

Sarah Archie Swanson Beverley 1881-1968

For thirty-three years Mrs. Sarah Archie Swanson Beverley served as principal of the old Whitmell Farm Life High School, and on her retirement in 1951 she had participated in the White House Conference on Rural Education in 1944, and served in 1927 as the Virginia representative to the South Atlantic Regional Conference at Rural Virginia Polytechnic Institute for contributions to agriculture. But the depth and scope of Mrs. Beverley's achievements in education are almost impossible to imagine.

Born on May 28, 1881 to Sarah Payne and Frank Archer Swanson, she was given the odd name of "Archie" because her family was set on having a son as the seventh child. She attended a two-room school at Whitmell, and then went to Randolph-Macon Institute in Danville before entering Randolph-Macon's Woman's College at Lynchburg. It was in Lynchburg that Mrs. Beverley said she came to the realization that she had to become a teacher, for here, she had to compete with students from all over the country and although this gave her no disrespect for her rural upbringing, it made her aware of the disadvantages that she faced because of her limited background. It was this that made her resolve to give her pupils the educational opportunities denied her.

One of Mrs. Beverley's professors, Miss Celeste Parrish, recommended her for a teaching position at Big Stone Gap, Virginia. From there, an offer came to teach Latin and History at Bristol High School in Tennessee, the metropolis of that area. Mrs. Beverley jumped at the chance, and there she met the Superintendent of the Bristol City Schools, R.H. Watkins, who was asked to head the schools in Laurel, Mississippi. He persuaded Mrs. Beverley to accompany him, and she found the two years spent near New Orleans most profitable because it broadened her horizons.

When her father became ill in 1908, Mrs. Beverley returned to Whitmell to care for him, and during this period she taught for two summers in Big Stone Gap, where, as she recalled, the big gap in her life was filled when she met Frank C. Beverley and married him there in June of 1912. They moved to Bluefield, West Virginia, but when her father became completely paralyzed in 1914, she, along with her husband, returned home to Whitmell.

Mrs. Beverley's first encounter with teaching at Whitmell came as a substitute, and she realized that Whitmell students were given an unfair deal in comparison to Danville students, who were only fifteen miles away. She drew her conclusions: a locality should give its children their just heritage. It was this thought that made Mrs. Beverley know that her place was one of working constructively for education in her own community. Consequently, on her father's death in 1916, she became a seventh grade teacher at Whitmell Farm Life School, and two years later became its principal.

At this point, according to Mrs. Beverley, she saw her duty as developing a group of isolationists into world-minded citizens. To achieve this end, she sought to incorporate four elements into a partnership: the home, the school, the church, and the entire community, with the youth as the stockholders in the investment. Willing to expand her own vistas, Mrs. Beverley attended the University of Virginia during the summer of 1918 and spend many weekends in Washington consulting with Harold W. Fought, Chief of the Rural Division, U.S. Bureau of Education. In successive years Mrs. Beverley attended State Teacher's College in Aberdeen, South Dakota, until she secured her Bachelor's degree in 1923. Dr. Fought aided Mrs. Beverley

in visiting various states as she commuted to and from South Dakota to observe those places that had a vision for rural development.

Subsequently, she began doing graduate study at the Teacher's College of Columbia University and was awarded the Master's degree in 1932. Her advisor at Columbia urged her to travel abroad; therefore, she took a short course at the International People's College in Elsinore, Denmark. After all these experiences, Mrs. Beverley arrived at the conclusion that the "country school must be at the center of community life." Thus, the Whitmell school was made to reach out through the homes and churches while it was building an educational institution for children's learning.

At Mrs. Beverley's request, in 1920 the Federal Government was asked to hold a National Country Life Conference at Whitmell. This was the first time such conferences had been taken to the open country, but thousands attended. Another similar event was held in 1923. As a result, the people around Whitmell gained confidence in themselves, and attained a lasting community consciousness. Mrs. Beverley said it was the school's motto that embodied the spirit of the school: "That our school may be a lighthouse, guiding individual, community, country, and state to the light of education, right living, ideal citizenship and brotherly love."

Community life was so important to Mrs. Beverley's philosophy that periodic surveys were taken by the Whitmell community to determine weak spots in community life. Truly the story of Whitmell Farm Life School and of Mrs. F.C. Beverley are inseparable. So successful was she in instilling her spirit into the community and into its education, that she soon became a widely recognized authority on rural education and was invited in 1944 by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt to participate in a White House Conference on Rural Education. In addition to being the Virginia Representative to the South Atlantic Regional Conference on Rural Education, Mrs. Beverley was a visiting lecturer on the subject to several states.

Mrs. Beverley's reputation as a dedicated educator and her rapport with her cousin Claude A. Swanson, who served as Governor of Virginia, United States Senator, and Secretary of the Navy, brought many important people to her locality: outstanding educators, governors, congressmen, diplomats, senators, and foreign leaders. Their presence in the Whitmell School and community had a tremendous educational impact on Pittsylvania County.

Of the many honors bestowed on Mrs. Beverley, one was truly exceptional. She was the first woman ever awarded the State Farmer's Degree accorded by the Future Farmers of America in 1949. In 1951 she was made Honorary Member of the Piedmont Federation of Future Homemakers of America. Governors of Virginia appointed Mrs. Beverley four times to commissions pertaining to rural life. Mrs. Beverley made a lasting mark on the teaching profession in Virginia and was a founder of the Virginia Iota State and of the Epsilon Chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma. She was the recipient of the Delta Kappa Gamma Outstanding Citizen Award in 1952.

In 1955, Mrs. Beverley wrote her own story of the development of Whitmell Farm Life School and rural education in her book "Growing Years." Upon her retirement, it was observed that the Whitmell community had been "fortunate to have had a leader with such broad vision, deep understanding, and selfless spirit." On her death in 1968, her fellows in Delta Kappa Gamma remembered, "Her life was an inspiration; her memory, a benediction."