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## She Cared

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*Miss Elsie Shoemaker*

# She Cared

*by Margie Cooke Porteus*

**W**hat did my parents, my siblings, my high-school home economics teacher Lela O'Toole, and Southwestern instructor Elsie Shoemaker have in common? They all cared enough about my education not only to encourage me morally, but in varying degrees to help me materially to get four years of college.

Although the depression was about over in 1939 when I graduated from Thomas High School, it wasn't over for my family because Dad had had a bad heart attack which kept him from working. I was too naive to realize that it was impossible for me to attend college, so off I went to school.

I don't remember much about that first year, but among some memories is the disappointment I felt because Elsie Shoemaker was on leave. An older brother had worked under her supervision as a drama major and thought her wonderful, so I thought I would have it made as far as she was concerned. Later I was to discover students had to make their own way with her.

Many Southwestern alumni may remember Elsie Irene which we called her behind her back--as a journalism teacher, but many of us also knew her as a speech-drama instructor and a director. Since my major was in the latter, I was enrolled in many of her classes and worked under her direction in several plays. As a teacher and a director, she influenced my teaching and directing more than any other person.

In my mind I see snapshot-like glimpses of Elsie Irene: in a dark box-pleated skirt with feet firmly planted, lecturing; in the auditorium a shadowy figure commanding, "Do that scene again!"; with a sarcastic voice "You're not getting into character enough. Be feminine," while I was attempting to be a Merry Wife; after casting me in several important roles, bringing me down to earth with, "You might make a director, but you'll never go far as an actress"; in an Oklahoma City theater, sitting next to her and watching Ethel Barrymore in *THE CORN IS GREEN*, a feat which she had made

possible; after I had ironed her huge stack of ironing, seeing her gratitude and surprise. The latter needs some clarification because it shows how concerned she was.

One summer to save money I commuted to school with a neighbor. The Advanced Drama class I was taking was to present a Shakespearean play, and since my parents had no car I would have had to stay in town some nights, which I couldn't afford. I guess she knew how I was trying to stretch my pennies because Shoemaker invited me to stay with her. As a thank-you I decided to do her huge stack of ironing, which included at least a hundred pretty handkerchiefs, several which had been made by Verle Jones (an English instructor at Southwestern who made and sold beautiful handkerchiefs before the time of paper throwaways). Those hours of ironing are what caused the gratitude.

Another time she paid me to do some typing. Since my typing wasn't the greatest, I later decided she had made some work for me to do so that I could by my Alpha Psi Omega pin.

I stayed in her home, worked in her office, was in many of her productions, but I remember seeing her upset only twice. Once was when the president of QP, our drama club, resigned. He was active in sports as well as in dramatics, and it seems that a coach was giving him a bad time because of his interest in acting, so he resigned as our president. Shoemaker was incensed that a coach would put this kind of pressure on a person. Another time she was hurt and angry when an instructor who shared her tiny office made some snide remarks comparing their

respective private lives.

Those who worked under her guidance soon learned that she seldom gave oral compliments. There was never a "good job" or "you're improving." If she said nothing, people knew they were doing OK. She could be biting in her criticism as the time she told me to stop being the shrew that I had worked so hard on developing for a previous play and to start being a feminine flirt for the current one.

Although oral compliments were few, she gave written ones. I remember after I had done a detailed prop book for a class assignment she put me on cloud nine when she wrote, "Your plans are so interesting you make me want to produce this." She seldom gave an "A" in her classes because "No one is perfect."

She didn't always cast drama majors in plays; she sometimes made them do the dirty backstage work like rebuilding or sizing flats. She knew they probably wouldn't end up on Broadway, but would be attempting to instill a love of theater to Western Oklahoma high-school students while directing plays in combination auditorium-gyms.

It would be difficult to say Elsie Shoemaker was my favorite Southwestern instructor--after all there were Edna Muldrow and Walter Crouch--but she certainly was at the top and certainly influenced me more than any other, and I adored her.

I wonder how many more persons she helped along the way, helped to get them through school and helped them to gain a bit of pride and confidence.

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