

Carroll History Journal

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DOROTHY ELDERDICE – AN INDOMITABLE SPIRIT

BY JAMES E. LIGHTNER

One can't learn without experimentation. . . . I suppose it's better to have experimented and lost than never to have experimented at all.

Dorothy Elderdice, 1925



Dorothy Elderdice was the quintessential experimentalist. This community activist, feminist, humanist, costumer, dramatist, and prolific writer of letters, pageants, and diaries is remembered for her devoted and highly visible activity in all phases of community betterment. Her extraordinary life, with its many ups and downs, made her a fascinating and well-known leader of the Westminster and Carroll County communities for more than 50 years.

Miss Elderdice was born in Baltimore on April 7, 1892, the daughter of the Reverend Dr. Hugh Latimer Elderdice, Sr. (1860-1938) and his wife, Annabel (1859-1935). She was just 5 years old when her father was named president of the Westminster Theological Seminary, and the family (including her two-year-old brother H. Latimer, Jr.) arrived in Westminster.

The Methodist Theological Seminary of the Methodist Protestant Church had been formed in 1882, with Thomas Hamilton Lewis as founding president. In 1886, Lewis was named the president of the adjacent Western Maryland College (WMC) and he switched places with his father-in-law, James T. Ward, who served as Seminary president for another 11 years until his death in March 1897. At this



Dorothy Elderdice, in her twenties.
Courtesy of McDaniel College
archives.

juncture, many expected that the Seminary would not long survive Ward's departure. The Seminary Board, in an amazingly candid analysis, noted that they needed a "man of vigor" to resuscitate the Seminary. They found their man when they elected Hugh Latimer Elderdice as the third president. He would serve in this capacity for the next 35 years.

Dorothy remembered being introduced to the neighbors who exclaimed:

'Oh, but we already have one Dorothy on The Hill, born to the McDaniels [William Roberts and Ada (Smith) McDaniel] last December'. Because I was five years older we didn't become instant friends – playmates, I mean. But by the time the other Dorothy was five I wasn't a bit too old to share in games with her along with the Lewis children, the Reifsniders, [and] the Geimans. . . . How small and friendly our Hill at the turn of the century! No cars, no radio, no movies, no TV – but we had our old [horse] Dolly with our sleigh rides and sleds for coasting down steep hills in winter, our horse drawn wagon for straw-rides

and carriages for Sunday School picnics in summer. Best of all, we just enjoyed being with one another.

Dorothy attended the West End Elementary School for about five years before enrolling in the College's preparatory school at age 11. She spent four years in this small private academy held in Levine Hall on the edge of the campus, although, according to her diary, some years were happier than others. Referring to her last year in the prep school, she said, "I feel that this in many ways has been the best, most profitable and happiest of my school years thus far." At age 15 she enrolled in Western Maryland College, completing her bachelor's degree *summa cum laude* in 1911. She made many friends with her classmates with whom she kept up at least annual correspondence with a round-robin letter for the next 68 years.

During her senior year she wrote a paper opposing adoption of the 19th amendment for women's suffrage but quickly changed her stance to the consternation of her father. Apparently, Dorothy was riding on a bus in Baltimore when a boorish man was loudly expounding on the dangers of women's suffrage. She decided if such a person were against it, then she should certainly be for it! For her time, she bucked the tide of her family, revealing her forward thinking and a "rebellious" attitude. She described another rebellion:

It was at the beginning of either my Freshman or Sophomore year that I noticed in a fashion magazine that middy blouses would be worn that season flowing on the outside of one's skirt instead of neatly tucked in as heretofore. So I decided to cross the campus to gym wearing mine that way. (Even I never dreamed of not wearing a skirt to cover my gym bloomers). Even so, I made a sensation because I had no sooner reached the College than my mother came rushing over. 'Dorothy, you must tuck that middy inside your skirt before you come home. The Seminary men stopped their tennis game to look at you!' I protested: 'It's just too bad they don't know what's being worn this year. I'm very properly dressed.' But I'm afraid I complied outwardly while I continued to fume inwardly. . . .

There were times when I am sure that my father considered his two children a greater problem,

perhaps, than all of his [seminary] students put together. As we grew up we discovered that certain things were forbidden us because we were son and daughter of a Seminary president, who was also a Methodist minister. Specifically, my brother wanted to play cards and I wanted to go to dances and the theatre. Both were of the devil! . . . So the waltz was not for me! Nor the theatre . . . Only in my late teens did my family attend an outdoor performance of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. . . . I walked around in a daydream for days afterward, wishing I had been the daughter of the stage rather than of the Seminary! In fact, from that time on I began to attend the theatre whether or not my father approved. Finally, reluctant approval was given provided I kept quiet about my enthusiasm. . . . It was OK for me to see Maude Adams in a decent play, he said, but if the Seminary students heard about it, they wouldn't understand how decent it was.

A young woman full of curiosity and ambition, Dorothy noted that her college education gave her the foundation for her future:

We were indoctrinated with the idea that the aim of education was to prepare us to realize our own potentialities so that we might better serve humanity. We were taught that spiritual ideals must be kept alive in the midst of a material civilization. Mind should matter more than money.



The women of the Western Maryland College Class of 1911, taken during their Junior year. Dorothy Elderdice is in the center. From the 1910 Aloha; courtesy of McDaniel College archives.

Her restless nature and active mind soon led her away from Westminster. "The only way I could see to set myself free . . . was to go as far away from the Seminary as possible."

The first stop on her road to independence was Boston to attend the Emerson College of Oratory from which she graduated in 1913, acting in several plays while there. She then spent some time at the Leland Powers School of Elocution, also in Boston. Armed with this training, she embarked on several tours, giving readings at churches and conventions, arranged through her Boston connections and the YWCA. In 1914 she returned to Westminster at her father's invitation to be a part-time instructor in oratory at the Seminary. Of course, she received her room and board from her parents in the president's house, but no salary! In July 1918, just before World War I ended, she wrote and directed the first of her many pageants with universal social themes, for which she is still remembered. *In the Cause of Freedom* was performed on the courthouse lawn before a large audience and involved over 100 local residents. By 1918 she was teaching public speaking full time at the Seminary.

On June 10, 1922, she produced one of her largest pageants for the dedication of Hoffa Field, Western Maryland College's new athletic field. The pageant was attended by 5,000 people and involved 1,000 participants from the College and various organizations in town, and began with a trumpet fanfare announcing the entrance of "Peace" attended by representatives of four ages: Ancient, Medieval, Modern, and Future. The pageant celebrated many historic victories for peace and featured 250 young girls singing an international hymn, another 100 performing a ceremonial Indian dance, and a finale featuring school children dancing and singing and the freeing of white doves. Dorothy seemed to have found her niche as a writer and producer of major epics and was beginning to fulfill her dreams.



Dorothy in *Pygmalion* and *Galatea* at Emerson College of Oratory, November 1912. HSCC collection.

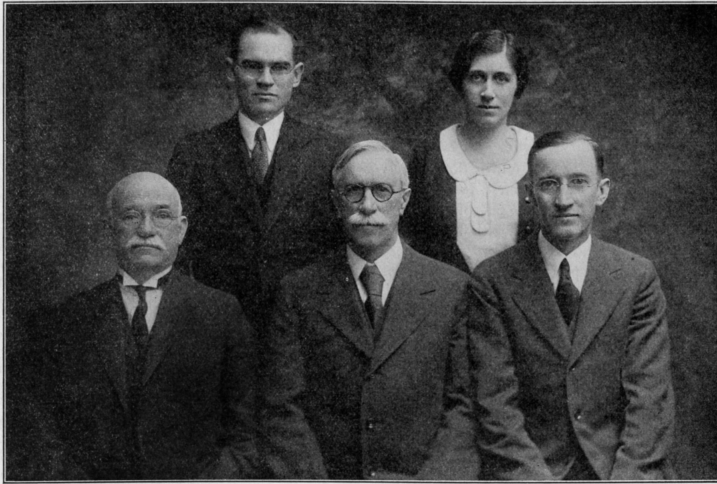
This success, and perhaps a desire to again escape Westminster, led her to Pocatello, Idaho, in 1922 for a year as a teacher of speech and drama at the Idaho Technical Institute. She then headed for New York to work for the Church of All Nations, writing and producing community dramas and pageants. She was sent to Clarksburg, West Virginia, for six weeks to work in the Little Theater Movement there, and then to West Palm Beach, Florida, as Director of Community Drama from 1925 to 1927.

In 1924, while in New York, she wrote in her diary:

I have been learning – That one shouldn't try to make over parents. The mere fact that I like The Village and Cyrano is no reason I should try to ram them down father's throat – any more than he should try to develop my appreciation of Hebrew vowels and Homiletical reviews. . . . That I feel worse when I give up faith in people and they afterward prove worthy of it, than when I hold on to faith and they disappoint me. . . . I have learned that my mind still loves to chase butterflies and is affected by every breeze that flows. I realize that I must attain a greater stability and yet not lose flexibility. . . . After 30 [she was now 32!] I really should stop flying off on so many tangents. I've had my fling at life and now I should put my experience to some practical use.

While she found occasional work, she also described her financial straits, often questioning, "Where has my money gone?" Throughout her life she at times seemed unable to manage her finances successfully or effectively.

In 1927 she returned to Westminster to a full-time job at the Seminary as a teacher of speech and religious drama, a position she would hold until her retirement in 1951. She also served for over a decade as the seminary librarian and office secretary to her father, all for very little salary.



The Seminary faculty, 1932. Front row, left to right: Dr. Charles Forlines, Dr. Hugh Latimer Elderdice, Dr. Montgomery Shroyer. Back row: Dr. Fred G. Holloway, Dorothy Elderdice. From *Pilgrimage of Faith* by Douglas R. Chandler.

Helen Shroyer, Dorothy's good friend and wife of her Seminary colleague Dr. Montgomery Shroyer, noted that it took a number of tries before Dorothy found the right direction for her life. Her parents kept a tight rein on her because sometimes she didn't show good business sense. She eventually did get it right and had the self-confidence to proceed on her path even when there might be opposition.

Following her father's retirement from the Seminary presidency in 1932, the family moved to 75 West Green Street. Dorothy took care of her mother until she died in 1935 and her father until his death in 1938. While still teaching generations of future ministers (one reported that she sometimes had quite a job on her hands trying to give some idea of grace and beauty to budding preachers!), Dorothy took on the role of director of the Westminster Community Players for about eight years. In 1957, she wrote and directed a pageant for the Historical Society about its Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House. Entitled *The House That Jacob Built*, the production was held in the backyard of the house which had been built by Jacob Sherman in 1807.

Dorothy began a costume business, slowly amassing a collection of over 5,000 pieces from gifts, purchases, or by creating them as needed. They eventually almost filled her house from attic to basement. She provided costumes for many area church pageants and high school productions

including plays directed by Mike Eaton at Westminster High. She also outfitted wedding parties, prom goers, legions of folks of all ages for costume parties, Mardi Gras celebrations and Halloween, and Santa Clauses for Christmas. Her diary contains this observation: "I wish I had more large size gowns. I've had 3 girls calling themselves 13 but what they really need is an 18!" Another time she had the challenge of finding trousers for a man with a 44" waist. She rented costumes for nominal fees, at first about \$5 and later for \$10 each. And this income, in addition to her rather meager salary from the Seminary (until 1951) and some investments, kept her going. In 1950 she remarked in her diary about receiving two costume orders amounting to \$27.50 and \$29 – "What a relief!" Twenty years later she noted: "Received my \$127.50 check from Governor Thomas Johnson High School today in time to pay my \$64 fuel bill and my \$26 phone bill."

She also turned her home into a small bed-and-breakfast to accommodate people for various lengths of time, including her good friend Lillian Shipley (first curator of the HSCC Shellman House) who lived with her for 17 years. Lillian gratefully noted: "Dorothy and her housekeeper Margaret Hughes cared for me and I shared all the benefits of Dorothy's happy home."

We know that Miss Dorothy (as she was often called) never married, although her diary reveals that in 1928 she appears to have been smitten by a young



The Elderdice family on the front steps of their new home at 75 West Green Street, 1932. Left to right: Hugh L. Elderdice, Sr., Annabel, Dorothy, Myra Smith (Annabel's sister), Hugh L., Jr. Courtesy of McDaniel College archives.

man named Noel. Her friend Lillian Shipley knew about this friendship but when asked about it later, kept her silence. And apparently there was another man whom she met in New York and tried to “redeem” from some sort of addiction, but unfortunately he stole money from her, and she reluctantly took him to court.

Beginning in 1930 and continuing until 1951, she produced the Seminary’s annual Nativity pageant across the front of the seminary building, with lighting, amplification, recorded music, and tableaux that simulated famous artists’ portraits of the Annunciation, shepherds and sheep, magi, and the manger scene. Angels leaned from the windows with harps while “Gloria in Excelsis” rang out from the tower. The climax was always a gathering of representatives of different nations, races, and ages crowding around the Christ child in testimony of love and goodwill.

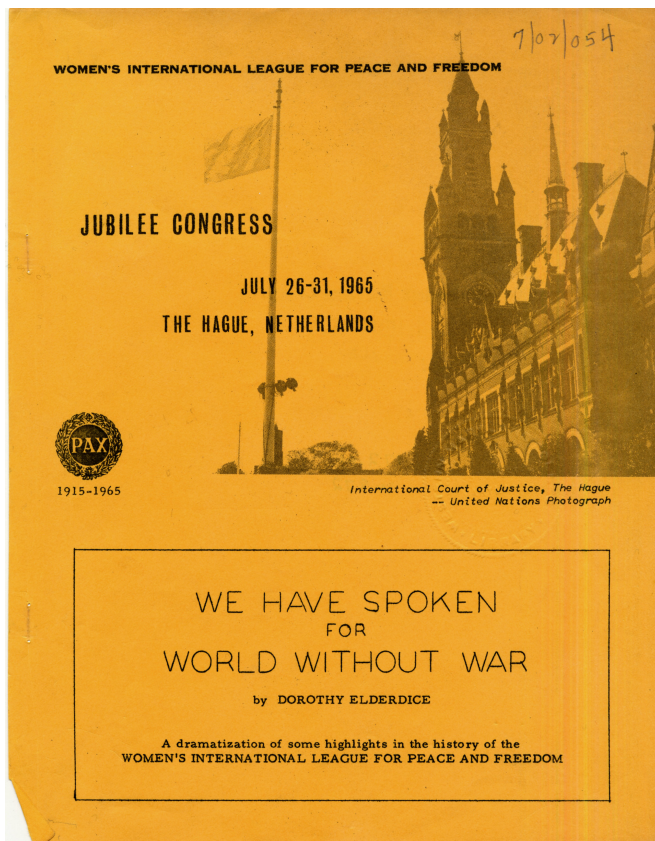
Her spirit of social justice and pacifism was manifested in everything she did. Her soft-spoken, mild manner was a cloak for an energetic, determined woman of strong convictions. She was a suffragette and a feminist. She was an active



The climax of the Seminary’s annual Nativity pageant featured students on the rooftop and leaning from the windows of the Seminary building. Courtesy of McDaniel College archives.

proponent for civil rights who participated in the Great March on Washington in 1963 and heard Martin Luther King’s *I Have a Dream* speech. Locally, she was one of the founders of the Human Rights Commission of Carroll County in 1961 and crusaded for integrated theaters and restaurants. In 1977 at 85, she led a group of 25 men and women on a five-mile march in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. She was also a vocal critic of the Vietnam War and produced several thought-provoking dramas dealing with it. As a member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, she wrote, produced, and directed a pageant, *We Have Spoken for a World Without War*, at the organization’s 50th anniversary held at The Hague in 1965. The cast included women from 23 countries. It was her second trip to Europe (she had gone in 1930 with Lillian Shipley), and she loved visiting sites she had always read or heard about, including Oberammergau for the *Passion Play*.

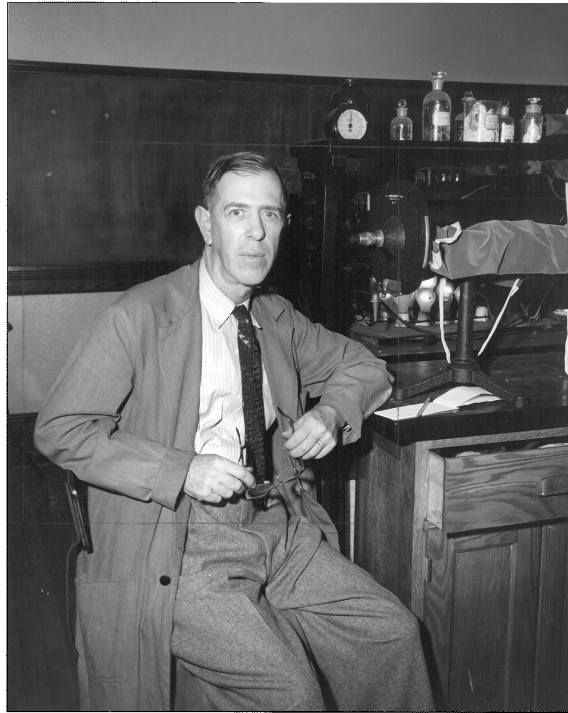
In Carroll County, her pageants, which took weeks to prepare before the actual rehearsals even began, celebrated events such as: County’s Centennial in



Cover of the program for Dorothy’s production for the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 1965. Courtesy of the McDaniel College archives.

1937 (*The Carroll County Caravan*, with a cast of 1,500); the bicentennial of Taneytown's Trinity Lutheran Church (*The Seven Books of Trinity*, 1951); the city of Taneytown's Bicentennial in 1964; and the centennial of Westminster's Grace Lutheran Church. She served as secretary of the Carroll County Committee for the U. S. Bicentennial and created the pageant for that celebration, *Memorable Moments*, in 1976. Dorothy discovered that Francis Scott Key had once organized a Sunday School for black children in Westminster, so she included the incident in the pageant. Down the hill onto Hoffa Field came Hugh Barnette Speir, dressed as Key, followed by 75 black children on their way to "Sunday School." Some local white residents reacted negatively: Why go to Union Street for the children when, with a little burnt cork, "our children" could have played the part? Dorothy replied that burnt cork was a messy job and took a lot of time, and since we had children nearby whom God had prepared for the part, why not use them?

Though she didn't drive, Dorothy was always on the go, often walking around town on her errands or going with some of her host of friends to movies, plays, and concerts or to meetings of the numerous organizations of which she was a member. When she needed to go out of town, for visits and shopping or to direct pageants, she rode buses. Even with her limited income, she often entertained friends at meals or teas. Her diary chronicles her many activities, and one wonders how she did all she did each day, including managing the quite active costume business, with only a little help. Even into her eighties, she was going up and down the stairs multiple times to her attic or basement, writing articles and letters, reading lots of magazines and books, and attending meetings in or out of town.



Dorothy's brother, Hugh Latimer Elderdice, Jr., in his chemistry lab at WMC. Courtesy of the McDaniel College archives.

Sadly, during the later 1950s (and perhaps before), Dorothy was confronted with her brother Latimer's physical and mental problems. Latimer was a bright but quiet young man who grew up in the shadow of his gregarious older sister, almost four years his senior. He attended the WMC preparatory school and completed his bachelor's degree in chemistry at WMC in 1917. After his World War I service in France, he studied at The Johns Hopkins University, and in 1929 was appointed assistant professor of chemistry at WMC, a post he held until 1961, except for his World War II service. He suffered from severe alcoholism, which may have had its beginnings during his

stint in the Army. Dorothy never succeeded in persuading Latimer to give up alcohol and tobacco (very un-Methodist activities!). After Latimer's wife Helen died in 1961, Dorothy (with occasional help from neighbors) had to cope with his falls, paranoia, and stupors, but her efforts often resulted in periods of estrangement from him. She tried to help him through his long, final illness from multiple causes during which he needed considerable care, but he frequently rebuffed her efforts, and this hurt her deeply. She could not understand his resentment of her, but perhaps it went back to their childhood, their strict up-bringing, and their very different personalities: he the military man, she the pacifist. However, she saw him through to the end in 1971, dealt with his estate, and then never mentioned him again in her diary.

During her lifetime, she had sponsored and opened her home to many foreign students attending Western Maryland College or the Seminary. She loaned them money, with no thought that it would be returned. She was very proud of her large international family and reveled in their successes, enjoying immensely their visits and letters. Fittingly,

the Dorothy Elderdice Scholarship for Foreign Students was established in her memory at the College to aid needy and deserving students.

Dorothy retired from the Seminary in January 1951. She noted, late in life:

If anyone had told me in the 1920s that I would end by spending 30 years of my life teaching in the Seminary, I would never have believed him. I did not then realize that in the end, I would find satisfaction by responding to the need to be needed. . . . That was what my father made me feel. And his attitude toward dramatic interests changed so completely that at his urging I started the department of religious drama in the seminary. And I left the very day it was no longer needed.

After years of untiring activity within the community, Dorothy Elderdice began to be recognized for her work and zeal. She was honored on her 80th birthday by the Carroll County Branch of the American Association of University Women, of which she had been an active member for many years. She received the Meritorious Service Award from the WMC Alumni Association, and two years



Dorothy was a member of the first Board of Directors of the Historical Society of Carroll County (seen here in a 1939 photograph), a life member, and editor of its newsletter for several years.

later was named the College's Alumna of the Year for 1974, the first woman so honored. It was noted that "Peace is the underlying thesis of her life," and she was called a "rare spirit." For the occasion, she wore a middy dress from her college era (with her blouse *outside* her skirt!). She wrote of the occasion:

The reason I fell in love so desperately with the pom-pom girls on October 12 was . . . because their performance brought so vividly to mind the caravan of colors that flowed over Hoffa Field in that 1937 [county centennial] pageant when 350 girls gave the Rainbow of Promise dance for a better day to come! The Impossible Dream lives on.

In 1979 Dorothy Elderdice was diagnosed with cancer. She was determined to complete a series of articles on the founders of Carroll County, and all ten were published by the Carroll County *Times* just prior to her final illness. A year before, she had donated her entire costume collection to the Carroll Players.



Dorothy celebrating with the WMC pom-pom girls at Homecoming when she was named 1974 Alumna of the Year. Courtesy of McDaniel College archives.

Dorothy gave definite directions to her minister for what she called her final “dramatic production.” She asked that it be called a “Celebration of my Graduation.” She died peacefully at her home on October 1, 1979. Her funeral was held at 5 p.m. on Sunday, October 7. A tape she had made in 1965 when she received the Woman of the Year Award from the Soroptimist Club was played. After the tape, “The Impossible Dream” from *The Man of La Mancha* was sung; WMC President Ralph John spoke briefly; and Montgomery Shroyer spoke of some of the causes she furthered. The service concluded with a recording of the Hallelujah Chorus. Those present thought it was just right for Dorothy.

Ironically, in 1907, at age 15, Dorothy Elderdice had written a sentiment that could have served as her epitaph:

I wish I could spend all my days in school—and so I can, in the school of life. May it be that on my Great Diploma I may receive the one Honorable Mention that counts—the well done from the Teacher of Teachers and the Master of Masters.

Dorothy had willed her body to science, and her ashes were later interred in the family plot in the Westminster Cemetery. Among the many expressions of sympathy was a note from a former student who noted:

In spite of age Miss Elderdice was a young person in her mind, always open to ideas and new things.



Dorothy's Legacy

On July 5, 1984, the Dorothy Elderdice Theater in Alumni Hall was dedicated at Western Maryland College. The program for that day noted: Miss Elderdice was a feminist and a proponent of civil rights. She was fondly remembered for her love of humanity, her boundless efforts for peace and justice, and her life that was a source of inspiration for both the college and the community. The College also launched the annual Elderdice Peace Week, sponsored by the College's Peace and Justice Coalition. Dorothy Elderdice would never be forgotten, and her legacy lives on.

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