

Former KU dean of women renews faculty ties on campus Lawrence Journal

Martha Peterson, Kansas University's dean of women from 1951 to 1956, returned to Lawrence recently to reconnect with her roots and to distribute and collect several honors on the KU campus.

In an interview before she and her traveling companion took off for a family genealogy foray to Ottawa University, Peterson talked about her ties to Kansas and her career in university administration, which began at KU.

"I've tied in KU and relatives and friends, so this is nice," she said. "This is the longest I've been in Lawrence since 1956."

While she was here, Peterson presented a KU mathematics department teaching award and several scholarships as a benefactress of scholarships honoring her former math teachers, Florence Black and Wealthy Babcock. She also was honored by the KU School of Education with a crystal Apple Award for Distinguished Achievement in Education.

Peterson, a graduate of Salina High School, first came to KU in 1933 with her uncle, Markle French, who had studied here and thought his math-loving niece should become a Jayhawker too.

HOME WAS Jamestown, about 50 miles north and a little west of Salina, she said, noting her grandparents had homesteaded there in the 1800s.

Peterson still owns their land, and because her grandfather didn't trust his daughters to manage it, her name now is listed right after his and former

U.S. President Rutherford B. Hayes on the deed.

Peterson said her mother never appreciated her grandfather's lack of confidence in his female children and was determined her own daughter would receive the higher education she was not allowed to pursue.

"Mother took great pleasure in my successes," she said, adding the older woman also always seemed to think she could have done as well if she'd had the chance.

AT KU, Peterson encountered many strong women educators,

starting with Black, whom she called "Blackie," and Babcock, both of whom received bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees at Kansas and continued teaching on campus into the 1960s.

Helen Rhoda Hoops, Cora Downs, Alberta Corbin and Matty Crumrine were among other Ph.D. women on the KU faculty who became role models to students like her, Peterson said.

"THE STRONG WOMEN in the 1920s usually ended up teaching in the more enlightened uni-

versities," she said, noting the after World War I, many career opportunities in education opened up for women.

Because of them, she said, "I think we just took it for granted if we wanted to do this we could."

After graduating in 1937 with her mathematics degree, Peterson took teaching positions in Stockton and Ellinwood, and began work on her own master's degree in mathematics at KU.

By 1942, she had all her course work done and was invited to return to campus to teach while writing her thesis.

"The math department was just as busy as it could be," she said, noting the United States' involvement in World War II was then under way.

With her master's completed, Peterson started in on her Ph.D., but in 1946, Chancellor Dean Malott decided she'd be a good administrator and pressed her to assume some of those duties.

"I didn't want to give up mathematics," she said, "but when Dean Malott wanted you to do something, there was no way out."

IN 1951, she was named dean of women, gave up her teaching responsibilities and switched her Ph.D. to educational psychology.

In '56, she left KU to test her skills at the University of Wisconsin, where she was dean of women and then dean of students until 1967.

"That whole attitude of 'you don't tuck girls into the dormitories at 10 at night' changed" during those years, she said, and women college students began to be treated like the adults they were.

"Many parents at Wisconsin were far more liberal with their sons and daughters than the university regulations were," she recalled, noting time and again, she and other administrators went to the regents seeking liberalized rules.

During that time, Peterson also was involved to developing campus programs for older women.

In 1967, she accepted the presidency of Barnard College of Columbia University in New York City, arriving just a few months before student unrest closed Columbia for two months.

Barnard itself never closed, although protests went on for several years, she said, noting her Wisconsin experience served

her well during that time.

"You never knew what was going to blow someone off."

Peterson said it was very fortunate that Columbia and Barnard had come through those harrowing days.

"COLUMBIA really was an ivory tower," she said. "They

couldn't imagine people being that way."

By 1975, Peterson had decided "I was never going to grow old in New York. To be retired there was a terribly lonely life," so when Beloit College in Wisconsin invited her to be a candidate for its presidency, she agreed.

A month and a half later, she

was named to the post and remained there until retiring at age 65 in 1981.

"Beloit is a small, very good liberal arts college," she said, noting it had great financial problems when she arrived but fortunately had recognized them early.

"We worked constantly for a balanced budget and financial security," she said.

"I got to be a part of that and that was fun."

In retirement, Peterson focused her energies on various board responsibilities she had accepted, including work with Metropolitan Life, Exxon and Macy's.

"I had time and became really quite devoted (to the boards)," she said, noting her work on Exxon's audit committee and Metropolitan Life's finance committee.

SINCE THE 1982 death of her mother, who also lived in Lawrence for a time during her later years, Peterson has taken up work on the family genealogy that her mother began.

Recently, she said, she completed a book-length work about one side of her family and now is preparing to research the other side.

She and a friend who is retired from the University of Wisconsin faculty, own homes together in Madison and in Florida, she said, and like to travel.

"It's been fun coming back," she said of her stop in Lawrence.

Peterson noted she always enjoyed but wasn't enthusiastic about student alumni reunions, but this trip's focus on her facul-



(Staff photo by Mike Yoder)

Martha Peterson, Kansas University's dean of women from 1951 to 1956, later became president of Barnard College of Columbia University in New York City. Now retired, she was in Lawrence recently to present and receive several honors on campus.