

## **Alumna of the Year Mel Anderson's Roberts Association Started at Birth**

### **By Jack Oliphant NES 1**

It would be hard to imagine a Roberts Wesleyan College graduate who has had a closer lifetime association with the Roberts campus than Alumna of the Year Mary Eleanor "Mel" Staines Anderson '51.

Mel was born at 65 Orchard Street, in the building that now houses the Religion and Humanities Division. Shortly thereafter her family moved to the former tavern building in which Chili Seminary started and then into a house across from the campus on property formerly owned by founder B.T. Roberts.

She came to personal faith in Christ at the age of 5 during a camp meeting in the grove that used to be next to Roberts Hall. She also took piano lessons from Marie Snyder in the 65 Orchard Street house of her birth, which had become the College's Music Hall.

Her whole childhood was spent in association with Roberts students who roomed and/or boarded at her parents' home, in exchange, in some cases, for caring for her and her two older sisters, Edith and Frances.

In her home she also became acquainted with many of the leaders of the Free Methodist Church whom her parents, Elizabeth and George Staines – also alumni – often entertained when they were in town for conferences at Pearce Memorial Church. Her Free Methodist roots are deep, tracing back to her great, great grandfather who was part of the first Free Methodist Church in Albion, pastored by denominational founder B.T. Roberts.

After graduating from the Churchville-Chili High School, Mel enrolled in Roberts Junior College. Mel's parents were very determined their daughters would go to college, largely because of the difficulties they had encountered in obtaining their own education.

"It was just automatic as far as they were concerned," Mel reflected. "Their daughters were going to college and Roberts was the place. They didn't have a lot of money and we girls could live at home while attending Roberts."

That fact constitutes one of few regrets Mel has about her college experience.

"I feel badly that I never got to live in a dormitory," she said.

Because Roberts Junior College only offered two-year degrees, Mel anticipated transferring to either Greenville College, as her sisters had, or to Asbury College. But circumstances changed dramatically by the time of her 1949 graduation.

In the winter of her sophomore year, Mel was among a large group of students, along with faculty and trustees, who gathered one morning at the Rochester train terminal. They were there to greet President Merlin Smith as he returned from Albany with the charter for the new four-year Roberts Wesleyan College.

Mel's father had died at Christmastime and, with her mother's limited income and her sister, Frances, already attending Greenville, the continuation of Mel's education might have been in jeopardy had she not been able to continue on at Roberts.

"My mother needed my help at home and there was really no money for me to go away to school. When the four-year program opened up at Roberts I recognized this was the only way I was going to get an education. I became content," she reflected.

Thus she became a member of the last graduating class from Roberts Junior College (1949) and the first graduating class of Roberts Wesleyan College (1951).

Tuition at Roberts at that time was between \$200 and \$300 per year and Mel managed to earn a sizable portion of that by working in the College library with Ora Sprague and Martha Humelsine, whom she recalls as "just wonderful people."

A variety of factors contributed to Mel's having been what she calls an "only average student." One of those factors was a case of questionable academic advisement. From her youth, Mel had envisioned herself as a social worker, but Roberts didn't offer a social work major at the time. Her advisor guided her into social studies, suggesting it would lead in a similar direction.

"But social studies was mostly history and I didn't really care for history," she said.

Another factor was Mel's involvement in extra-curricular activities, including the traveling A Cappella Choir, directed by Marian O'Brien, about whom Mel said, "I just loved her." The choir performed as many as 90 concerts in a single year.

Mel was also editor of the college yearbook during both her sophomore and junior years, a job to which she came somewhat involuntarily, but which helped set the course for her professional life.

"Yearbook editor was an elected position and I didn't run for it. However, classmates Art Horwood and Jim Alley submitted my name as a 'write-in candidate' and I was elected," Mel said. "That job probably did more to change my personality than any other single thing," she added.

Always painfully shy, Mel was forced to become "a little more extroverted" as she worked diligently to do an excellent job.

"It used to petrify me to have to get up in chapel and make announcements about picture schedules and such. We didn't have a weekly publication for sharing information, so all announcements had to be made at chapel."

Concerning her academic grades, Mel recalled going to the academic dean's office to check on her transcript and being very disappointed in it.

"But Dean Updyke told me, 'You know something? Your extra-curricular activities are going to mean more for you in your life and toward your work than some of these grades.'"

The words have a prophetic ring to them today.

As Mel neared graduation, with her major in social studies and a minor in business, she was approached by Ernest Keasling, who wanted her to come and work with him in the youth department at Free Methodist Church headquarters in Winona Lake, Indiana. Keasling had seen her in action at a Youth In Action Conference at Pearce Church, had been a guest in her mother's home during the conference, and was aware of her excellent work as yearbook editor.

To enhance her preparation for the job he had in mind for her, Keasling paid the tuition (\$15) for her to take a journalism course at Rochester Institute of Technology, where her instructor was the city editor of the Gannett Rochester newspapers (who subsequently hired her to be a campus "stringer" for the newspapers during her last semester at Roberts).

"I graduated on a Monday morning and Monday evening I got on the train and headed to Winona Lake. I arrived at five o'clock in the morning and Dr. Keasling met me and took me to the apartment they had found for me. They gave me a couple of hours to sleep and I was in the office in the afternoon. The next morning we left for Hillsdale, Michigan, for General Conference."

As she worked 12-hour days to handle all of the daily publication responsibilities – news releases on every delegate, a daily conference newssheet, and more – Mel entered into an intense work pace that was to become her trademark over the next 50 years. She worked at Free Methodist headquarters for 3½ years before being drawn back to North Chili.

"Gordon Markey (then Director of Development at Roberts) kept telling me he had a job for me at Roberts and it was obvious that my mother needed my help. She had apparently been more sheltered by my father than we had realized. She had never even written a check as long as he was alive and I was the one who had to pick up and do these things. So, I came back to live with her."

In November of 1954, Mel began working in Roberts' combined Development-Admissions office. At Christmastime two years later, Mel made a fateful journey to Florida to visit her sister, Edith, whose husband Riker Simcoe was pastor of the Miami Free Methodist Church. While there she was introduced to a professional fireman named Alvin Anderson.

"We just seemed to click. We just enjoyed being with each other."

Ten months later they were married and Mel moved to Miami, where they lived and raised a family (a son, Alvin, and a daughter, Sondra) over the course of the next 20 years. While there, Mel served as a substitute teacher (everything from kindergarten through adult education, even music and industrial arts). In 1972, she was recruited by the pastor of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church they were attending to direct the church's kindergarten and day care program, which she did until 1977 when the family began transitioning toward relocating to North Chili.

“We came up here to take care of Mother who had spent every winter with us, but just wasn’t able to make the trip anymore. Al retired from the fire department after 20 years and went into the contracting business, which he had done on the side while with the fire department.”

They moved to North Chili permanently in 1979. That November Mel began working for the Development Office, then housed at 65 Orchard Street, and her assigned office turned out to be the very room in which she had been born!

She was hired to be Development Director Wes Willmer’s secretary (“a wonderful boss!”) and to do typesetting.

“I had never done typesetting before. So, they gave me a book and a tape and said, ‘Here is the machine.’ So, I listened to the tape and looked at the book and that’s how I learned. Then I discovered I was expected to do layout, too. I had done simple paste-ups, but never mechanicals. I was as green as they come. I began asking questions of printers and they gave me advice and suggestions and little by little we got better equipment for the job.

“Then they started working me into doing special events. I did homecoming and then George Ford came (1981) and he put me in charge of publications and special events. Then he made me director of the Conference Center as well.

“That fall we had three special events in the month of October: President Crothers’ inauguration, Homecoming, and Parents’ Weekend. It about killed me off, trying to do all that and the typesetting on *Roberts Today* in between!”

Gradually, Mel expanded her publications staff and purchased a computerized typesetter in 1986. To stay on top of all of her assignments and responsibilities, Mel worked very long hours many weeks throughout the 1980s. In 1990 she was able to relinquish responsibility for Special Events and the Conference Center.

Mel’s exceptional work ethic and devotion to the College through the decade of the 1980s did not go unrecognized. In 1991 she was named the first recipient of a “Staff Member of the Year” award and was considered such an exceptional model of what such an award represents that the annual award was named in her honor: “The Mel Anderson Staff Member of the Year Award.”

In 1996 Mel turned over the job of Publications Director to current Director Diane Jennings, who had worked for her as a graphic artist since 1987, and she reduced her workweek to three days.

Two years ago, she reduced it to two days per week and now, as Special Assistant to the Vice President for College Development, continues to coordinate all of the College’s print advertising, photography, and ordering of a variety of award plaques for the College each year, and serves as yearbook advisor and liaison between the College and the Roberts Wesleyan College-Community Orchestra, plus “other duties as assigned.”

Meanwhile, Mel has also been very involved in the life of Pearce Memorial Church, where she is in charge of wedding coordinators and is part of the committee in charge of a major missions conference this fall.

As far as future plans are concerned, Mel says she “will take it one year at a time,” noting that she is committed to continue working through June 2002, but her future primary commitments are to her family, to whom she says she owes a “major debt of gratitude.”

“I never could have worked the way I did for Roberts in the ’80s without the husband and the kind of kids I have,” she said. “When I was working such long hours and trying to manage a family and keep our house up, they had to be very understanding. And Al got very involved as a helper in my work. He knew I loved the work I was doing. In fact, I don’t know if I would ever be happy not working. Al says I wouldn’t.”

Finally, Mel says, “I am so thankful to the Lord for the blessings of His grace toward me, without which I could have done none of the things that I have done.”