

DR.
ANNA
JANE
HARRISON:
A
PORTRAIT



By Jean Stephens

Dr. Harrison was on Campus Nov. 8-10 for the dedication of the new chemistry building and the eighth Midwest Regional Meeting of the American Chemical Society. She spoke on the topic "In Pursuit of Dignity." (See News From The Divisions.)



Dr. Anna Jane Harrison is a beautiful person whose life picture emerges as a direct, deceptively simple drawing.

Make a bold, black stroke to define her professional competency. She received an AB '33, BS Ed '35, AM '37 and PhD '40, all from the University. Now a professor of chemistry at Mt. Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, she also is the only woman appointed by President Nixon to the 24-member National Science Board, which sets policies for the National Science Foundation. The fundamental purpose of the Foundation is to strengthen research in education in the sciences by awarding grants and contracts. But outstanding professional contributions are not the primary measure of Anna Jane Harrison.

The subject of the sketch speaks in a low, no-nonsense voice of growing up on an Audrain County farm, and commuting to high school in Mexico, Mo. "My first teaching job was in a one-room rural school, a little white frame building in the corner of a cornfield." Laughing a little, smoothing a fold in a jersey dress with lines as softly disciplined as the character of its wearer, she reminisces

about her graduate assistant days at the University, where she "received the magnificent stipend of \$550. The men got \$500. I guess the department chairman figured it cost more for a girl to live respectably than a boy."

The backdrop of the portrait obviously took form before the days of women's lib. So how did she find her way into what was then largely a man's field? She shrugs, shifts in her chair, thinks quietly for a moment. "You do what you enjoy doing, and what society will permit you — or at least not make it impossible for you — to do."

The way she lives, the people and things that matter, provide lines, angles and form to the total Harrison picture. She likes classical music, opera and art. She also does much gardening of shrubs and perennials: "I'm a farmer at heart." And more of the farm girl shows through when she talks about something she really enjoys — horseback riding.

She doesn't have a horse now, but gets some riding in anyway. "Every two or three years I go on a pack trip to a national forest or wilderness area. I like the diversity of the people there."

She also appreciates the diverse in her daily environment. "My social contacts aren't restricted by disciplines. Some of my best friends are classicists, in English, art, music, biology — a nice cross-section."

Ms. Harrison is one of those rare individuals highly attuned to and appreciative of fellow human beings. She finds that "part of the fun in working with students is that eternal conflict in the individual's struggle to develop. The college students I see are so able, poised, yet desperately needing reassurance both professionally and personally."

She says she's not an idealist herself. "I don't expect perfection. You don't have to have an ideal organism to have it function efficiently!" Nonetheless, she enjoys the "idealism of young people. They seem to have rejected the image of success as the acquisition of material goods." On the other hand, she's apprehensive about the existence of student apathy, and is bothered because many students have "such narrow realms of interest. So many simply aren't internationally-minded, and are very self-centered."

It's not surprising that narrowness is abhorrent to a woman like this. The overall portrait, deepened and clarified as she talks, shows an individual who cherishes the flavor, form and textures of living. She responds to life with tolerance and involvement. "Religion? I'm certainly not concerned with the details of any creed but I tend to respect what other people believe in. Homo sapiens have a built-in capacity for reverence. I haven't had time to get too involved in politics, and frankly, this worries me. If you don't contribute more than your vote and financial support, you're copping out, not investing much of yourself. I write letters, persuade other people, about the war, conservation, minority group problems, education . . ."

Now that she's in a position to translate her concern into policy on the National Science Board, what will she do?

Without hesitating, she answers "Work like hell! Most people on the board are research-oriented and not concerned with pre-graduate work. Well, I am." Society is based on science and technology. As citizens, students will be faced with a number of value judgments (pollution, ecology, etc.) that require an understanding of science, she says.

Now that Anna Jane Harrison has filled in the fine lines and shadings of her life picture, what about life itself? She smiles, then quietly replies, "I think it's fun." □