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NATIONAL PARK SEMINARY

by

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In 1890, a real estate syndicate began the development of Forest Glen, Maryland, then mostly farm land. The developers planned a community where Government workers could build homes and commute back and forth to work in Washington. One attraction of the new development was a large rambling hotel with the name Ye Forest Inn in large letters across the front. The hotel was for summer use and hoped to attract guests from Washington who wished to escape the city heat. This project, which started out with such a promising future failed and the hotel building was left a white elephant on its owners' hands.

About this time Mr. and Mrs. John Irving Cassedy, then principals of a Norfolk, Virginia, Junior College, decided they wanted to open a school of their own. They were first attracted to Rockville where they tried to buy Woodlawn. The deal did not go through so the Cassedys looked elsewhere. Their search soon led them to Forest Glen. Realizing the potentialities the area contained for the kind of educational institution they envisioned, the couple called on the owners of Forest Inn, who were as eager to sell their failing hotel as the Cassedys were to buy it. In a short space of time the transaction was completed and thus National Park Seminary came into being.

It was named "National Park" because it was near the capital of the United States. The school opened its doors on the last Thursday in September, 1894, with fifty pupils. At first, in addition to the boarding school, there was a kindergarten combined with the primary grades, where the children of the neighborhood could

be taught. This small group was presided over by a Miss Watkins. There were also a few young ladies who came as day students. The primary department didn't prosper, and neither did the day school. Soon National Park Seminary became almost entirely a boarding school for wealthy girls. Its corporate charter was issued by the State of Maryland in the year 1903.

National Park Seminary was in reality a finishing school. At that time girls weren't going to college in large numbers. National Park took care of the education of young women whose parents wanted them to have more education than was offered in a high school. The parents also wanted their daughters to be taught the social graces which would benefit them in their station in life. The school offered the girls high school courses as well as two years of college work. Upon graduation, any who wished could take the examination to enter the sophomore year at Smith.

Mr. and Mrs. Cassedy had not only the rare quality of envisioning the kind of educational institution they wanted but also the business ability to make it come true. They were both dedicated to the project, and were extremely successful in creating a school beloved by the majority of the students, a school which fulfilled its purpose of giving a splendid classical education, and of teaching all the refinements needed to go with the highest society. It lived up to its name as a "finishing school" in every respect.

In the early days, especially before Mrs. Cassedy's death in 1910, the rules of etiquette were very strict. All clothing had to be inspected to see if the dresses were the proper style. No dress could be too low in the neck, a square Dutch neck being preferred. No dress could be too tight. If it didn't suit, it had to be remodeled. Girls had to be properly clad for classes, and evening gowns were worn for dinner. Mrs. Cassedy wore an evening gown every night, generally one with a train, when she came into the dining room. When a student went into Washington on a shopping trip or for sight-seeing, she was looked over to see if her attire were correct, to see if her gloves were suitable and to make sure they were being worn. Sometimes the girls were allowed to go to the neighboring churches on Sunday - of course chaperoned and of course checked to see that the proper dress was being worn. At receptions, teas or dinners the girls were inspected to see if the dress were the right one, the neckline suitable, the hair neatly dressed. If a girl were caught smoking a cigarette she was expelled. Beginning with 1912 the young women were required to have uniforms for day-time wear. These were blue serge "middie blouses" and skirts. The length of the skirt was decided by the style of the day.

The Cassedys chose teachers of ability, sterling character, and dignity. Those teaching foreign languages were natives of the country whose language they taught. The school advertised there would be no nerve-wracking examinations between semesters, but tests were given by the teachers, and those girls who didn't measure up had to spend Monday (Monday was the day off instead of Saturday) in study hall to make up the work. Those who missed time from classes because of illness were also required to make up the work on Mondays.

There was an adequate infirmary presided over by a nurse, Miss Stone. There a girl would remain until her illness was pronounced cured by the doctor, who was generally Dr. George H. Wright, who had a large sanitarium nearby.

The girls wore gym suits of green serge bloomers with white cotton "middie blouses" with green ties. The school's colors were green and white. Before taking a trip to play another school in basketball, going on a shopping trip, or sight-seeing, the young ladies were often given a talk in chapel the day before, reminding

them of the proper mode of conduct. One of Miss Munford's favorite admonitions was, "Remember who you are and who you represent."

One of the reasons for the school's great success was its system of sororities. The first one, Chi Omicron Pi, always called Chiopi, was organized in 1894 by Miss Charlotte Priest, an English teacher who came to the school with the Cassedys. She and a group of girls interested in literature formed a secret society which held its meetings in a small alcove off the main building called "The Mouse Hole." This proved so successful a second sorority was formed, Alpha Epsilon Pi, always called Alpha. Not all the students of the school were invited to join the first two sororities. This caused many tears, and much unhappiness, so Mrs. Cassedy moved to rectify it. She then divided the girls into four groups and in 1899 Kappa Delta Phi and Zeta Eta Theta were started. (Kappa and Zeta). This took care of all the young women. In 1903 Theta Sigma Rho was founded, also Phi Delta Psi (Theta and Delta). In 1904 Pi Beta Nu (Beta) came into being, as did also Chi Psi Upsilon (Chi Psi U).

Each sorority had a mother, a teacher who guided the activities, but the girls took the responsibility for directing the club. There were a president, secretary, and treasurer. The officers conducted meetings according to parliamentary procedure, and these meetings were always secret from the rest of the school. Regular yearly fees were paid by the members to take care of expenses. Each sorority was given a club house, which accounts for the variety of architecture on the campus. Chiopi was built to represent an American bungalow, as was also Alpha. Kappa was erected in the form of a Dutch windmill. Zeta was a Swiss chalet. Theta's home represented an Indian mission, and Delta, at the end of a bridge, was to depict a gate house. Beta was the English castle and Chi Psi U, the Japanese pagoda.

All of the sorority houses were furnished appropriately and were used merely as meeting places. They were not dormitories. Each group would entertain at various times with receptions, open houses, teas, etc., the young ladies planning and taking charge of the arrangements. In this way a girl learned how to greet guests correctly, the correct clothing to wear, how to indulge in polite conversation, to officiate at a tea table, etc. All the refreshments were sent down from the school kitchen. As no girl was excluded from club life, there were no more tears, and no more unhappiness.

When the new students arrived the last of September, or the first week in October, the rushing period began as soon as class schedules had been worked out. Each sorority gave a reception or tea to show off its club and to become acquainted with the newcomers. When the rushing season was over the new prospect had a choice of which sorority she wanted to join. The sorority also made a list of the girls they picked and wanted. For the most part, when the final choice was made, all were satisfied. If not, the dissatisfaction didn't last long for the atmosphere was one of friendly fraternity, and also some secrecy. The inner doings of the sorority were never divulged.

One of the musts of the school was sight-seeing. Every student was required to see a prescribed number of public buildings in Washington before she graduated. Parties of girls were listed for the Mondays in the fall, and a suitable teacher was given to each party to act as guide. Whenever the young ladies went into Washington they used the B and O train. Though the trolley came to Forest Glen, the girls weren't allowed to take it. Upon arriving at the Union Station they could then board a street car, but only if a chaperone were with them. No girl could go into Washington without a chaperone. Even if a young man wanted to take a girl to dinner or to the theater, a teacher must accompany them.

There were shopping parties, also chaperoned, but in the stores the parties could split up. To go to Martha Washington Candy Shop alone was out of bounds. Sometimes a daring twosome would wander that far alone. The clerks in the store would watch out for N.P.S. teachers. If they saw one approaching, they quickly hid the recalcitrant students under the counter.

In the early days, the girls on shopping trips or sight-seeing tours would be allowed to go to the Raleigh Hotel for lunch. It cost fifty cents. For that they would get chicken salad, hot rolls, a beverage, and chocolate ice cream.

While the young women were in school, every minute of their day was accounted for. A girl was required to post on her door her daily schedule as to where she would be at a given time. No food was allowed to be sent from home such as cookies, cakes or candy. The meals served at National Park were excellent. The dining room was large and beautifully furnished, with round tables each seating eight students and a teacher. The chairs used for the tables were of the Chippendale pattern. It was said that National Park Seminary contained the largest collection of Chippendale pattern chairs in the world. The tables were served by uniformed maids and, before eating, a bell would ring which signaled silence. The head teacher, usually Miss Munford, seated on the teacher's platform, would say grace. When the meal was over, the girls at each table would line up at the door, four on each side, to let the teacher in charge of her group walk through first.

In the field of education the school was also successful. A great variety of courses were offered. The traditional English, languages, history, science, mathematics, and sociology had many different branches. In addition, much stress was put upon art, music, dramatics, home economics, gardening, athletics, and library science.

For the regular academic courses, classes were held in a separate building known as Recitation House. The music department had a regular building where much piano practice was always going on. It was known as Practice House. For the dramatics, Mr. Cassidy built a regular little theater which he named the Odeon. It had a large stage with much available scenery, orchestra seats, boxes, and a gallery. For the art department there was a large, light studio. Home economics had a real house where the "home ec." girls lived at certain times of the year, doing the housework and the cooking. There was a large school library, and also a building named the Miller Library which housed a fine collection of books which had been owned by Mr. John DeWitt Miller, a former friend of Mr. Cassidy. These facilities could be used by the library science classes.

A large gymnasium was built near Recitation House, with an athletic field near by. Near the gym was a hot house where the girls interested in gardening could learn about the care of plants, planting, etc. The stable was near the greenhouse. Saddle horses were kept for those students who wanted to ride. Groups of the girls would ride down through Rock Creek Park bridle paths several times a week always accompanied by an instructor or an attendant.

The dormitories were Main Building, Villa, Aloha, and Senior House. They were all connected by covered walks to Main Building so that the girls weren't exposed to the weather when going from building to building.

The school advertised that it was Christian in tone, but not sectarian. It said, "The religious spirit is inculcated by its teachers, who are chosen for their sterling characters and Christian virtues as well as for their academic attainments."

A chapel service was held every school day, and two services were held on Sunday. The Sunday morning service was conducted wholly by students, while the afternoon service was led by some well-known minister from the city of Washington, or by some clergyman representing church interests of alumnae from various parts of the country. Some ministers from the community were also invited to hold Sunday afternoon service. Dr. George H. McGrew, from Grace Episcopal Church of Silver Spring, often officiated, or the Rev. Alfred O. Armstrong, a Methodist minister from Rockville, would come down for a service. The chaplain from the House of Representatives sometimes preached.

Besides the excellent educational courses the school had to offer, and the popular system of sororities, much entertainment was planned during the year. There was one social gathering on hand for every week, and sometimes there were several. All holidays and patriotic days were observed with fitting celebrations. In October the entertainments listed were: Reception of New Girls, Reception of Old Girls, Floriculture Exhibition, Concert by Members of the Music Faculty, The Old Girls Reception to the New, At-Homes: Bungalow, Castle, Colonial and Windmill Clubs, other At-Homes: Chiopi, Mission, Japanese, and Swiss clubs, also a Hallowe'en Party.

The Hallowe'en Party was one of extreme fun. It was scheduled for after dark. All the girls gathered in front of Main Building, then walked down the paths, through the wooded area to the glen. Along the way were sights to send excited chills through young breasts: skeletons in grottoes, bodies hanging from trees, and lighted jack-o-lanterns sitting on rocks or tree stumps. There were witches stirring evil potions under tall trees bathed in weird lights, and masked highwaymen who sprang out unexpectedly from dark corners. With many shrieks and much laughter the party ended with refreshments being served to all who survived the terrors of the trail.

In November there would be: Informal Musical in Ballroom, First Villa Recital, Odeon Recital by Students in Elocution, Senior Banquet, First Chapel Recital, First Recital by Students of Expression, Seniors "At Home" to Faculty and Students, Informal Musical in Ballroom, Junior Dinner, Second Villa Recital, First Braemar Tea to Faculty and Juniors, First Recital by Students of Dance, Workshop Plays, Thanksgiving Service, Thanksgiving Dinner.

The Thanksgiving Dinner, a meal of many courses, lasted from one o'clock well into the afternoon. Here the young ladies were seated by sororities. Between each course the sororities took turns in giving their call and singing their songs. Music was played throughout the meal. In the evening there would be a theater party. A special car would be ordered on the B and O to take the girls into Washington.

In December the entertainments were: Informal Musical in Ballroom, Sub-Junior Dinner, First Recital by Students of Music in Odeon, First Play in Odeon by Dramatic Club, Second Chapel Recital, Arts and Crafts Studio Exhibition, Art Studio Exhibition, Home Economics Exhibition, Children's Party (the children of the neighborhood were invited). This was a Christmas tree party given by Chiopi.

Some of the girls at Christmas, for various reasons, had to stay at the school during the holidays. For the Christmas feast, a roast suckling pig with a red apple in its mouth would be brought on the table in addition to the other Christmas dinner food.

One of the more colorful entertainments was a spectacular pageant given at Twelfth Night, after the girls returned from the Christmas holidays. Every student

in the school was dressed in costume. It concerned the Three Kings who brought gifts to the Christ Child. The song, "We Three Kings of Orient Are," was sung as the long procession following the Three Kings came into the gym. Each sorority had a special act to perform after the gifts were given. The members of Pi Beta Nu, the castle sorority, were dressed as medieval knights and ladies. They sang "The first day of Christmas my true love gave to me," and danced.

The rest of January and February would see the usual number of exhibitions, plays, teas, etc. The senior class usually presented its play in February. It would probably be a Shakespearian production. The actor, Francis Wilson, who had been a friend of the Cassedys, was so impressed with the school he gave all of his theatrical wardrobe to the dramatic department. The clothing filled many chests. Miss Charlotte Priest usually overlooked the costumes, and an outfit for any play was always forthcoming from these chests, be it Shakespeare or Barrie. The month ended with a great colonial ball. Here again all the students were costumed in colonial clothing. The minuet was danced with appropriate music.

When inaugurations for President were held in Washington, a whole floor of a building on Pennsylvania Avenue would be rented. All the student body were transported into the city by special cars on the B and O to Union Station. There private cars on the trolley would be waiting to carry the young ladies to their destination. Tiered seats were erected in the building, and at noon a box luncheon was served, brought in from the N.P.S. kitchens.

The months of March and April followed a pattern of the preceding part of the year with plays, exhibitions, teas and dinners. On May Day a very special event was celebrated. It was the crowning of the May Queen. The May Queen was chosen by the students. She was the most popular girl in school - one who showed strength of character, one interested in school activities, good in her studies, and with an outstanding personality. The ceremony was held out of doors in the circle in front of Main Building. The queen's name was never divulged until she appeared to receive her crown. After the coronation she and her court were entertained by dances, a Maypole dance being one attraction. When the festivities were over, refreshments were served to all who attended. There usually were some guests besides the students.

In 1900 the one chosen for May Queen was Rose Armstrong of Rockville. She later became Mrs. Somervell Dawson, and has lived in Rockville for many years.

After May Day, the various departments of the school gave final exhibitions. Then came the last two weeks before graduation. Each one of four sororities gave a play in the Odeon. Such productions as Dorothy Vernon of Hadden Hall, Pomander Walk, and Robin Hood were produced. Robin Hood was staged out of doors in the glen. The audience sat on the hillside which made a natural amphitheater.

The graduation was held in the Odeon. The girls all had to wear white dresses. Each one carried a large bouquet of sweet peas. One year the bouquets would be lavender, the next year pink. The seniors were all seated in a tiered platform on the stage. It made a beautiful picture.

Mr. and Mrs. Cassedy were civic minded as well as dedicated educators. There was a very fine women's club in the neighborhood named "The Home Interest Club". Mrs. Cassedy was a member of this organization. She entertained the ladies at luncheon in her large dining room once a year, and gave them a course lunch. The women of the Home Interest (there were thirty members) were interested in building a consolidated school at Woodside to take the place of several one-room schools in the

area. The county agreed to pay \$4,000.00 for the project if the club could raise \$4,000.00, which would take care of the total cost of the eight room building. Mr. Cassidy, through the influence of his wife, pledged \$2,000.00 of the amount the ladies were to raise. He also offered the use of all the school's facilities where the club could have entertainments to make money. From that time forth, plays, dances, musicals, etc. were held in the gymnasium or the Odeon until the rest of the \$4,000.00 was raised. No charge was ever made to the members of the community for the use of National Park's facilities, not even for janitorial service. All were given free use of the grounds or buildings when the proper request had been made.

The death of Mrs. Cassidy was a dreadful blow to Mr. Cassidy. Her duties were largely assumed after that by Miss Priest, Miss Stover, and Miss Munford. Mr. Cassidy later remarried, but in 1916 decided to sell National Park. It was then taken over by a board of directors with Dr. James E. Ament as president.

Dr. Ament made extensive improvements. He enlarged all the sorority houses, added to Senior House and the Main Building. He traveled in Europe and brought back many pieces of sculpture which he placed around the grounds. He doubled the number of girls at the school but carried on with all of its traditions. Dr. Ament died in 1936. For the next year Mrs. Ament acted as head. In 1937 Dr. Roy Tasco Davis was made the president of the Board and the Faculty. The school then became mainly a junior college, and its name was changed from National Park Seminary to National Park College. It continued to function until 1942 when the government bought it as an annex to Walter Reed Hospital. It is still used for this purpose.

Though the school has ceased to exist, the Alumnae Association is still active, but its ranks are thinning as death has claimed many of the former students. To have been able to attend such an educational institution was a rare privilege for all students who entered its portals.

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A FEW NOTES ON NATIONAL PARK SEMINARY

As we read Miss Getty's interesting article, we who were not privileged to attend National Park Seminary have a few questions about it. Here are some of the answers.

From an elaborate catalogue issued in 1902-3, we learn that the Seminary occupied 40 acres. There were 11 buildings; 6 school buildings, 5 Sorority houses, and also the Miller Library, the Odeon and various utility buildings. The buildings were clustered together, surrounded by landscaped grounds with lovely trees and a stream.

In the years 1902-3, there were about 250 students.

Apparently the Courses were on the High School, possibly Junior College, level. To earn a diploma, a girl must have completed 25 credits in major subjects. This was planned to take four years.

The catalogue states that the acquisition of Soul Power or moral training is a special feature of the school. "The expanding soul needs training in a more specific systematic and practical form than we have ever seen employed." In accordance with this belief, "candidates for graduation must have completed not only the prescribed course of study but also must have acquired that maturity of mind and judgment and culture of personality that will reflect credit upon the Institution they represent."

Students were called "young women", not girls. Although hedged around by so many restrictions, the catalogue states that: "Pupils with permission of parents are

permitted to receive at stated times calls from gentlemen properly introduced." However "Visitors cannot be entertained in students' rooms".

What did it cost to attend National Park Seminary in 1902-3? Tuition ran from \$500 to \$600 a year for regular courses. All the special courses required additional fees. Lessons in piano, voice, elocution, art and the like ran about \$100 a year. Subjects like Business, Domestic Science, dancing and fencing cost about \$40 each. Laundry for a year cost \$20 and was limited to 12 pieces a week. Membership in a Sorority must not cost more than \$25 a year.

The Catalogue was filled with many pictures of the fantastic buildings - fantastic inside and out. Later, under the Ament regime, many art treasures were part of the surroundings and scattered through the buildings. The Catalogue also devotes some dozen pages to pictures and descriptions of public buildings in Washington. This was intended to attract prospective pupils and their parents to the unusual opportunities afforded by the school.

Some 40 years followed after 1902-3. Principals of the school were: Dr. and Mrs. John I. Cassedy, 1894-1916; Dr. James E. Ament, 1916-1936 (Mrs. Ament, 1937); Dr. Roy Tasco Davis, 1937-1942.

Throughout its long history, National Park Seminary and its successor, National Park Junior College, represent a sector of American society in an era now past. It is an important feature of the history of Montgomery County, Maryland.

NOTICE: The Montgomery County Historical Society has in its library in Beall-Dawson House in Rockville a number of pictures of the unique buildings and furnishings at National Park Seminary. We recommend that you drop by and see the pictures.

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