

Dr. June Rose Colby (1856-1941)

June Rose Colby, known to friends and family as Rose, was born at Cherry Valley, Ohio on June 4, 1856. June Rose was the fourth of five children born to Lewis and Celestia Rice Colby. June Rose's early education was gained at home from her mother Celestia, "a woman of unusual gifts." After being home schooled for many years, she was enrolled in the seventh grade in Freeport, Illinois where she also attended high school. Dr. Colby spent her adult life as a literature teacher and a rather prolific author. She seems to have inherited this interest from her mother who spent much of her life writing. Her father was largely absent from the home in part because of his traveling in a variety of sales positions.

June Rose suffered some sort of illness or accident in her youth that her family feared she would not survive. Her mother confined her for months and nursed her back to health. June Rose recovered but never achieved full physical vigor. Descriptions of her over the years from many sources referred to her slight stature. What she lacked in physical traits seems to have more than been made up for by her intellectual achievements. In a period in which teachers often received jobs based on a tenth grade education and lawyers and doctors attended far less formal schooling than we would now expect, Rose had an educational background that would place her at the very pinnacle of educated people, men or women, of her time.

She graduated from Ann Arbor High School in Michigan and entered the University of Michigan in 1874 where she completed a four year A.B. degree. Following graduation from Michigan, she taught high school classes from 1878 until 1883 when she quit to return to school at what is now called Radcliffe (then the Harvard Annex). She transferred back to Michigan where she earned her A.M. degree in 1885. The following year she completed work for her Ph.D. at Michigan becoming one of the first women to achieve this honor. Even with these remarkable credentials Dr. Colby was unable to obtain a professorship. She taught high school for about six years in Peoria until she was hired at Illinois State Normal University.

In 1892 Dr. Colby was appointed professor of literature at ISNU. This was the thirty-fifth year of the school's existence and she was only the third female professor in that time. She also spent much of her time at the school as preceptress, or as it would be called in more recent times, Dean of Women.

Many of the courses Colby taught were in grammar and composition which were often considered the poor relatives of literature at that time. Much like modern teachers, she commented that many of her students struggled with the use of the paragraph and even with the sentence. She felt many were deficient in spelling.

Her work load was large with over a hundred students at times. Each student wrote twenty-seven exercises a semester and it wasn't unusual for Colby to have to read 14,000 words of student work a night, five nights a week. She was also ahead of her time in advocating an interdisciplinary approach where teachers of other subjects would stress the use of proper English.

June Rose Colby inherited from her mother a strong sense of expanding women's rights and their ability to compete with men. Upon achieving her position at ISNU, she became very involved with the Sapphonian Society, a society that provided social and

intellectual opportunities much as the men enjoyed in their debate societies. She was appointed its sponsor and remained so for twenty years.

Dr. Colby's interest in the suffrage movement also came from her mother and developed over the years. In an article written ten years before she came to ISNU she stated that the demands of teaching and the uncertainty of her own health prevented her from taking a larger role in the suffrage/women's rights movement. She felt that having an impact on her female students was what she could best accomplish. She talked of her small triumphs like getting one girl to give up "trashy reading". She also made sure the girls did not go out in cold weather without being properly dressed; something she said parents appreciated. Colby wrote that she was on friendly terms with her male students but took an extra interest in widening the horizons and expectations of her female students.

From this modest beginning she became a long time supporter of the suffrage movement and was an active member in the Normal Equal Suffrage Association which was organized in 1911. This group was "made up of women of the Faculty and women of the city of Normal" and regular meetings were held at her home every six weeks. She was also made a lifetime member of the state association. Her views in the area of women's rights were well known on campus and in 1894 the Index published a cartoon with two pictures of a local street car. The top picture was captioned, "President Cook's idea of street car accommodations." and shows three women seated and a man standing. Below that is one captioned, "Miss Colby's idea of street car accommodations." There are, of course, three men seated and one woman standing.

June Rose Colby's long tenure on campus saw her in the role of the leader in teaching classical literature and one of the leading advocates of the expanding role of women. She was active not only in the Sappho society and the Suffragist movement, but she was also a member of Phi Beta Kappa, the National Educational Association, the American Association of University Women, and an honorary member of the Delta Kappa Gamma Educational Society for women. Upon her retirement in July of 1931, after more than thirty-nine years of service at ISNU, she was made Emerita Professor of Literature.

Like many well known women of her day, June Rose never married. Typically when a woman got married she had to give up her career, what ever it may have been. This was especially true for women who taught. For June Rose, who devoted her life to teaching, this was not an issue. In a way, her students at ISNU were like her children and she cared a great deal for them.

On May 11, 1941 June Rose died at her home located at 302 West Mulberry Street, only a few steps from the campus where she spent more than half a century. Her obituary stated that she died among her favorite possessions including a large collection of books, a chair she had used in her classroom specially made to accommodate her slight stature, and a jar of rose petals, each representative of a happy point in her life.

Because she was so highly regarded and her influence at ISNU and in the surrounding community was so profound, the *Pantagraph* "devoted a two-column story and picture as well as an editorial celebrating her life and accomplishments." In the 1960s, twenty years after her death, ISNU built a new residence hall and named it after her; Colby Hall.