

MILDRED LETTON WITTICK
Our Mysterious Benefactor

Lyn Wolz



(Photo courtesy of Linda Schmidt, Lyons Memorial Library, College of the Ozarks)

In 2008, MFS treasurer Dave Para received a letter from a lawyer and was pleasantly surprised to learn that the society had just received a gift of \$5,000 from the estate of one Mildred Wittick. While we were all thrilled about such an unexpected donation, no one on the Society's board of directors or other long-time members of the Society could remember ever knowing or hearing about this person. Wittick had never been a member of MFS, as far as we could tell, and no one could remember her ever having attended one of the annual meetings. Finally, long-time MFS board member Jim Vandergriff dredged up a memory of sitting in an airport waiting for a flight to a professional meeting and talking to the woman sitting next to him. It turned out they were both professors of education and Jim remembers he told the woman about his work with the Missouri Folklore Society. It must have been a memorable conversation, because that's the only connection we can find between Dr. Wittick and any of our members, though our research into her past eventually revealed that she had long-ago ties to Missouri.

She was born Mildred Celia Letton, most likely sometime between 1905 and 1910,¹ though I've been unable to verify an exact birth date. Her parents Riley and Celia (Warmoth) Letton lived in Kansas City, Missouri, at the time. I haven't found much information about Mildred's childhood, but was able to pick up the trail in 1925, when she became a student at the Teacher's College of Kansas City, where she took classes through 1927. She began teaching in

the public schools in Kansas City, Missouri, during that period, staying with the district until 1939. She received her BS in Education from the University of Missouri in 1932 and her MA in 1935.² Letton next served as an instructor at the University of Missouri for a short time before leaving the state in 1939 to teach middle school at the University of Chicago Lab School. She taught there until her marriage to colleague Eugene Charles Wittick in 1945, returning in 1947 and remaining until 1954. She probably went back to graduate school full-time in 1954 or 1955, because she received her PhD from the University of Chicago in 1958. In 1959, she became an assistant professor of education there, but left later that year to teach English at Paterson State College in New Jersey, where she remained until her retirement.³ Wittick died on February 22nd, 2007.⁴

I feel that this bare bones recitation of facts doesn't do justice to Wittick's full and interesting life, of which I found hints in unexpected sources. For example, while I was reading articles that cited her dissertation, I serendipitously found an article *about* Letton, which listed her hobbies as "collecting antiques, photography, writing, and attending the ballet."⁵ Another interesting bit of information, provided by Wittick to the publisher of *Who's Who of American Women*, gave three addresses for her as of 1961: South Shore Drive in Chicago, Windy Hill Farm in Indiana, and Paterson College in New Jersey.⁶

The earliest printed evidence I found relating to Wittick was several mentions of her in the University of Missouri's *Missouri Alumnus* newsletter, most under her maiden name of Letton. Her name first appears in a list of MU students who participated in a month-long tour sponsored by the MU Geography Department—they visited twelve western states and Mexico during August 1930, traveling a total of 6,250 miles by "luxurious motor coach" and visiting four national parks and many cities along the way.⁷

From the extensive research I did in education journals, Wittick seems to have had a well-established and creditable career in that field. Her dissertation, titled *Individual Differences in Interpretive Responses in Reading Poetry at the Ninth-Grade Level*, was especially influential, having been cited in many journal articles during the 1960's and '70's.⁸ She was also an active book reviewer in her field, writing for the *Elementary School Journal* and other education journals in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Along with colleagues from the University of Chicago, she also compiled bibliographies on elementary, middle, and high school teaching for education journals over a period of many years.⁹

Dr. Wittick was also active in various professional education organizations during most of her long career. According to her listing in *Who's Who of American Women* (1961), she was a member of the New Jersey Education Association, the National Conference on Research in English, the National Society for the Study of Education, the American Education Research Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English. In

addition, she served as president of the Chicago section of the Association for Childhood Education from 1944 to 1946 and was a member of their advisory board from 1946 to 1956.¹⁰ She also served as an educational consultant to several organizations and companies during the 1940's and 50's, including the Kellogg Foundation; the National Dairy Council; textbook publisher Scott, Foresman & Co.; the Illinois Secondary School Curriculum Program; and *Food News* magazine.¹¹ She also dedicated herself to mentoring and training teachers, presenting at many University of Chicago annual education and reading conferences over the years, among many other continuing education events designed for teachers.

Wittick continued to express her dedication to education even in her retirement by contributing money to colleges offering excellent teacher education programs for qualified, but less affluent, students—among them Alice Lloyd College in Kentucky and the College of the Ozarks in Point Lookout, Missouri, where she established two teaching awards and a scholarship.¹³ Curious as to why she chose that particular college in Missouri, I called the Lyons Memorial Library at the College of the Ozarks to ask if they had any information about Dr. Wittick and the connection she had to their school. Librarian Linda Schmidt kindly looked into that question and within a couple of days had found some very useful materials, including the photo that appears at the beginning of this article. It turns out that Dr. Wittick had been involved with Alice Lloyd College in Kentucky when Dr. Jerry C. Davis was president there, though I was unable to find out what initiated the original contact. When Davis later became president of the College of the Ozarks, she “followed” him, so to speak. Evidently, she felt some kind of resonance between the philosophy underpinning those two colleges and the work of the Missouri Folklore Society, which led to her support of our organization’s mission through her financial gift. I hope someone will be inspired by this brief description of her long and distinguished academic career to do further research and write a more substantial biography of Dr. Wittick, a Missouri born and bred educator who generously and unexpectedly gave money to support the work of our Society.

Acknowledgements and a Request

The research I did for this biography began with the help of Gary Cox of the University of Missouri Archives, Columbia librarian/researcher Janice Dysart, and our own Dave Para. I discovered more about Wittick’s career through the University of Kansas Libraries’ online resources and through general Internet searches. If you have any further information about Dr. Wittick, especially her well-hidden birth date, please contact me at: lwolz@ku.edu.

Notes

- ¹ Most of the biographical information in this article comes from:
 “Wittick, Mildred Celia,” *Who’s Who of American Women, 1961-62* (Wilmette, IL: Marquis Who’s Who, 1961): 1075.
 Additional information: *World Who’s Who of Women* (4th ed. 1978): 1273.
 Since Wittick herself provided the information included in her entries in *Who’s Who* publications (as do all people included there), I did not try to independently corroborate the information those sources provided.
 Despite searching all the online resources I have access to through KU Libraries, as well as free online sources, I have so far been unable to find Wittick’s birth date. I calculated the approximate date given in this article by counting backwards from her enrollment in college in 1925 at what I assume to have been the age of 18, although I am aware that, especially in earlier times, college students sometimes started their studies at an earlier age than most students do now.
- ² I have assumed that Wittick must have attended university classes while she was working or during her summers off in order for her graduation dates and employment dates to mesh.
- ³ According to Wikipedia, the school was founded in Paterson, New Jersey in 1855. In 1950, it moved to its current location in Wayne, New Jersey and in 1997, it was renamed William Paterson University of New Jersey. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Paterson_University; acc. 6/6/15).
 Based on the fact that Dr. Wittick appears listed as “professor emerita” in the William Paterson University catalogs, I assume she must have taught there until her retirement, if that school follows the usual academic traditions.
 Paterson University. *Retired Faculty Association Bulletins and Meetings Archive* (http://www.wpunj.edu/faculty-and-staff/rfa/rfa_arch_bulletins_andmeetings.dot; acc. 6/6/15).
 Paterson University. *Undergraduate Catalog, 2003-2005*, page 356 (<http://cdm15701.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15701coll4/id/1107>; in right-hand box, scroll down and click on WPU_UGC_2003-05small 358; acc. 6/6/15).
- ⁴ “Mildred (Letton) Wittick” [“In Memoriam” column], *EdLife ’08*, College of Education, University of Missouri (http://education.missouri.edu/edlife/2008/people/alumni_updates.php; acc. 4/2/10; no longer avail. 6/6/15).

- ⁵ “Miss Letton Succeeds Mr. Mosier,” *The Propagandist* (University of Chicago Lab School), 1 #4 (1945): 3.

I found this article reproduced in an article by one of Dr. Letton’s fellow University of Chicago Lab School teachers:

Merrick, Nellie L. “The Class Newspaper as a Learning Experience,” *School Review*, 53 #4 (April 1945): 218-226 [found in *JSTOR*].

One of the other teachers mentioned in that issue of *The Propagandist*, the student newspaper of the University of Chicago Lab School, was one Mr. Wittick, the future husband of the then Miss Letton.

- ⁶ *Who’s Who of American Women*.

- ⁷ “Geography Department Inaugurates Annual Field Trip,” *Missouri Alumnus*, University of Missouri—Columbia, October 1930, p. 38 (<http://digital.library.umsystem.edu/cgi/t/text/textidx?page=home;c=alum;acc.6/6/15>).

- ⁸ Letton, Mildred Celia. *Individual Differences in Interpretive Responses in Reading Poetry at the Ninth-Grade Level* [PhD dissertation] (University of Chicago, 1958): 308 pages.

- ⁹ *Who’s Who of American Women*.

A selected list of Dr. Wittick’s writings appears at the end of this article.

- ¹⁰ *Who’s Who of American Women*.

- ¹¹ *Who’s Who of American Women*; WorldCat (OCLC).

- ¹² *Elementary School Journal*, “News and Comment,” [column] (May 1964): 416; *Reading Teacher* (April 1955): 248; (Feb. 1956): 182-183; (April 1958): 278.

- ¹³ Dr. Mildred Letton Wittick Professional Achievement Award, College of the Ozarks (www.cofo.edu/images/OzVisitor/sum04vis.pdf; acc. 4/26/10).

Dr. Mildred Letton Wittick Professional Teaching Award, College of the Ozarks (www.cofo.edu/images/OzVisitor/sum03vis.pdf; acc. 4/26/10).

Dr. Mildred Letton Wittick Book Scholarship, College of the Ozarks (www.cofo.edu/Catalog20052006/costfinaid.asp?page=2; acc. 4/26/10).

Geography Department Inaugurates Annual Field Trip



Mildred Letton's student trip was sponsored by the University of Missouri

(*Missouri Alumnus*, Oct. 1930, p. 38; courtesy of University of Missouri Archives; acc. 6/6/15; [http://digital.library.umsystem.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?page=home;c=alum;search "October 1930"](http://digital.library.umsystem.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?page=home;c=alum;search%20October%201930))

The University of Missouri Geography Department's first annual field trip through the West was held during the month of August, 1930. During the 30 days of the tour, the party traveled in a big, luxurious motor coach, visiting twelve Western states and Old Mexico in the course of a 6,250 mile journey. Although the primary purpose of the field trip was to better acquaint the students with geographic conditions in the United States through personal observation and lectures by the conductors, time was found for viewing many natural wonders and for visiting some of the principal towns of the West. Four national parks—Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon—were included in the itinerary. The month-long tour proved so attractive to the members of the party that many wanted to make a similar tour to some other part of North America the next summer.

Selected Publications by Mildred Letton Wittick

Here is a sample of the wide variety of materials Dr. Wittick produced during her long career. I have interfiled articles/books for which she was the sole author and those she co-wrote with others (alphabetical by title). Though she wrote under both her maiden name and her married name, I have interfiled all works regardless of which name she used for any particular item.

Civics for Youth, co-authored with James Edmonson and Arthur Dondineau (NY: Macmillan, 1946).

Clubs Are Fun, co-authored with Adele M. Ries (Chicago: SRA, 1952).

“Correctness and Freshness: Can Children’s Writing Have Both?”
Elementary School Journal (March 1960): 295-300.

Hello, U.S.A.! (Chicago: National Dairy Council, 1948).

It’s Always Breakfast Time Somewhere (Chicago: Nat’l. Dairy Council, 1947).

“Language Arts [column],” *Elementary School Journal*, (Nov. 1956-1964).

“Language Arts for the Disadvantaged” in *Teaching Culturally Disadvantaged Pupils* (Springfield: Thomas, 1969): 109-149.

“Language – Improving Thought Articulation,” *Instructor* (Dec. 1966): 106+.

“Let’s Teach Children to Proofread,” *Midway* (July 1960): 47-57.

The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren by the Opies [review],
Elementary School Journal (Oct. 1960): 46-47.

Man’s Ways and Times by Lewis Todd and Kenneth Cooper, teaching guides
by Helen Flynn and Mildred Letton (NY: Silver Burdett, 1954).

Pasture Trails, co-authored with Charles and Sara Whittier (National Dairy
Council; 1941).

“Progress Report on Johnny’s Reading,” *Elementary School Journal*
(Dec. 1955): 143-149.

“Status of the Teaching of Listening,” *Elementary School Journal* (Jan. 1957):
181-192.

Ways of Our Land by Clarence W. Sorensen, teaching aids and guides by
Mildred Letton (NY: Silver Burdett; 1954).

“White House Conference on Education,” *Elementary School Journal*
(Dec. 1954): 187-199.

Your Child’s Leisure Time (NY: Teachers College, Columbia Univ., 1949).

[*Note:* Please contact me at lwolz@ku.edu if you’d like me to send you a more
complete bibliography of Wittick’s work.]

Selected Publications by Lyn Wolz [Available at: kuscholarworks.ku.edu]

“Anglo-American Folk Music in Missouri: An Annotated Bibliography,” *Missouri Folklore Society Journal*, 4 (1982): 51-104.

“Annabel Morris Buchanan and Her Folk Song Collection” in *Folk Song: Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation*, ed. by Ian Russell and David Atkinson. Elphinstone Institute Occasional Publications 3 (Aberdeen: Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, 2004): 299-312.

“Annabel Morris Buchanan: Folk Song Collector,” *Ferrum Review* [Ferrum College, Ferrum, VA], (1982): 27-34.

“Ballads” in *Storytelling: An Encyclopedia of Mythology and Folklore, Vol. 1*, ed. by Josepha Sherman (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2008): 51-53.

“British Folklore and Superstitions: A Review of Two New Classics,” *Missouri Folklore Society Journal*, 26 (2004): 97-102.

“Buchanan, Annabel Morris” in *Dictionary of Virginia Biography, Vol. 2, Bland-Cannon*, ed. by Sara Bearss, John Kneebone, Jefferson Looney, Brent Tarter, Sandra Treadway (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2001): 363-365.

“*The Dictionary of Missouri Biography*” [review], *Arkansas Review*, 31 (Aug. 2000): 159-161.

“Folk Music in Missouri: An Annotated Bibliography,” *Missouri Folklore Society Journal*, 8-9 (1986-87): 193-213; [supplement to my earlier article].

[Index to] *Happy in the Service of the Lord* by Kip Lornell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 165-171; [first edition only].

“Index to the *Missouri Folklore Society Journal*, Vols. 1-10,” *Missouri Folklore Society Journal*, 11-12 (1989-90): 225-249.

“Index to the *Missouri Folklore Society Journal*, Vols. 11-16,” *Missouri Folklore Society Journal*, 17 (1995): 163-195; [Dr. Donald Lance > 15-16].

“Resources in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library: The Anne Geddes Gilchrist Manuscript Collection,” *Folk Music Journal*, 8 #5 (2005): 619-639.

“A Sampling of Folk Song Databases,” *Missouri Folklore Society Newsletter*, 29 (Mar. 2005): 5-8.

“Two Gardeners of Song: Exploiters or Preservers?” co-authored with Linda Plaut, *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association*, 7 (1995): 41-49.