

The Diaries of Anne Frank and Birdie Mathews

by Shelby Myers-Verhage

While sightseeing in Washington, D.C. in August 1941, Birdie Mathews wrote in her travel diary that she had seen the Magna Carta, "which has been sent here from England for safe keeping during the bombing." In Amsterdam, far closer to the bombing, Anne Frank had not even begun her diary yet. She would receive it as a birthday gift from her father the next June.

Frank's diary would be short but intense and emotionally honest. Mathews's diary would be at first kept sporadically (during her travels), but then almost daily as she detailed her life in Danville, Iowa, as a retired teacher. Each diarist wrote about what was important to her. Each diary—as all diaries do—gives a unique view of the world.

Yet the Anne Frank diary that became known around the world was not exactly the same diary in which Anne first wrote. There are actually

three versions. She began her cloth-bound diary on her thirteenth birthday, June 12, 1942. She wrote about the war (the families in hiding listened to the wireless daily) and her everyday experiences with those in the secret annex. She wrote mostly for herself, using the diary as a place where she could be alone and express her feelings.

On March 28, 1944, Anne heard a radio broadcast requesting letters and diaries detailing individual wartime experiences. She began to consider writing her experiences as a book, calling it *het Achterhuis* ("the house behind" or "secret annex"). That May she began in earnest to rework her original diary for publication, recopying the entries onto loose-leaf paper, adding and editing selections, changing the names of some of the people in the annex. She edited her entries through March 29, 1944.

At the time of her arrest

on August 4, 1944, Anne's original diary and her revision were left behind. Otto Frank's co-worker Miep Gies gathered them up to save for Anne. When Anne's death was confirmed, Gies gave them to Otto, who had not read his daughter's diary before this.

Otto Frank soon began to translate excerpts into German to send to his mother in Switzerland. At first he translated portions for family and friends only, but after excerpts were shared with the publishing community, the diary soon became a work for a larger audience. A publisher worked closely with Otto Frank in editing the diary, selecting largely from his excerpts. (Otto did not wish passages about Anne's difficulties with her mother and certain intimate entries to appear.) This version was published in the Netherlands in 1947 and in the United States in 1952. All three versions of

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Besides the various editions of the Anne Frank diary mentioned in the preceding articles, the biographies *Anne Frank* (1985) by Lina Tridenti; *Anne Frank: Beyond the Diary* (1992) by Ruud van der Rol and Rian Verhoeven; and *The Last Seven Months of Anne Frank* by Willy Lindwer (1991) were useful. The Frank sisters' correspondence to the Wagner sisters is at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. See the *Los Angeles Times* (July 24, 1988) for a comment from Cornelius Suijk, international director of the Anne Frank Foundation in Amsterdam. Regarding Birdie Mathews, the author interviewed or corresponded with Mathews's relatives and former students (Bob Dodds, Bonnie Jane Hayward, Don Kellar, Vivian Kellar, Don Mathews, Cyrene Wagner, Vera Mathews, and Roger and Caroline Parrott). Betty Ann Wagner was particularly helpful. Marjorie Fitzsimmons loaned correspondence from Mathews. John Haefner, professor emeritus, University of Iowa, provided background on schooling practices in Iowa prior to World War II. Local sources include the Burlington *Hawkeye* and *Des Moines County News*, Jan.-June 1940, and *The History of the Danville Community* (1966) by James I. Garrels and David R. Gerdes. The Birdie Mathews Papers, now in the State Historical Society of Iowa collections (Iowa City), includes Nancy Bauer's 1967 Burlington *Hawkeye* interview, other clippings, teaching mementos, and postcards. Annotations to these articles are in *The Palimpsest* production files.

the diary now appear together in *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition* (1989). An unabridged version of the 1952 diary was also recently published.

Birdie Mathews, the teacher who arranged the pen-pal exchange for Anne Frank and Juanita Wagner, also was a devoted diarist. Her diaries, recently donated to the State Historical Society of Iowa by Vivian and Don Kellar (Birdie Mathews's grandnephew) begin with travel diaries kept during her frequent trips and her post-retirement winters in Florida and California. Each entry was carefully handwritten on loose-leaf or plain typing paper, or in composition books or unused teacher record books.

Once retired, Mathews devoted even more time to her diaries, writing nearly every day until her death at age ninety-four in 1974. She detailed her everyday activities and daily regimens with great

care. For example, an entry from October 15, 1967, reads: "Rainy all day. The chili supper scheduled for tomorrow night called off on account of the flu epidemic." In an entry from February 22, 1959, she wrote, "Washington's 228th birthday. Cold. The Gerdes boys came with their snow plow and shovel and cleaned the snow from my walks. Paid them \$1.25." At times her topics expanded to world events. On July 19, 1950, the eve of the Korean War, she noted: "Listened to President Truman's message tonight. Sounds exactly like Dec. 1941. Must we go through all that again? God forbid."

Mathews seldom recorded deeply personal perspectives, although some of her earlier travel diaries include a few poems and reflections on her travels. Although lacking the emotional impact or historical significance of Anne Frank's adolescent diary kept while hiding from the Nazis, the Birdie Mathews diaries

give us a glimpse into the orderly life of a rural Iowa teacher who tried to broaden her students' and community's world view by sharing her experiences. The portrait that emerges from the Mathews diaries is of a career school teacher who organized her life as she did her diary pages—with clarity and detail.

"Iowans are fortunate to have rediscovered the story of Birdie Mathews, as it serves as a strong reminder of the role Iowans can play in world affairs," remarked Mary Bennett, audiovisual archivist at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City), where the Mathews diaries are now housed. "Rather than remain complacent and uninvolved, this school teacher took an active interest in events across the globe. She encouraged her students to look outside of their relatively secure lives in Iowa in order to gain insights about the turmoil faced by people like Anne Frank. Her diaries and writings are significant because they document her worldly attitude and the experiences she gained while traveling abroad. It is fortuitous that her family preserved these research materials for future generations, so we can gain a new perspective on how World War II impacted Iowans." □

Left: Selections from the Birdie Mathews papers: her letters from Europe published in the local newspaper; diary entries for 1945 in a teacher's planning book; and loose-leaf pages of her 1961 diary.

