

Gallaudet College  
BUFF + BLUE  
1937

## THE VICTORIAN ERA AT GALLAUDET

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CO-EDUCATION at Gallaudet, then the National Deaf-Mute College, started in the fall of 1887. It was to be an experiment for the period of two years, the success or failure of this experiment to determine its permanence. The first young women to enter were Misses Black, Rudd, Lowman, Elliott, MacGinnis, and one other whose name I cannot recall. I entered in the fall of 1888, when the experiment was in its second year. The last four young ladies named above were also there, with Misses Halpen, Sartain, and Herdman, newcomers like myself, making eight in all. We lived in Dr. Gallaudet's house, which he had tendered for use during the two years' experiment, his family meanwhile residing in Hartford. We had the entire third floor for a dormitory. That floor had a wide central hall, with four rooms of good size opening on it, so that, two in a room, we were comfortably lodged. The chaperon and house mother was Miss Ellen Gordon, whom many of the early co-eds will remember for her gentle dignity and kindly heart. As we often had Dr. Gallaudet with us at meal times, and had casual contacts with him in the house, I feel that we were rarely blessed. This great and beloved educator was then in the prime of life, and we could observe his rare conversational talents, his ready wit and humor, and could in a degree realize the greatness of the man. He had a thorough and graceful command of the sign language, so beloved by us all, and of this language he was the outstanding authority and exponent. We were often favored with his wise and sane opinions, and as I look back I realize that I was then too young to grasp his whole-hearted devotion to his life-work, the college.



When I entered Gallaudet co-education was not only on trial there, but at every other college where women were then being admitted. The magazines of the day were full of arguments pro and con the higher education of "The Weaker Sex." Barely fifteen at the time, conscious of youth and energy, of ability to think, to feel, to act, I resented this being on trial, both at Gallaudet and in the world at large. How completely the conventions have changed is illustrated by this incident. In Seattle, a couple of years ago, my daughter Alice was stretched out at ease on the family davenport, absorbed in a book. I happened to pass through the room and remarked to her that she was displaying a considerable length of limb. "And what," asked Alice, sitting up and eyeing me in astonishment, "is the matter with my leg?" What indeed! The Gallaudet co-eds of my time could not even leave Kendall Green unaccompanied, even for a casual errand down the street. They had no clubs or societies, but were allowed to attend the meeting of the male students' "Lit" when properly accompanied by a chaperon. They sat meekly back and watched their brother-students hold forth in lectures, debates, dialogues, and declamations on the platform. To go in groups for hikes, to visit public buildings, to go skating or to the theatre, a chaperon was always required. If the girls were unsuccessful in finding one who had the leisure and the will to go with them, they had to forego the contemplated diversion. We had no reading-room, though we were allowed to use the Kendall School library as a sitting room, and the boys kindly lent us their copies of "the little paper family" when they were through with them. We were conscious of being under constant and critical observation, as though the faculty and the male students were holding a silent court on us and our ability to make good. Contact between the sexes at the college was rigorously tabooed, except at such times and such places as the powers ordained, and undoubtedly the rules went to an unreasonable length, considering that these young men and women were the cream of the various state schools throughout the country, and that their common handicap and understanding of signs made the desire for reasonably free social intercourse well-nigh irresistible.

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The dissatisfaction of the girls over existing conditions resulted in the formation of the O. W. L. S. A committee, headed by Miss May Martin, '95, prepared a constitution which was duly accepted by the co-eds, then about sixteen in number. Each one was then invited to propose a name for the new club, and the present name, suggested by Miss Martin, was adopted. The words that these letters stand for are a sworn secret, and we take not a little pride in the fact that for over forty years this secret has been inviolably kept. The O. W. L. S. club is now both an institution and a tradition at Gallaudet.

It was during my time that the *Buff and Blue* was started at Gallaudet. Mr. W. I. Tilton, '93, Mr. J. M. Stewart, '93, Mr. J. C. Howard, '95, Mr. Harvey DeLong, '94, Mr. J. A. McIlvaine, '93, and others of the bright and enterprising boys then at college were deeply chagrined that Gallaudet had no paper, such as every other college had. Every state school, even, had its weekly or monthly publication. Dr. Gallaudet was slow to give his consent for the boys to take up such an activity in addition to their clubs and sports. He deprecated starting a publication which later might be abandoned with resulting humiliation. The history of independent papers published by and for the deaf was far from encouraging. But the enthusiasm and persistence of the boys finally carried the day, and permission was given to start the paper which still lives and thrives today, and which has published so many articles, stories, and poems showing a high order of talent and scholarship.

At the end of two years the co-educational experiment at Gallaudet was declared a success, and in the fall of 1889 the girls were transferred to rooms formerly used as a Kendall School dormitory. Dr. Gallaudet's family then returned from Hartford to re-possess their house. During the whole length of my student life the various rules and regulations, reasonable and unreasonable, remained in force. But rules notwithstanding, I am deeply grateful that I went to Gallaudet. The contact with Dr. Gallaudet and the brilliant and kindly faculty of my time, the entrance to the homes of these men, where courtesy, culture, and hospitality held sway, were blessings indeed. During these happy years the realization of my handi-

cap was reduced to a minimum. I acquired an ideal of what constituted a real lady and gentleman which has remained my standard of measurement throughout my life.

But as I said before, I was a very young girl at the time, and I resented that there might be any question of the right, the God given right, of my sisters and myself to take our places in the sun. An expression of this vague resentment is shown in the subject of my graduating oration, "The Intellect of Woman." I closed this oration with these words, which in those days burned my heart, and who shall say that I was not an unconscious prophet? "Over and above the peculiarities which pertain to a woman as a woman, are her needs as a human being. She has her way to make in the world, and she will succeed or fail in whatever sphere she moves in, according as her judgment is rendered accurate, her moral nature cultivated, her thinking faculties strengthened. It is true that we have made a start in the right direction. But that start has been made very recently, and it is still too early to pass sentence on the results. There yet remains a large fund of prejudice to overcome, of false sentiment to combat, of narrow-minded opposition to triumph over. But there is no uncertainty as to the final outcome. Civilization is too far advanced not to acknowledge the justice of woman's cause. She herself is too strongly impelled by a noble hunger for something better than she has known, too highly inspired by the vista of a glorious future not to rise with determination and might and move on till all barriers crumble and fall."