



Eugenia Kaufman

“A KNOWING, KINDLY AND GENTLE SOUL.”

By David W. Levy

IN OCTOBER 1950, David Burr, a brand-new graduate about to embark upon a career of incomparable service to the University, offered a tribute in this magazine to a favorite teacher. She was an assistant professor of modern languages named Eugenia Kaufman, and she deserves our attention for two reasons. She was notable for what another of her former students, University College’s Dean Glenn Couch, called “her capabilities as a teacher and as a human being.” And she serves as a sobering reminder of how unmarried women teachers were treated by this and other universities.

Eugenia Kaufman was born in Leon, Kansas, on February 2, 1889. When she was nine, her parents and older brother Kenneth moved to the Cherokee Strip and then to a farm near Weatherford, Okla. In 1904, she joined her brother at Southwestern Normal School, practically walking distance from the farm. She planned to become a math teacher, but a brilliant new professor of German appeared at Southwestern, and, as Burr put it, the arrival of Roy Temple House “dates the advent of Miss Kaufman’s interest in foreign languages,” and from that time on, “it has been her work.”

In 1910, armed with a “certificate,” she began teaching

in small-town high schools. Summers were spent studying in Norman, where Professor House relocated in 1911. In 1917, Kaufman received her bachelor’s degree (later doing summer studies at the universities of Mexico, California, and Chicago). OU hired her as a teaching assistant (1919), an instructor (1920), and an assistant professor (1927). For thirty-seven years, she taught German, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. During the final years of her career, her classes met in “Kaufman Hall,” named after her brother Kenneth, who’d become an honored teacher, literary critic and editor.

Kaufman’s life was her teaching. Another of her students was Savoie Lottinville, later director of the University Press. “She was never content to teach merely the mechanics of the language,” he told David Burr, “but to imbue the student somehow with the spirit of the literature.” She had a special regard for returning World War II veterans, but valued every student and offered her help to each. She was the sort of teacher who took counseling seriously; the sort that brought flowers to class from her famous garden and invited students home for ice cream and cake after the final exam. A departmental evaluation in 1952 described her as, “not only a fine teacher but also a sympathetic counselor and friend of long standing to a whole generation of university students ... She is, in short, a knowing, kindly, and gentle soul.”

On the other hand, Kaufman was so absorbed by her teaching and counseling that she sometimes neglected other duties. After twenty years, her mentor, Professor House, described her as “very loyal and responsible, tries hard to be punctual, but is forgetful and constitutionally unable to budget her time. Very intelligent, industrious, helpful

to students. Would be useful on committee work if it were not for her forgetfulness.” She might have smiled at those comments if she had ever gotten to read them.

Like other single women, Eugenia Kaufman was never rewarded to the extent warranted by her merits. She was held at the rank of assistant professor for twenty-five years, making her (along with one other individual) OU’s longest-serving assistant professor. Her department’s plea for promotion in 1952, “if only on the grounds of common humanity,” was finally approved shortly before her retirement. Kaufman’s nine-month salary in 1927, her first year as an assistant professor, was \$2,200 (roughly \$37,000 in today’s dollars). Eighteen years later she was still being paid \$2,200, and at her twenty-fifth year as an assistant professor and thirty-third as a faculty member, she was paid \$4,200—about \$46,000 today. A green, new assistant professor today would be paid almost double what OU paid her after decades of superb service. The injustice was based on the belief that single women did not have the same financial needs as men, a belief never applied to single men.

As she was about to retire, her chair wrote: “She is not ... a woman who ardently seeks material rewards; rather, her deepest satisfaction must be found in the grateful hearts of generations of students who have known and loved her, but who haven’t always taken the trouble to say so. To have inspired such loyalty and personal devotion could well be the desideratum of all of us.” In poor health, Eugenia Kaufman announced her retirement on her sixty-eighth birthday. She died in January 1963. ●

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