

Educating Mary Frances Kennedy: M.F.K. Fisher remembers Illinois

By Kathleen Spaltrö

Rambling obituaries in 1992 of the master prose stylist M.F.K. Fisher clustered together her brief but all-too-recurrent undergraduate experiences. Along with her matriculations at Whittier College, Occidental College, and the University of California at Los Angeles, the Californian Mary Frances Kennedy also attended Illinois College in Jacksonville in the Fall of 1927. While Kennedy's brief sojourn in Illinois may seem surprising, she was born in Albion, Michigan, to parents who both had Midwestern origins and relatives. Restless and young, Mary Frances Kennedy of Whittier was in flight from her Californian family and her town, but she did not yet know who she was or what she was good at. So, going to college out of state seemed like a way out but was not. Marriage in 1929 to doctoral student Al Fisher (whom she met in the UCLA library), in its turn, seemed like a way out but was not. But her time in France with Fisher, and her earlier memories of Illinois, did educate Mary Frances about her palate—a way of measuring her powers as a unique memoirist of food or, more exactly, of the sensuous ingestion and appreciation of food. Thus was Mary Frances Kennedy, future author of *The Gastronomical Me*, introduced to the Gastronomical She, M.F.K. Fisher.

Her recorded memories of both Chicago and Jacksonville centered on

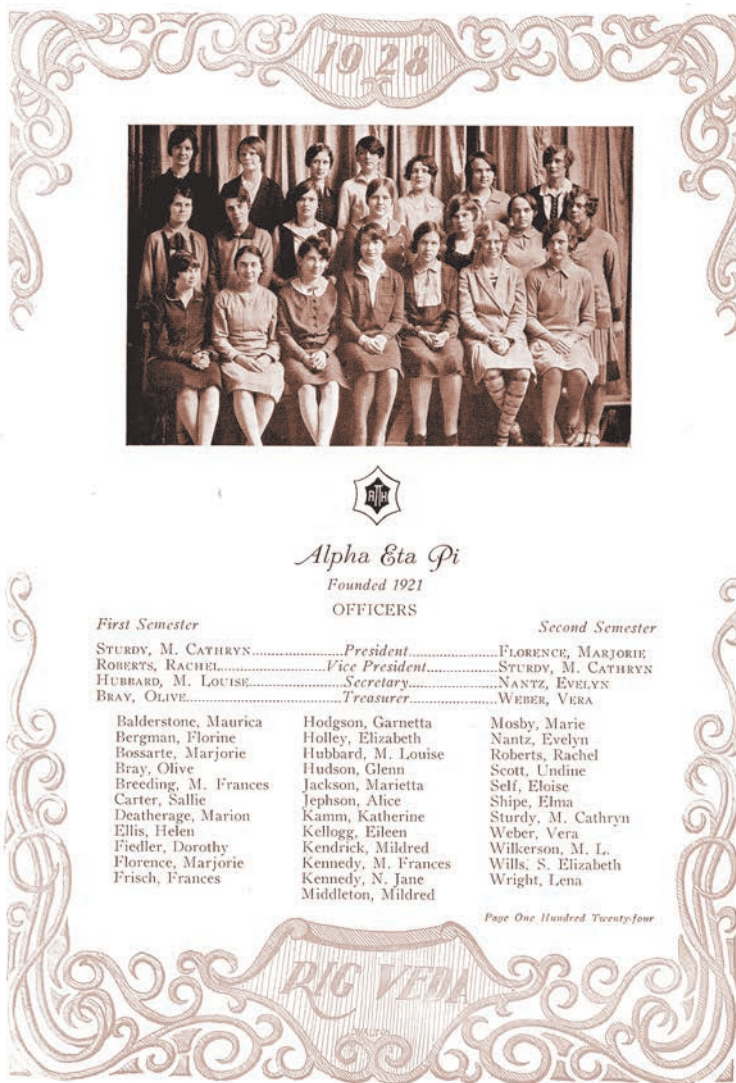
what food she ate and how she ate it. Like James Beard, who with lavish detail recalled the meals of his youth in his autobiography, *Delights and Prejudices*, she possessed a remarkable “taste memory,” an ability to remember and render the intense pleasure of eating. Of course, Mary Frances could have eaten at far less expense to her parents if she had stayed in Whittier.

years later, Fisher analyzed her earlier self: “I assumed that I was intelligent, because I had learned how to bluff. Intellectually, I was a lazy zero, even though I had been reading everything from Thomas à Kempis to *The Oz Books* since I was not quite five....” “[N]ow I know how hard many of my peers worked and studied while I played grasshopper.” Despite her poor academic performance at Illinois College, Mary Frances's real education nevertheless was proceeding underground.

Uncle Evans and Cousin Bernard

“My favorite relative,” Mary Frances's maternal uncle Evans Holbrook, a law professor at the University of Michigan who had been teaching law at Stanford University while on sabbatical, suggested that he accompany 19-year-old Mary Frances to Chicago. She would go on to Jacksonville, while Uncle Evans went home to Ann Arbor. Fisher later perceived, “I now believe that he did this on purpose, to help me into new worlds.” By 1927, Uncle Evans had been traveling by train to and from the West Coast for almost 30 years: “I paddled along happily in the small sensual spree my uncle always made of his routine travelings. I probably heard and felt and tasted more than either of us could be aware of.” Uncle Evans loved the breakfasts served at the Harvey Houses on the train line. Devoted to their baked apple breakfast, he declared, “The Harvey girls never fail me.” He also knew how to obtain the best food served on the train itself.

“Dazed at escaping the family nest,” Mary Frances ate lunch and dinner with her uncle both on the train line and in the dining car, where he enticed his niece's appetite by suggesting foods unfamiliar to her, such as



Kind help of Samantha Sauer and Illinois College Office of Alumni and Development

Attending college in the Midwest served as a way of escape: “[A]s soon as I could escape the trap, whatever it was, I fled family and friends and security like a suddenly freed pigeon, or mole, or wildcat. I probably thought that I was at last MYSELF.” Almost 60

Eastern scallops instead of lamb chops. She realized that Uncle Evans “knew more about the pleasures of the table than anyone I had yet been with.” When the callow Mary Frances replied that she did not care whether she ate a fresh mushroom omelet or a wild asparagus omelet, Uncle Evans rebuked her uncharacteristic stupidity: “Let [your host] believe, even if it is a lie, that you would infinitely prefer the exotic wild asparagus to the banal mushrooms, or vice versa. Let him feel that it matters to you . . . and even that *he* does.” He explained further, “All this may someday teach you about the art of seduction, as well as the more important art of knowing yourself.”

Together with his son Bernard, who met them in Chicago, uncle and niece ate together in a Fred Harvey restaurant in the newly opened Union Station. Intimidated by the brainy Bernard, Mary Frances erred again in saying “Oh, anything, anything” in response to the menu. Uncle Evans returned “a cold speculative somewhat disgusted look in his brown eyes.” Stung by the look, Mary Frances recovered her equanimity: “I knew that it was a very important time in my life.” She looked at the menu with intelligence, “really looked, with all my brain, for the first time,” and ordered her meal with care and discretion. “Never since then have I let myself say, or even think, ‘Oh, anything,’ about a meal, even if I had to eat it alone, with death in the house or in my heart.”

Her memory of this episode in Union Station motivated Fisher to revisit the Harvey restaurant in the station years later “to find satisfaction there where I first started to search for it.”

Uncle Walter and Cousin Nan

Mary Frances’s paternal cousin Nancy Jane Kennedy, a daughter of Uncle Walter Kennedy, planned to attend Illinois College for a year before matriculating at the University of Chicago. Self-described as “very shy and rather snobbish,” Mary Frances spent most of her time in Jacksonville with her “very intelligent” and “fascinating” cousin as well as with Nan’s roommate, Rachel, “comforting—like a great warm woman who smells cinnamonly and feels soft—like a tender-eyed bitch.”

“We three have had a lot of fun this year. I’ve spent most of my time in their room—mine was so hideously colored and so empty of humanity.” They gorged on movies, hot

For Further Reading

Fisher, M.F.K. “Figures in a Private Landscape.” In *To Begin Again: Stories and Memoirs, 1908-1929*. New York and San Francisco: Pantheon, 1992.

Fisher, M.F.K. “The Measure of My Powers, 1927 and 1927-1928.” *The Gastronomical Me*. In *The Art of Eating*. New York: Macmillan, 1990.

Reardon, Joan. *Poet of the Appetites: The Lives and Loves of M.F.K. Fisher*. New York: North Point Press of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004.

Zimmerman, Anne. *An Extravagant Hunger: The Passionate Years of M.F.K. Fisher*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011.



Courtesy <https://chuckmanchicagonostalgia.wordpress.com>

chocolate, food: “We must have bought twenty-five packages of cream cheese, quarts of ginger ale, hundreds of crackers, a whole garden of lettuce, barrels-full of jam. It was fun to eat the pale green leaves, and the richly colored jam, and the suave cheese, and drink the exciting ginger ale—on a candle-lit table, with the Victrola moaning blues in the corner of the room.” She remembered buying rolls, anchovy paste, as well as French dressing and the girls’ baring their little breasts at the cold open window, defying pneumonia.

In this winter of gluttony, despite generally bad food at the college dining room, the Hall, the girls wore their Sunday morning church clothes while they devoured delicious hot cinnamon rolls, and then they went back to bed instead of to services. Often, they celebrated at the Coffee and Waffle Shop on 311 West State Street, which served them 4 waffles and unlimited coffee or hot chocolate, or they bought a five-course meal for 40 cents. Invited out to the Colonial Inn, 1213 West State Street, for Sunday dinner, Mary Frances noticed “dishes of pickled peaches like translucent stained glass.” At local Jacksonville homes, “The food was always divine”: “There were fine cooks in that part of Illinois, most of them colored, and I regret that I knew so



Colonial Inn.


Photo courtesy Amy Danielewicz McCombs.

little then about the way they handled chickens and hams and preserves and pickles.” Alternating bites of pie and ice cream taken from separate plates, she admired Jacksonville pumpkin pie, and mince pie, as well as very rich and homemade eggnog ice cream.


Although Mary Frances felt “interested in these people, their looks, conversation, everything,” and she partied vigorously, homesickness for California, hatred of “skidding on icy walks and looking at mangy, sooty

snow,” and hospitalization at Chicago’s Passavant for a bronchial infection curtailed her stay at Illinois College to a single semester. She liked the enthralling history professor, Mr Smith, who gave “thrilling” lectures; the “garrulous old lady,” Miss Elly, reminiscing in “a fascinating stream of sometimes almost incoherent chatter”; and the affectionately remembered Miss Moore and Miss McCune “and their beautiful old house and their delicious things to eat.”

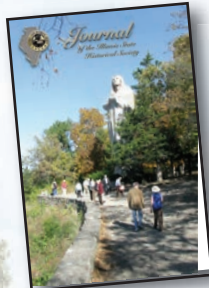
However, man does not live by bread alone, nor can a scholastic career be sustained solely by eggnog ice cream, even if homemade and very rich. Mary Frances freely admitted her academic laziness on her biology final, “To state and define the characteristics of protoplasm is a thing I should know how to do. Once I did know how—two or three months ago, perhaps. Now, in the final examination, I do not know—and I do not care. I am losing five hours of credit. Too bad, isn’t it?” While she ignored her biology exam, she noted in her journal on January 30, 1928, “This year has been an amazing adventure in many ways but thank God I’m ending this part of it tomorrow. My train leaves for dear old California at noon.”

“Going as unexpectedly and with as little cause as I came, [I am] leaving a few marks of myself which will soon rub out or remain faint smudges—taking a few permanent lines on my own—what shall I say? blackboard? I took much more of Jacksonville than I gave or that it took from me. That is as it should be, perhaps.” 

Kathleen Spaltro of Woodstock is a freelance journalist and frequent contributor to Illinois Heritage. This article first appeared in the Woodstock Independent.




Mission Statement



*Journal
of the Illinois State
Historical Society*

The mission of the Illinois State Historical Society, founded in 1899, is to foster awareness, understanding, research, preservation, and recognition of history in Illinois. The Society is a registered 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization sustained solely by its membership and programs, and through donations and grants from corporations and individuals like you. To find out how you can help sustain the Society's mission, make a donation or bequest, or otherwise contribute to the work of the ISHS, call 217-525-2781.

To join the Society or subscribe to its publications, call the University of Illinois Press/Journals at 217-244-0626, or visit the Press online at www.press.uillinois.edu/journals/subscriptions.html.



*Illinois
Heritage*

**A publication of The Illinois
State Historical Society**