

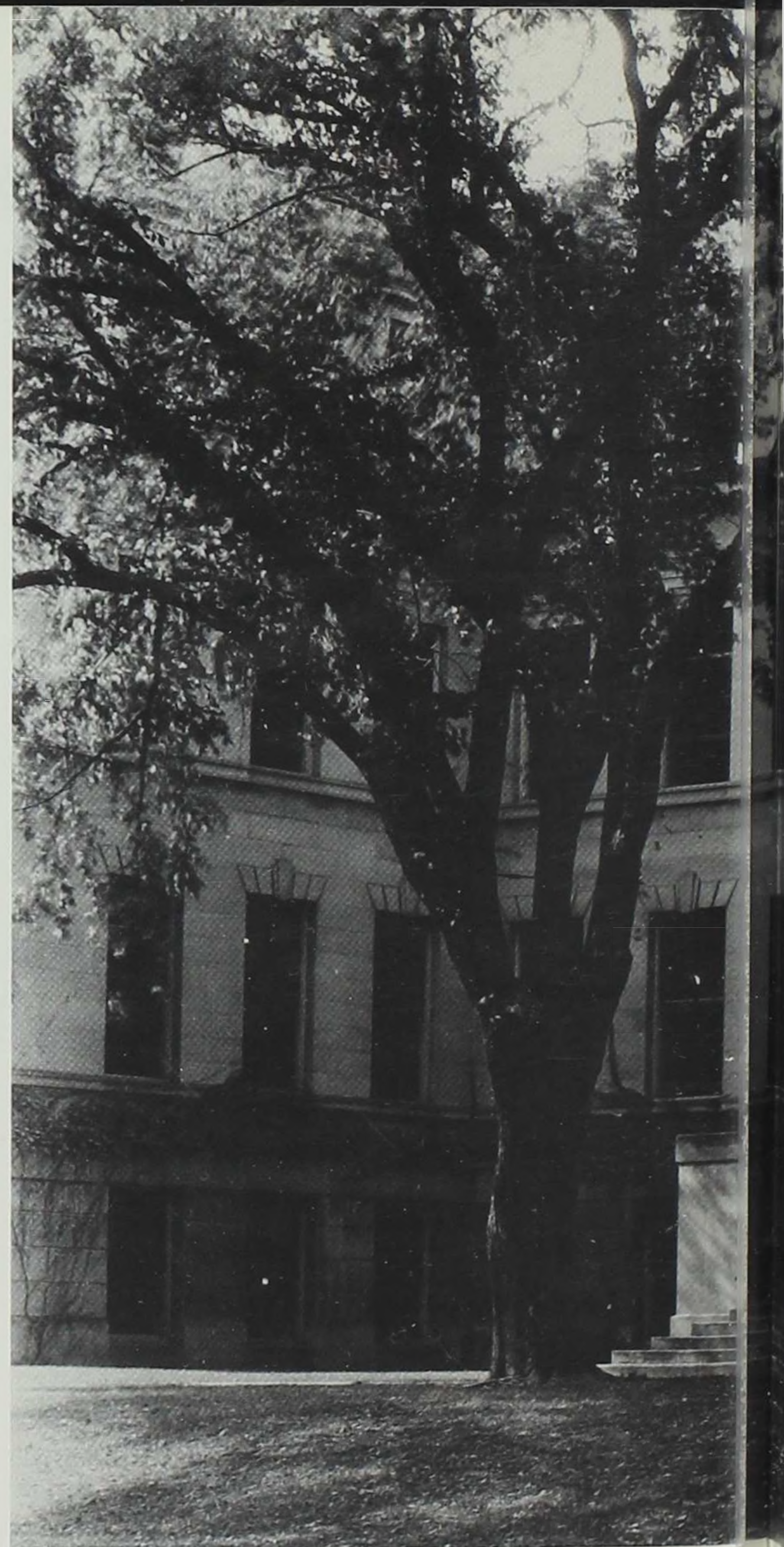
# A Young Latin Scholar

## University Life in the 1920s

*by Helen Clifford Gunter*

**A**FTER ONE YEAR of teaching high school Latin, I had a different attitude toward university study. I was not going back to school, in the autumn of 1927, to follow the traditional sequence of grade school, high school, and college. My one year of teaching in Duncan, Oklahoma, had interrupted that sequence. Now I was choosing to advance my professional career by obtaining a master's degree. My specific purpose was to become better informed and more confident to answer any question that might arise, whether about Latin literature, ancient history, or the people who had spoken Latin and lived in antiquity. If I was to be a teacher, I wanted to be a good one.

I had applied for a scholarship at the University of Iowa at the suggestion of Dr. Frank Justus Miller, a favorite professor of undergraduate days at the University of Chicago. He was a true humanist who had introduced me to Horace and Latin lyric poetry and made life in Rome's Golden Age come alive. At age seventy he had reached compulsory retirement at the University of Chicago, but was immediately snapped up by the University of Iowa as an emeritus professor. It was to follow him that I had applied at Iowa. Upon his recommendation to Dr. Roy C. Flickinger, head of the



Classics Department, I received a scholarship by which I was to teach nine semester hours, attend classes half time, and be paid five hundred dollars plus free tuition for my services. By also going to summer school in 1927 and 1928 I could earn a master's degree. It was an exciting opportunity to teach, to study, and to research.

I realized that the problem I had had with discipline in my first year of high school teaching was due in part to having been too casual, too friendly, too informal at the start. It had been so hot when school began that autumn in Oklahoma that I had let pupils move chairs



close to open windows and sit helter-skelter to catch any breeze, instead of requiring formal rows. Because I had wanted a friendly atmosphere I had allowed casual interruptions and sometimes silly comments before having established respect. I wasn't going to make that mistake again.

Now, on the first day of fall semester, standing behind my closed office door, I prepared to face my University of Iowa students in Elementary Latin. It was hot in early September, and I knew that at age twenty-two, in comparison to the regular faculty, I wouldn't look very formidable, with bobbed hair, wearing a

The Hall of Liberal Arts (now Schaeffer Hall) on the campus of the University of Iowa, where the author was a graduate student in Latin in the late 1920s.

sleeveless summer silk shift, green beads, and green and white sandals. Nevertheless I stood erect, squared my shoulders, pursed my lips into as grim an expression as I could summon, and walked to the classroom next door.

As I pushed the door open fourteen young men wearing suits, collared shirts, and neckties looked up and together smiled as if to say, "Good! There'll be a girl in this class."

Frowning a bit I looked them all over as I marched to the platform in the front of the



**Helen Clifford.**

room. Standing, I announced, "This is Elementary Latin. I am Miss Clifford." I wrote the subject and my name on the blackboard, told them what textbook to buy and sat down behind the desk. Unanimously they sighed, a quite audible, collective sigh. I asked them to introduce themselves and learned that all fourteen were "pre-law" students from small Iowa high schools. Latin was a required subject for students who aspired to become attorneys, and these fellows had to take it. Apparently my grand entrance gave me the right start, because I never had discipline problems with those young men (although later in the year, when several of them came by my office to invite me to a movie, I had to tell them that as a teacher I couldn't "date" my students).

One of the students was older than the others and blind. He sometimes came to my office for extra help because the Latin textbook available in braille was not the one the class used. He told me he had lost his vision in an explo-

sion in the chemistry lab of Western Electric in Chicago, where he had been employed. A colleague had tried to help by throwing water in his eyes, which had set off a chemical reaction that completely seared his eyeballs. He said that for a couple of years after the accident he was so despondent that he had just sat around feeling hopeless, but after a while he had asked how other blind people passed their lives. When he learned about a blind senator who had built a successful political career in Washington, he decided to study law.

He was the best student in the class, either because he was older, or smarter, or because he had fewer extracurricular distractions than the other fellows. Because he couldn't see he had a habit of speaking out of turn. One day when a slower boy was having trouble with syntax, he didn't wait for me to ask if someone could explain it.

"That's easy," he volunteered. "It's RAT-C-C."

I was as surprised as the others, who asked, "What do you mean?"

"RAT-C-C," he repeated. "Use the preposition *cum* with the verb in the subjunctive mood for relative, adversative, temporal, conditional, and causal subordinate clauses." He had to memorize rules that the other lads sometimes forgot because he couldn't rely on combing through braille for review. His perseverance and courage were a real inspiration to me and we became good friends, but I didn't accept his invitation to his dorm spring dance. Maybe it would have been all right, but I wasn't sure if I could dance with a blind man. I declined, saying it was because I was a teacher and he my student.

**B**ECAUSE I was the graduate teaching assistant I was included in social events of the Classics faculty. Drs. Flickinger and E.L. Crum and Professor Franklin Potter were married men in their middle years; Dr. Miller was the elderly professor emeritus. Dr. Louisa Walker, a pretty, brainy young woman, shared her office in the seminar room with me. At dinner parties and club meetings I felt at ease with the faculty members because they resembled my parents'

academic friends whom I had known for years. It was nice to hear the faculty talk about authors I was studying, like Homer, Sophocles, or Aristophanes, as if they were old friends, and to listen to anecdotes about travels in Italy, Greece, and Egypt. They were my University of Iowa "family."

In their classes, held in the Hall of Liberal Arts, next to the Old Capitol, I was introduced to more frivolous literature than I had known before. Tibullus, Catullus, and Ovid wrote love lyrics and light verse (Ovid's infrequently, but sometimes, close to prurient). Through Plautus and Terence I was introduced to Roman comedy, which they had adapted from Greek.

Because Dr. Flickinger was an authority on Greek theater, it was a privilege to "sit at his feet" to translate tragedy and comedy. I was thrilled to receive an inscribed copy of his scholarly tome, illustrated with photos and diagrams of ancient amphitheaters. In his class I was introduced to Greek drama in the Golden Age, five centuries B.C. Of about twenty tragedies I translated four but was expected to know the contents of all. I visualized outdoor performances where male casts enacted scenes from mythology in which humans were propelled to disaster by unforgiving deities and the relentless force of destiny. Was the Fate that caught up with wayward Greeks something like the predestination in John Calvin's Protestant Reformation theology, I wondered. It seemed unfair to be punished as sinners for what your ancestors had done. I found classical literature so engrossing that I began to consider myself foreordained to teach. To be a teacher was a better fate than a sinner's.

Of the tragic poets Euripides was my favorite because he seemed the most down to earth, and I liked Aristophanes because he wrote comedies that made fun of generals and politicians. Tragedy heaped upon tragedy provided plots for many Greek dramas. Stories I had read in Homer in my undergraduate days were enriched with characterizations, details, and subplots that the tragic poets added. Greek drama inspired me because of the glorious tales of gods and mythical heroes, the sonorous rhythm of its poetry, the philosophical chants of the chorus, and the stagecraft of a remark-

able device called *deus ex machina*, used to explain how human actions were directed by divinity. No matter how laborious or time consuming were translations, the visions the tragedies and comedies inspired made hours of study worthwhile.

In a lecture course titled "Classical Art and Archaeology" Dr. Flickinger opened up a new world for me. Occasionally he may have projected three-by-four-inch glass slides, and each student had a bound volume of black and white "University Prints," rather fuzzy images of ancient buildings and sculptures. But what I remember most are the stories he told. He brought to life ancient artists such as Phidias and Praxiteles. Alone with such luminaries I vicariously walked the streets of ancient Athens, attended symposia, offered votive gifts in temples. In the same class we learned about the archaeological discoveries of Heinrich Schliemann at Troy, of the excavations of Sir Arthur Evans in Crete, and of Lord Elgin's transfer of the "Elgin Marbles" from the Parthenon to the British Museum.

Dr. Flickinger had all the graduate students meet with all the faculty in a weekly seminar to



Roy C. Flickinger, an authority on Greek theater, headed the Classics department and directed the author's thesis research on the playwright Terence.

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"Iowa City of the late 1920s was graced by the rolling slopes along the Iowa River, big frame houses, the green of spring and summer after the frigid winters, and most of all, lovely shade trees everywhere."

review current literature, including scholarly articles and book reviews and news reports on archaeological discoveries. (The word *seminar* is rooted in Latin words meaning "seed plot." We students were like seedlings in a botanical nursery, needing cultivation for growth.) He wanted us to form the habit of keeping abreast of classical research. He urged us to read the *Classical Journal* cover to cover every month, because it was slanted for teachers, and the *American Journal of Archeology* for scholars. We also discovered that the *London Illustrated News* had excellent articles on excavations worldwide. Each student was responsible for one seminar by presenting a year's issues of a magazine and leading a discussion. This was scary because any professor could question our interpretation or criticism. I thought it was easier to review a book, even a long dry one, than an entire year of a magazine.

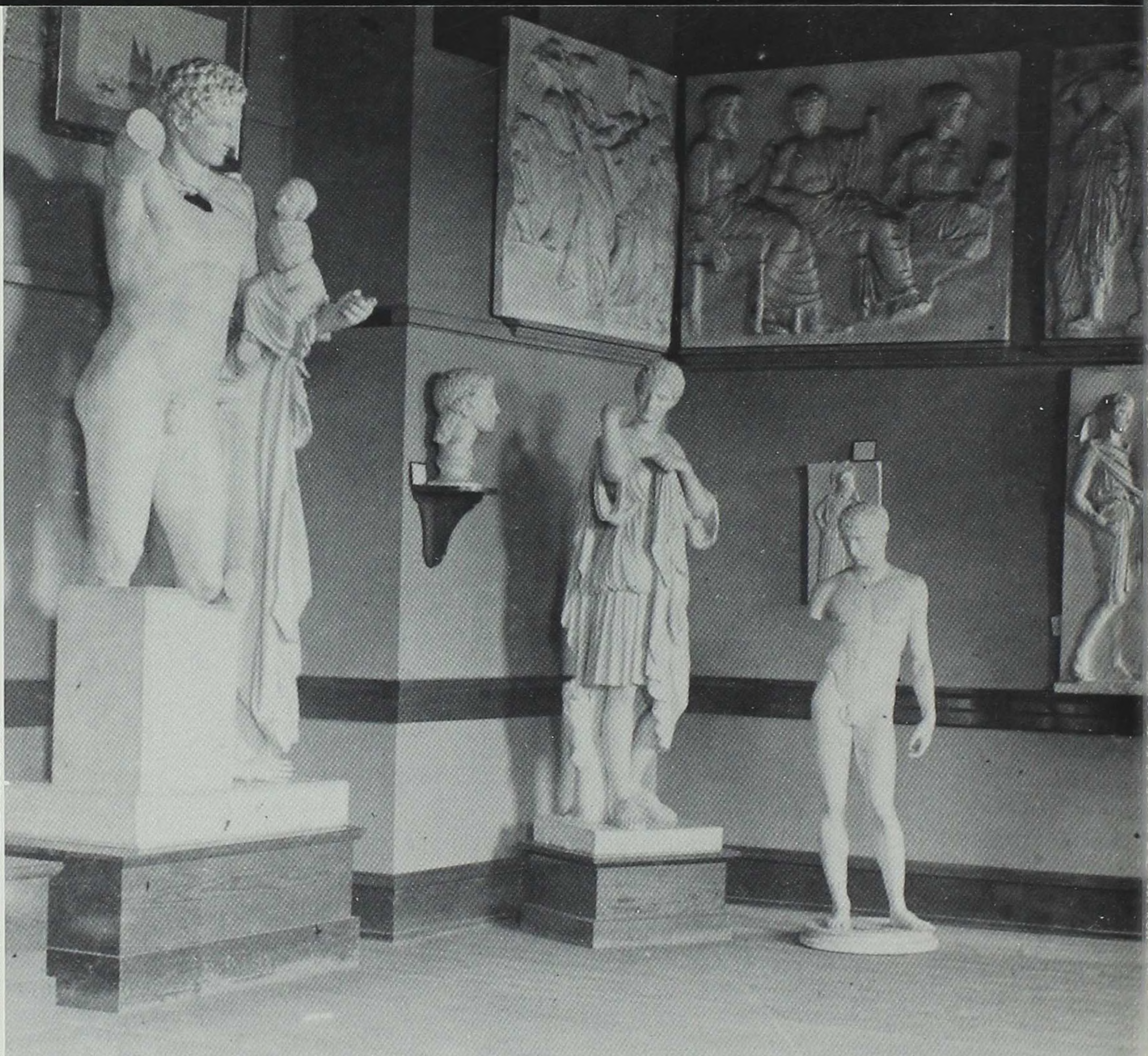
IOWA CITY of the late 1920s was graced by the rolling slopes along the Iowa River, big frame houses, the green of spring and summer after the frigid winters, and most of all, lovely shade trees everywhere. Graduate students rented rooms in private homes or rooming houses. I found a sunny upstairs bedroom in a gray frame house eleven blocks uphill from the Old Capitol Campus, in the home of Joseph and Louise Slavata. They were from Bohemia and he was a retired tailor. I shared the only bathroom with the owners and was not allowed kitchen privileges. In winter it was a long slippery walk over icy sidewalks banked with snow to the campus and business district for classes and meals, then back uphill for the night. I tried to make the round trip only once a day, eating at restaurants on school days or on Saturdays, when I spent long hours in the Classics Library. Across the street from campus was an old hotel with a small restaurant partly below ground level. It offered "home cooking" and I often ate lunch there for thirty-five or fifty cents, or dinner for a dollar or less.

On Sundays, especially when a blizzard raged, I would "hole up" in my rented bedroom. I bought a recently invented combina-

tion toaster, skillet, and egg poacher, a compact gizmo about the size of an eight-inch cube. Plugged into a light socket, it could fry a slice of bacon, cook eggs, or heat a can of soup. It was an ingenious little contraption, and Mrs. Slavata didn't complain about my weekend cooking on a card table. Rather aloof when I first moved in, Mrs. Slavata became more friendly as the year progressed. By the end of the school year, she treated me like a daughter.

A social life with my fellow students was nearly non-existent, aside from occasional activities for our Classical Club. In addition to teaching first-year Latin, I was expected to help plan programs for the club. Dr. Flickinger was pleased when I suggested culminating the school year with a Roman banquet. He knew it couldn't be expensive because most students lived on the proverbial shoestring. I was happy when the cook-owner-manager of the dining room in the nearby hotel consented to close her little restaurant to the public for one evening and to help prepare a meal resembling a Roman banquet. I knew the guests couldn't recline on Roman couches — we'd have to use traditional chairs — but the tables could be pushed together to form a "U." I bought royal purple cheesecloth for the "slaves" (or waiters) to wipe off the tables between courses. Diners could arrive dressed as ancient Romans. The professors and few male students draped themselves in sheets for togas. The professors' wives and female students fashioned vari-colored dresses out of two long pieces of yardage pinned over the shoulders with large safety pins (remarkably similar to ancient bronze *fibulae*.) Ribbon girdled the robes and held the folds in place. (Since the front and back pieces weren't cut into, the yardage could later be salvaged for a modern summer frock.) Ladies wore *stolas* and several strands of glass or pearl "Roman jewels." After a meal centered around *porcus et vinium* (ham and grape juice), the professors entertained the guests with speeches quoting witty epigrams from antiquity or even corny Iowa jokes. The Roman banquet was acclaimed a great success.

I also attended an occasional get-together at the old red brick Presbyterian church near campus. At that church I met the assistant pastor for student services, who wanted to help



Replicas of classical sculpture and art, in what may have been the Museum of Art and Archeology, directed by Roy Flickinger and housed in the Hall of Liberal Arts.

anyone with a problem. My problem was finding a job after I received my master's degree. He took an interest in me and suggested that I apply to teach at the Women's College of Roberts University in Constantinople, a mission project of the Presbyterian Church. I had never heard of it, but it sounded like a wonderful opportunity. I couldn't imagine that a mission school would need a teacher of Latin or ancient Greek, which was all I knew. He said I might be asked to teach English and I would have to sign a two-year contract. That would be fine with me because during the summer holiday I could go to Greece and visit Athens, Delphi, Delos, the Cyclades and probably visit

Italy and Rome, too. The itchy feet I had inherited from my Grandpa Coltman tingled in anticipation. The young minister said he would recommend me and find out how I should apply to the mission board.

I was so excited that I wrote home immediately to tell Mamma and Papa what my hope was. At this time my siblings, Mary and Charlie, and I didn't write each other. We all wrote home and Mamma recirculated any important news. She must have written my sister and brother immediately that I wanted to go to Europe for two years, and she must have enlisted their help in dissuading me, for they both wrote me that Mamma was worried and I should give up the idea. I don't know what my Victorian mother had learned about foreign men during her trans-Pacific voyages or while



as a bride she lived in China, but she acted as if all European men were licentious monsters, lying in wait to corrupt innocent young women. Her letter to me only said that she and Papa would worry about my going so far from home. Mary and Charlie both wrote that our parents were growing old and implied that since I was still single it was my responsibility to look after them. I resented their letters. Mary had a husband and a baby to look after, but she had married against Mamma's wishes and chosen her own life pattern. She was doing what she wanted to do. Charlie had a geology job in Texas and he was doing what he wanted to do. Why should they try to stop me from doing what I wanted to do? I was twenty-three years old and would decide for myself.

When the application form arrived, it cov-

ered both sides of a legal-sized sheet and asked numerous questions about my nationality, age, education, church connections, employment, social service — a real resumé of my life. I completed the front page as accurately and neatly as I could, turned to the back page, and progressed thoughtfully to the last line. A question preceding the blank for my signature stymied me: "Whatever duties you assume, if appointed, will you consider that your primary function is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ?"

"You have to be honest, Helen," the little voice inside me whispered. "You know you're not a missionary. You want to go to Turkey because it's near Greece. It's because you want to travel that you want that job. You want it because you want to see the Parthenon and the Lion's Gate at Mycenae; you want to go to Delphi and Corinth. You think it would be exciting to live in Constantinople. You know you've questioned some of the miracles in the New Testament, like feeding a multitude of five thousand people on five loaves of bread and two little fish. Your faith isn't strong enough for you to tell other people what they should believe. You'd be a hypocrite to sign the application. You have to be honest with yourself. You're not a missionary."

I stared at the paper until all the words blurred to blankness. I didn't sign the bottom line. After a while I crumpled the sheet and threw it in the waste basket. Then I sat still for a while longer. My family hadn't kept me from the job. I had made the decision myself.

**B**ESIDES teaching first-year Latin, attending my own classes in Latin and Greek, and reading for the seminar, I had to write a thesis. I didn't know what subject to choose so Dr. Flickinger suggested that I research entrances and exits in Terence. To start I had to read all of his plays. Fortunately only six had survived, and I had reached the point that I could almost read Latin direct without translating it into English. (Professor Potter had told me he dreamed in Latin. I remarked to another student, "That's no dream; it's a nightmare.")

In my research I had to keep track of every

time an actor came on or off stage. If he said he was going to the forum and went out by the right wing, dramatic technique required his return by the right wing unless he reported he had also gone somewhere else. It wasn't hard to keep track of, only tedious. I made notes on three-by-five-inch cards until I had a large stack. My thesis was titled "Dramatic Technique and the Originality of Terence." I was supposed to show how closely Terence followed Menander, an earlier Greek playwright. Dr. Flickinger thought this was important enough for a master's thesis, and my concern was to satisfy him. He was particular that my footnotes identify other scholarly studies about Terence and that I meet format requirements for publication. I suspected that my findings wouldn't be important enough to set the scholarly world on fire, but I realized that I was being drilled on how to prepare a research paper for publication. Before I could merit a master's diploma, I would have to have the thesis approved by every classics professor and submit several perfectly typed copies to the University of Iowa Library.

Finally, I would have to pass an examination in one foreign language and take an oral examination in which I might be asked anything about Greek and Latin history (including wars and government, triumvirates and emperors), about Greek or Latin literature including lives of authors, content, style, or philosophy of their works, plus incidentals such as semantics and syntax, prosody or panegyric. In short, I had to be ready to answer *any* question about *any* thing that happened between about 600 B.C. and the collapse of the Roman Empire in 476 A.D. I had to read, *read*, READ, take notes, make outlines, and memorize facts, *facts*, FACTS.

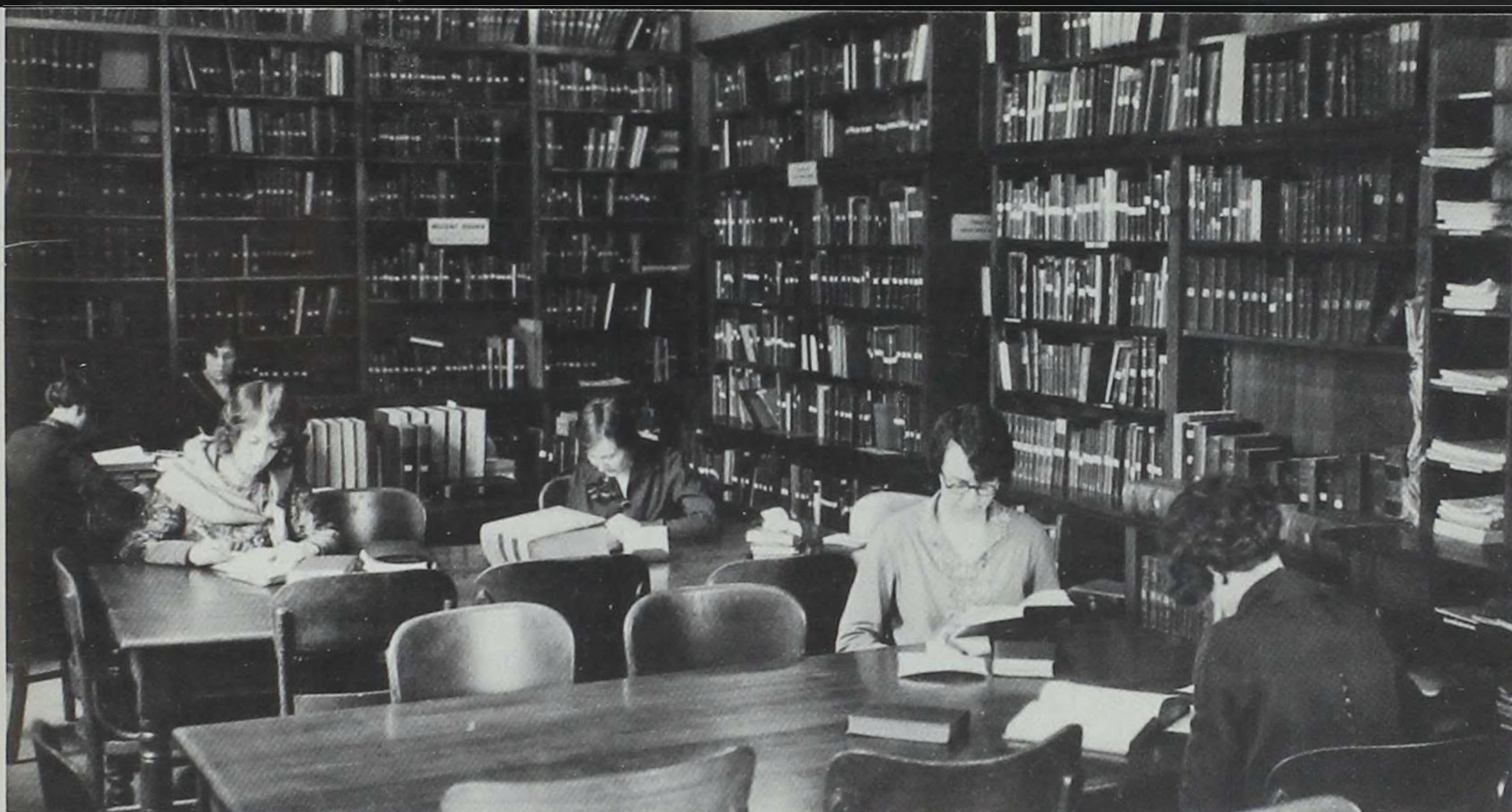
From the zenith of elation to which knowledge gained in Dr. Flickinger's classes had raised me, I sank to the nadir of despair at the prospect of tasks still to be completed. My research had been exacting but not really rewarding. What did it matter where Terence's characters came from and where they went? I had come from Chicago, via Duncan, Oklahoma, and where was I going next? After months of unremitting study I was tired, tired, TIRED. Depressed, discouraged, and *tired*.

I'm sure I wouldn't have thought of suicide if I hadn't read a news item about an instructor who had taken his life by poison. The paper didn't say why he had done it. I wondered what cataclysm of catastrophes could have driven him to such desperation. He must have been under terrible pressure or hopelessly discouraged. His body was found where he had driven his car to a wooded place outside of Iowa City. Because of the poison his skin was blotched green and yellow. I wondered what kind of poison did that; I wondered where he had gotten it — maybe from the Chemistry Department. I thought of death as an escape from pressure that was just too much to take. I wondered if that instructor's suicide might start an epidemic. For a while I seriously considered suicide. I was so tired and my life seemed pointless. Within a few weeks I had to submit my thesis, properly typed, and take my "finals." Then what? How important to the world was it for me to teach Latin? Did I really want to anyway? Where would I get a job? I was so tired.

**I**N THE WEEK between the end of spring term and beginning of summer school I went back to Chicago, planning to type my thesis on Papa's Hammond typewriter and hoping for a change of pace, maybe some dates for theater, even dancing. Nothing turned out right. It was four years since I had graduated from the university and my school friends had scattered. I had never had a typing lesson so I had problems with my "peek and poke" procedure — even before the typewriter broke down. That was the last straw. Papa's typewriter had changeable type so he could use mathematical symbols, but because the typewriter was more versatile than most, it also got out of order easily. Papa phoned the agency about repairs and was told it would take a week. I had to be back in Iowa City with my thesis typed by the end of the week. Later I read Mamma's cursory entries in her diary:

June 1: H arr'd Englewood. O & H to Typewriter Co afternoon. P.M. Helen hysterical.

I was frantic. I kept thinking about suicide, but how? We had iodine in the medicine



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The author recalls "long hours" in the Latin Library.

closet, also some hydrogen peroxide. To drink either could be fatal. When peroxide was poured on an open wound I knew it boiled up. If it did that to my throat and stomach, I'd be in agony. I wouldn't know how to buy poison from a drug store. A vision of myself as a green-and-yellow-striped corpse was horrible. Death was permanent. If I drank poison, I couldn't change my mind; and I knew I was a coward. Besides, the worst part would be how I would hurt Mamma and Papa. After all they had done for me, I couldn't commit suicide. That would be a coward's way out.

- June 2: H took typewriter to Co. again, They fixed it better. P.M. she went to show with Kennedy.
- June 3: All to Armour Baccalaureate [Papa's school]
- June 4: H typing thesis
- June 6: To Field's. H bought new suit for next fall.
- June 7, 8, 9: More typing
- June 10: H corrected her typed copy; packed, left at 5 p.m. for Iowa City.

I had regained control over my emotions and had won the battle of the thesis. Yet sometimes I wonder what was important enough about all those actors' in's and out's in Terence's comedies to eat up more than eighty typed pages of research.

THE ORAL EXAM was the final step, scheduled at ten o'clock on Saturday morning, July 14, 1928. I was so nervous that I arrived at the department library at nine o'clock, thinking I would study until I was summoned. I wore my nicest summer sport dress, determined to make a good appearance. I thumbed through my notes, couldn't concentrate, gave up, paced the floor by the windows. At nine-thirty Dr. Flickinger looked in. He said the student scheduled for nine o'clock had burst into tears and had run out of her exam; if I was ready, the examining committee could take me. That another student had given up, cried, and run away was foreboding, but I did as requested.

Now it happened that the student who had fled was Professor Potter's protégée, as I was a protégée of Dr. Flickinger. It also happened that Professor Potter apparently resented Dr. Flickinger because he had been called from Northwestern University to head Classics at Iowa when Potter was already on the Iowa faculty. People said he had wanted to be department head himself but he didn't have a Ph.D. (That was why he was called Professor Potter instead of Dr. Potter.) Anyway, I guess he was embarrassed that his student had performed poorly and he didn't want me to outshine her. I found out about college politics that morning. He couldn't fight Dr. Flickinger, but he could give me a hard time.

The exam was supposed to last an hour so I

thought mine would end at ten-thirty instead of eleven. However, since the third exam wasn't scheduled until eleven, they kept me for an hour and a half. After I had defended my thesis and had been quizzed on material related to my course work, Professor Potter changed the subject by saying, "When I was a lad in Sunday School, I was given a book with a picture of the Roman Colosseum that was labeled 'Where Nero persecuted the Christians.' Would that have jarred your archaeological sensibilities?"

It didn't, but I knew there had to be a catch. I had done my best to be prepared to answer *any* question about any *thing*, but what was he getting at? Silence prevailed as that masculine foursome focused expectantly on me. I had to say something.

"No, Professor, it wouldn't jar *my* archaeological sensibilities; it might jar *yours*."

Dr. Flickinger suppressed a smile. Professor Potter looked annoyed. He hadn't made me cry or run away. He pushed further.

"Well, Miss Clifford, if I told you that the Colosseum was built under the Flavians, would *that* mean anything to you?" His speech sounded like, "I hope it won't! I hope it won't!" but he had actually thrown me a lifeline. I survived because I had memorized the names and dates of all the Roman emperors. Nero had fiddled while Rome burned, 54-68 A.D. The Flavians, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, ruled 79-96 A.D.

"Oh, thank you, Dr. Potter," I chirped happily. "I see what you mean. The Colosseum wasn't there in Nero's time." And I quoted the dates. He looked disappointed. I knew he didn't like to be called "Dr." but I was excited and it popped out. I always thought of professors as doctors. He may have thought I meant to rub it in that he didn't have a Ph.D.

Dr. Flickinger smiled broadly, looked at the clock, and said, "Please wait outside until we call you back."

In the hall I bumped into Laura Potter, who was hanging around to find out who passed their exams, I guess. Professor Potter's daughter was about my age. She was also a graduate student — a nice girl but the last person I wanted to meet at that particular moment.

"Did you pass?"

"I don't know. I'm waiting to find out."

"Was it hard?"

"Not very," I muttered and walked away.

Then Dr. Flickinger came out and said, "Congratulations." I was over the top.

I received my M.A. at the end of summer school in a convocation held in the Iowa Memorial Union, the university's handsome new building. I was sorry that Mamma and Papa didn't come from our summer home in Colorado for the convocation. It was too expensive to travel so far just to see me receive a diploma, but it would have been nice if they had been there.

**S**HORTLY BEFORE I was to leave Iowa City, Dr. Flickinger called me to his office. He said he had been notified of a vacancy for a college Latin instructor in "the most foreign city in the United States." The salary would be two thousand dollars. He said he knew I was disappointed not to go to Constantinople, but I was young and he understood my mother's feelings. This would be an opportunity to spread my wings without leaving the United States. He would recommend me for the position if I was interested. "Think it over tonight and tell me in the morning if you want it," he said. "I don't want to recommend you unless you will accept the position if it is offered."

"I can tell you now. I want it."

"Very well then, I'll propose your name. But I haven't told you where it is. Where do you think you'll be going?"

"Why, San Francisco, of course," I replied, envisioning its Chinatown.

"It's a good thing I asked, but I can see why you thought of San Francisco. Actually it's in New Orleans. Would that make a difference? The opening is at Sophie Newcomb College for Women, which is part of Tulane University."

San Francisco or New Orleans — to me it made no difference. With my two years' teaching experience and a master's degree I was ready to say, "Have requisites, will travel." If teaching was my predestination, Latin would provide the wherewithal to explore wider horizons. □