

Elizabeth Scott: Scholar, Teacher, Administrator

L. Billard and Marianne A. Ferber

Elizabeth Scott was born on November 23, 1917 in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, while her father was stationed there during World War I. This was an unlikely start for a girl who was to become an eminent scholar and researcher, a valued teacher and mentor to generations of students, a good friend to many colleagues throughout the country and a pioneer in the struggles for equality for women in academia. When she was only four years old, her father retired to study law, and the family moved to Berkeley to be close to the university. From that time on, her life centered around the University of California, Berkeley. In due course, Scott entered University High School. Henceforth, she was on the path to a career that encompassed a wide variety of interests, contributed much to knowledge and involved work with a large array of collaborators over a span of five decades, until her death on December 20, 1988.

THE EARLY YEARS

University High School in the 1930s was clearly an unusual place, which probably played a significant part in shaping Scott both personally and professionally. It was located in Oakland, and because of a policy of admitting children from the immediate area automatically, and those from other districts only selectively, it had a racially balanced population. The school was well financed, with foundation support for experimental programs and courses and considerable emphasis on training student teachers. There was substantial emphasis on an academic curriculum, preparing students to go on to college. This was clearly an environment conducive to the development of a youngster with a keen mind and sensitivity to social issues.

It is also clear, however, that Scott herself was exceptional even in that environment. Among these

college-bound students, she was the only girl in the advanced mathematics courses that were offered. She was already thinking of becoming an astronomer. Although she also was considering a career as an artist, she was obviously willing to do what was necessary to prepare herself for a challenging, demanding profession that few women considered entering in those days. She found out that it was a profession not quite ready to welcome women.

Upon finishing high school, at a time when the big depression was not yet over, her family may have had more than their share of financial problems (her father had lost much of his eyesight in a serious automobile accident), so the University of California at Berkeley was certainly the most logical choice for Scott. Not only was the tuition extremely low, but also she was able to live at home and walk to campus.

Like many college students do, Scott joined a sorority. Unlike many others, however, her priorities were such that when the mandatory meetings of the organization coincided with an astronomy course she had signed up for, she stopped being an active member, never to return. But she continued to take astronomy courses and, upon receiving her bachelor's degree, went on to graduate work.

Through her years as an undergraduate, she had no women professors, except in physical education. At times, however, there were women substitutes when regular faculty were temporarily absent. It was on such an occasion that she met Pauline Sperry, one of the two women in the Mathematics Department at that time, who later gathered together several women graduate students and took them to lunch in the Women's Faculty Club. Scott was to have a long and active association with this group after she joined the faculty.

Just as there were few women mathematicians, so there were few women graduate students in mathematics, even during World War II. Their representation was somewhat greater in astronomy, yet they faced discrimination of a sort that was unusually harsh even for those early days. Women were explicitly forbidden to use the telescopes at Mount Wilson, which housed all the large instru-

L. Billard is Professor of Statistics and Associate to the Dean, Franklin College of Arts and Sciences, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602. Marianne A. Ferber is Professor of Economics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois 61820.