace's proficiency with a paintbrush is second only to her ability as a teacher. More than 150 of her oil portraits may be found in various business offices and private homes in El Paso. Also, she is credited with exhibits in New York, Dayton, Denver and Mexico City. On campus, five of her beautifully executed charcoal studies embellish her office. All this from an artist who has had no formal art training. Regrettably, she has temporarily halted this hobby, because, as she explains, "When you are faced with an average of 5 freshman English themes to grade every week, there isn't much time left for painting."

Grace also designed the gowns worn by the dutchesses and princesses of the 1965-66 Sun Carnival Coronation. After extensive research, she patterned the gowns after the court fashion of 19th century Vienna, carrying out the "Romantic Old Vienna" theme of that year's Sun Carnival festivities.

Although she follows a full and rigorous schedule of

activities during the regular semester, Grace reserves the summer months for her favorite non-teaching pastime — traveling. Each summer for the past ten years she has packed a 21 inch suitcase (she firmly states that this is sufficient for a three-months overseas journey) and has headed for Europe, France, Germany, Northern Italy, and her favorites, Austria and Switzerland, are some of the countries she has visited and revisited.

Her recent trips to Paris, she says, have taken on a sober note due to the student riots and demonstrations in that city, even though the students' initial motives were understandable to her. She says, "When student activism in Paris first began several years ago, legitimate complaints were the motivating factors. The old universities such as the Sorbonne had failed to keep up with the times. Some of the buildings lacked enough seating space for the students and they had to sit on window ledges, on the floor, and even in the halls. Also, many of the faculty members gave the same cut and dried lectures each year and never allow the students to question, participate, or exchange dialogue in classes."

LEADERS CHANGE

"But the motives seem different now," she continues. "The student unrest seems to be led by a strange and different group of what appear to be hard-core revolutionaries who could care less about improving the educational system. I watched them last summer, and they are a new breed who do not even seem to have homes since most of them sleep under the bridges of the Seine river. There wasn't much violence when I was there, however, because of the extremely heavy police guard. There was a policeman at every door of the Sor-

bonne."

A particularly saddening factor to her was the beautiful old buildings of the Sorbonne which now displace the scarce of the various student-police conflicts. According to her, trees are cut down (used as barricades by students against the police,) windows in the large buildings are cracked or broken, and worst of all, the streets which were beautifully patterned out of deeply embedded cobble stones are now being paved over because the students had dug up so many of them to use as weapons.

While in Paris, Grace even attended some of the students' "organizational meetings." She remarks, "They all ended up in the same manner — as shouting contests over the choice of leaders and policies."

The lovely U.T. El Paso professor has no qualms about traveling alone throughout Europe, and has yet to experience any unpleasant or dangerous incidents. She shies away from the new and ultramodern hotels, preferring those which are imbued with the true spirit and culture of the country. She enjoys her sojourns so thoroughly that "on the way back to the States at the end of each summer, I'm already planning my next trip."

A souvenir of her European travels is the beautiful diamond ring she wears, and the story behind it is a study in contrasts. While visiting a diamond factory in Amsterdam two summers ago, she saw and fell in love with an uncut stone of unusual beauty. However, as she explained to the factory manager, there was not enough money in her checking account to cover the cost, and to postdate a check was unfeasible since she wouldn't be returning to the States for two months. But the manager brushed aside these problems, urged her to postdate her check two months in advance, and immediately gave the diamond to her without even asking to see her passport.

Two months later upon arrival at the U.S. Customs in New York, officials wouldn't accept a check to cover the duty charges on the diamond. Between plane flights, she hastened to a bank near Kennedy Airport where her check was not cashed until the bank manager called long distance to her El Paso bank to verify her financial status.

"Multifaceted" describes the diamond and its owner, the versatile Mrs. Grace Knox Smith. Teacher, artist, traveler, mule-driver, dress-designer, brick-layer — you name it and if it requires some type of challenge or talent the lady has probably already proved her proficiency at it.

She might also be labeled "discoverer," since her youthful appearance indicates she has found the fountain of youth. But then again, maybe it isn't the fountain of youth at all, but rather her innate "joie de vivre" that holds back the years and assures Grace a continually content and rewarding life.