

Dorothy Stahl Brady, 1903-1977

I am sitting here, despairingly, with four resumé's of Dorothy Brady before me, which she herself prepared at different points in her career. What do they tell about her? The answer, I fear, is very little. They record her academic and professional accomplishments from the early 1920s onward—Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Reed College, Oregon; M.A., Cornell; Ph.D. in mathematics, Berkeley; home economics specialist at USDA; division chief at BLS, professorships at Illinois, Chicago, and Pennsylvania; Vice-President of the American Statistical Association and Economic History Association; Fellow of the American Statistical Association and Econometric Society; Chairman of the Conference on Research in Income and Wealth; numerous scholarly publications.

It is true that the record is outstanding for a woman of her generation. And it is doubtless incomplete, for Dorothy was not given to bragging, and that, after all, is what resumé's are about. But it tells almost nothing about the real Dorothy Brady—what she was like, her feelings, how she affected others, her struggles, her disappointments as well as successes—what was so special and unique about her.

Perhaps one can recapture a little of the real Dorothy Brady through the eyes of others. It is worth a try. In what follows, I have drawn, not only on my own impressions, but on those of Dorothy's many friends, who have been good enough to share them with me.

My first impression of Dorothy was at an NBER Income and Wealth Conference, when I was still an awestruck graduate student. A spare-framed woman in her late forties took the podium, hand thrust in jacket pocket. Her manner was modest and unassuming; her eyes twinkling, as though she were privy to some private joke; her voice, a faintly rasping Western twang. I do not remember her words, though they obviously commanded respect. What I do remember is the warmth and vitality she injected into the proceedings. One liked Dorothy at first sight.

Later on, as I came to know her better, it was these qualities that continued to distinguish her. She was sensitive, considerate, and utterly without pretense. I never knew a person less given to small talk; yet she was always interesting and fun to be with. She added a human dimension that is too often lacking in the rough, competitive world of government and academia, in which she spent most of her life.

Dorothy's work was part and parcel of her life. She and I had adjacent offices at Penn. Her door was always open and I can recall her voice, as I was passing by, often calling, "Dick, do you have a minute?" She would be bent over a confusing mass of charts, tables, and equations—all in her own hand—chuckling quietly over a new find which she wanted to share. Her excitement about a new idea and her exhilaration when it worked out were infectious. Dorothy once told a friend she felt lucky to be paid for something she enjoyed. Her pleasure in her work was a joy to others as well.

That work demonstrated her original and creative mind. Trained as a mathematician and statistician, Dorothy brought a questioning and often skeptical outlook to economics and economic history. She frequently asked questions outside the disciplinary paradigm. She was not interested in superficial generalizations; she wanted to penetrate to the reality of people's material lives. The energetic liveliness of her mind is manifest in her varied contributions. To mention only a few, her early work in developing the City Worker's Family Budget was recognized in an award from the National Women's Press Club, presented by President Harry S Truman. She pioneered in the study of family size equivalence scales. Her work on savings and income distribution played a seminal role in the development of the permanent income concept and related studies of the consumption function.

Though she was a long time coming to it, economic history was perhaps Dorothy's natural calling. She delighted in old diaries, journals, and account books. In rare spare moments, she would putter about antique shops, peeking here and there for clues to prices and ways of life in olden days. She amassed a wondrous collection of tools from times past that she would happily display to the interested guest—her Penn retirement party was climaxed by the presentation of an 18th-century hay rake. Dorothy loved numbers and all sorts of mathematical games and puzzles. (I can recall her sitting gleefully side by side with my ten-year-old son, poring over a new mind-stretcher she had brought him.) Dorothy was a pioneer in economic measurement, but she was much more than a mere quantifier. To Dorothy, numbers were an essential skeleton for reconstructing the historical record, but only a skeleton. Her feel for the past is most evident, I believe, in two of her later pieces. One was a truly original chapter on consumption that she prepared for the textbook by Lance Davis, William Parker, and others. When Dorothy wrote (p. 84) "Today, the great majority of American families live on a scale that compares well with the way wealthy families lived 200 years ago," she was not basing this on aggregative indexes of real per capita product, but on an intimate knowledge of the goods and services consumed by different social classes now and then. The other was her 1964 *JEH* article, modestly titled "Relative Prices in the Nineteenth Century." In this she presented a novel and fascinating conception of the evolution of new products in size and quality and the pricing practices associated therewith.

Of all the creative work Dorothy did, she liked her teaching best—whether the student was an undergraduate, graduate, or, as in my case, colleague. Nowhere was her concern for others more apparent. She put one instantly at ease, took a warm interest in what one was trying to do, and was able to convey a sense of understanding and encouragement, often when the student himself did not fully understand what he was about. She was a stimulating and patient teacher with an ability to put complicated concepts into simple words. As graduate chairman, she worked untiringly to provide intellectual and financial support for her flock. To her, no student was beyond hope; all (literally) were "A" students. I never heard her say anything ill of a student; I think she could not. A former student writes: she gave so much to so many of us.

This makes Dorothy's life sound like too much of a success story. It leaves

out the disappointments and failures. One can guess, perhaps, at a few of these—a difficult marriage ending in divorce, the struggle of a professional woman in a man's world, serious problems of physical health. One can imagine others becoming embittered, but these events seemed to leave little mark on Dorothy's unfailingly even and cheerful disposition. Doubtless one of the great resources that sustained her was strong personal friendships—with persons such as Rose and Milton Friedman, Dorothy and John Durand, Margaret Reed, Lenore Epstein Bixby, Alice Hanson Jones, and, especially in her later years, Eleanor Snyder. And she enjoyed a very close relationship with her son, Michael, on both a personal and intellectual level.

If Dorothy could read all this she would protest strenuously, for she was a humble woman as well. But it seems only right that the record show that beyond her intellectual achievements she was a woman of character, courage, and immense humanity. It was a privilege to know her and enjoy her friendship.

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