



3-15-1984

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Recommended Citation

Whisenhunt, Della Barnwell (1984) "A Lady & A Scholar," *Westview*: Vol. 3: Iss. 3, Article 12.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol3/iss3/12>

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A Lady & A Scholar

by Della Barnwell Whisenhunt

It was my privilege and my pleasure to be closely associated with Grace Elizabeth Jencke both in a professional way and as a good friend. I admired her for many qualities, especially her intellectualism, sincerity, generosity, and taste.

She was an 89er, not, however, as most Oklahomans construe the term; the fact is that 1889 was the year of her birth.

Dr. Jencke was head of the English Department at Southwestern for thirty-six years.

She had been educated in Randolph-Macon Women's College in Lynchburg, Virginia, Sedalia College in Sedalia, Missouri, Washington University in St. Louis, and Columbia University in New York City.

She spoke and wrote perfect English; she was an excellent professor; she was a lady. Everyone who knew her appreciated her fastidiousness, her ability at playing bridge and canasta—and her hats. These chapeaus she loved; it was my pleasure on many occasions to go with her to shop for them at which times she would try on many in different styles and ask me how I liked them. On a few occasions I noted that the back treatments were extremely chic and unusual; she then informed me she was not at all interested in the way the hats looked in the back; thus, I ceased calling attention to back interests. On many shopping sprees she would buy as many as four hats from one shop with perhaps one or two from another one.

She enjoyed the compliments people paid her hats. She especially liked what the minister of the Federated Church said to her on one occasion. The Reverend W. D. Welburn told her he could hardly keep his mind on his sermon because of looking at and thinking about the particular chapeau she was wearing on that Sunday morning.

Being prim and proper was perhaps the characteristic for which Grace Jencke was best known—so much that a story which was brought to Weatherford from Lubbock, Texas, in the fifties, soon became associated with her; and to this day many persons believe the story was true.

The story is about a fastidious lady who went to Neiman-Marcus in Dallas, Texas, to shop for some gifts. At the handkerchief bar the Neiman-Marcus saleslady, who was as neatly and stylishly dressed and well groomed as her customer, was showing various dainty and exquisite ladies' handkerchiefs to her customer who said, "I like these very much, but I prefer not to pay as much as five dollars each; I think the price is too high." Responding to her prospective buyer's remark, the well-groomed, well-manicured, well-coiffed saleslady said, "Hell, Kid, they're hand did." When Grace Jencke heard that the story was being told using her as the customer, she was pleased, and to this day the expression, "Hell, Kid, they're hand did" is still heard in this area and associated with her shopping in Neiman-Marcus.

Many other stories are associated with Grace Jencke, who was proud of her German heritage. Her conversation was spiced with a variety of German words. Once on a trip by car which she and I took to California, we stopped to look around in a gift shop which turned out to be a junk shop somewhere in Arizona; she glanced around and came to a sudden conclusion by saying, "I have never seen so many things I do not want." For the word "things" she used a German word.

Her fastidiousness showed when at one time at her house she asked me if I would please handwash her lingerie for her as her "helper" had such large and rough hands.

On another occasion she did not want to go to a book review because she did not like the reviewer's voice.

She enjoyed using the word "precarious," as in playing bridge and canasta she frequently found herself in "precarious" situations.

She disliked show-offs and on a few occasions commented on someone given to pretentious display, exhibitionism, or ostentation.

She spent hours each day with her daily newspaper. Besides reading both a morning and an evening paper from the front page to the last,

she made the working of the crossword puzzles and the cryptoquotes part of her daily ritual.

She could pull out of the hat, as it were, appropriate poetry to quote on any occasion. She quoted mostly from her favorite author Robert Browning, the most recited being "Rabbi Ben Ezra." A. E. Robinson's "Richard Cory" was another oft-quoted poem; she usually said this poem in its entirety.

As to hymns she preferred to stay with well-known authors. She chose as her favorite hymn "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind," the words of which were written by John Greenleaf Whittier.

Before she started driving Cadillacs, she drove Oldsmobiles. One of her favorite stories was about the little McReynolds boy's prayer in which he thanked God for the "automobiles and the Oldsmobiles"; so far as the child's parents knew, her Olds was the only one their child had ever seen.

In my own teaching which continued a few years after Dr. Jencke's retirement in 1957, I tried to instill in my students, as she did, the power of the English sentence.

In addition to her perfect prose, she wrote doggerel verse for special occasions. I imitate her style to an extent when I write my own "Paul Revere" rhythms, also for special occasions.

She herself said that most of her students turned out well; some became outstanding in the business-and-professional world. In the field of education, Dr. Donald Hamm, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southwestern State University, is one such former student. Needless to say, there are many others — including SOSU professors Dr. Eugene Hughes, Dr. Don Prock, and Dr. Leroy Thomas.

At age eighty-two she died in 1971. I continue to miss her and realize more and more that the world is a better and a more interesting place because of her.

When I think of a truly great lady, I think of Grace Jencke.