

ALTA ELIZABETH PARDUE KEIRN
A PIONEER IN THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN

Educational and career opportunities for women were extremely limited in the early 1900's. Women were supposed to marry and become homemakers. In the meantime, they might teach, nurse, or possibly do secretarial work. With the movement for voting rights for women, horizons began to expand. In the Pardue home, where the first three children were female, the questions of: suppose they don't get married?, or suppose the husband dies?, or suppose the husband needs a helping hand with the family finances?, began to be asked. Education and preparation seemed to be the key to answering those questions. Education that included a college diploma for all the children was the goal for the Pardue family.

Alta was born June 22, 1892, in ~~Mad~~ Madisonville, Monroe County, Tennessee, to James M. and Rebecca Moser Pardue. She grew up in Sweetwater, Tennessee, and attended public schools there, including ^{the Sweetwater} ~~the Sweetwater~~ ^{primary for young} ~~primary for young~~ ¹⁻²⁻¹⁰³ During these years her father was a prominent attorney in the area and also served as a teacher, post master, newspaper editor, ^{and in} the state legislature, and the local school board. Rebecca cared for their five children and was an expert dressmaker.

It was during Senator Pardue's time in Nashville that he met and grew to admire Sidney Gilbreath and became very interested in ~~the~~ new school he was about to lead in upper East Tennessee. This seemed the ideal place for his bright and ambitious oldest daughter and plans were made for her to enroll in the first Freshman class.

Alta is believed to have ~~been~~ ^{out of town} the first student to arrive on the new campus. She came by train from Sweetwater, and since the dormitories were not yet open, spent a few days as guest of the Gilbreaths in their home. When registration day arrived and students lined up to register for classes there was discussion about who should be signed up as the first student in the new school. It was agreed that although Alta was first on campus, the distinction really should go to a male student, so she stepped aside in favor of a young man and became the second to enroll at East Tennessee Normal School.

Alta did well at E.T.N.S. and had three happy and productive years there. She enrolled in domestic science classes and took part in many campus activities including plays, basketball second team, and the YM(W?)CA program that included retreats to Black Mountain N.C. She graduated June 5, 1914, with a Special Certificate in

The second Pardue daughter, Lena, would join her on campus the following year & be known for her musical talents -

Domestic Science and Arts. State certification included such courses as:

After graduation she served as Home Demonstration Agent in Sullivan County. Her father insisted that she save her money from this job for a very special surprise. The surprise proved to be an extended trip West that included the 1915 San Francisco World's Fair as well as visits to relatives.

Alta's teaching career was extensive and varied. It included ~~and~~ one room school at Pond Springs in Monroe County to which she traveled by horse and buggy. At one time she returned to *the Seminary*, the school where she received her primary education. About 1916, she became Home Demonstration Agent in Monroe County. She taught "Domestic ^{Science} Classes" spending three months in each town of Tellico ~~Plains~~ Plains, Madisonville, and Sweetwater, Tennessee. In the summer months she traveled to Nashville with her father, who was serving in the State Legislature, to attend classes at George Peabody College.

In 1917-18, Alta became a student at the University of Tennessee to continue work on a Bachelor's Degree in Home Economics. Here she pioneered another "first", becoming one of the first young women to be assigned to a "Practice House".

While teaching in Tellico Plains Alta met and fell in love with a young man in the lumber business. But World War I was coming, he volunteered, and was shipped to France. When C. E. Keirn returned in 1919, the couple became engaged, but agreed to work for a year and save money to finance a future home. Alta taught that year in Millington in West Tennessee. She became Mrs. C. E. Keirn on June 4, 1920. Future years brought two daughters, Mary Frances in 1920 and Elizabeth Ann in 1929.

In 1922, the young family moved to the coal mining region of Pennsylvania for a period of seven years. During this time Alta taught in the elementary school with students from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. In the fall of 1929, the family moved back to Tennessee. The depression years returned Alta once more to a fifth grade class of under-achievers. She proved to be very successful with this group until about 1938 when poor health dictated the end of that stage of her teaching career.

After her two daughters had left home for families and careers of their own, Alta returned to teaching for a short time. She became a member of the faculty at

Sweetwater High School teaching Freshman English and supervising study halls.

In 1966, Alta moved to Athens, Tennessee where she lived a number of years with her daughter. She died Jan. 4, 1983, and is buried in West View Cemetery, Sweetwater, Tennessee.

The tradition of college education and teaching continued with Alta's daughters and grand daughters. Although each chose a different field, English and French, Health and Physical Education, Child Development, Biology and Physics, each has found satisfaction in the field of education---following in the foot-steps of the pioneer.