

CHAPTER ELEVEN

STORMY YOUNG REBELS¹

by Mabel Barbee Lee

Editor's Note: Mabel Barbee Lee was a graduate of the class of 1906 at Colorado College. She returned to the campus from 1921 to 1929 to serve as an administrator. She thus was the Dean of Women at Colorado College during the 1920s, when the "Roaring Twenties" hit campus social life with full force. She wrote this memoir of her experiences more than 20 years later for the Denver Post.

Freedom was the campus war cry in 1921. What could a bedeviled Dean of Women do against "progress"?

My arrival on the campus of Colorado College, that golden September in 1921, was greeted by the fulsome breath of prohibition and the clanging discords of "hot jazz." The docile freshman of my day had been replaced by a rebel, screaming for what he called freedom and self-expression.

They Checked Their Corsets

The neat mottoes from Emerson that had guided my generation had been torn from their passe-partouted frames and riddled beyond repair. Skirts had climbed dizzily from trains sweeping sidewalks to split sheathes barely covering knees. Shorn hair cluttered the floors of beauty parlors; the loss of braids was synonymous with the loss of virtue. Even some of the "nicest" girls, it was rumored, checked their corsets along with their coats at the dances, and they often drank, smoked and petted with the abandon of wenches. Chaperons, who had once busied themselves observing the thickness of petticoats against light, were pinned with corsages and banished

¹ Mabel Barbee Lee, "Stormy Young Rebels," *Empire Magazine*, *Denver Post*, December 30, 1951, p. 8-9.

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to obscure corners, where like the Chinese monkeys, they could neither see, speak nor hear any evil.

I had just become Dean of Women at Colorado College. It was the first time an alumna had held such a position at the Colorado Springs institution, and I was filled with a sense of inadequacy.

Example - or Warning?

A friend tried to make light of it by telling me a story. The teen-age daughter of a university President asked him what a Dean of Women was for. "Well, he said vaguely, "for one thing she is expected to set a good example." "*A good example!*" she repeated scornfully. "How terrible - I'd much rather be a warning!"

The requirements for a deanship in that day were sketchy. The duties were a hodgepodge of housekeeping, giving teas and going to them, presiding over meals, comforting the heartsick, disciplining the recalcitrant, making speeches, reprimanding the failures and laboring over them, chaperoning dances and leading evening prayers.

No university offered preparation for such work; no specific undergraduate courses were considered essential.

Morals Like Putty

The quality of female minds was still questioned; women's motives in going to college, suspect. It was feared that the coed was more interested in romance than in Romance languages. And she was distracting to men. She had to be restricted, locked in the dormitory by ten o'clock at night. Her manners needed polishing; she must understand that the morals of men are like putty in her dainty hands. This nondescript order was assigned to the Dean of Women.

My qualifications for the post were scanty. I had spent most of my time since graduation as the wife of a mining engineer, living in camps and towns far from centers of culture. Our music was "canned" along with the food. What theater we had was homegrown. Good books were plentiful, and the leisure for reading them; but the refinements of living were missing. A skinner's profane arguments with his mules were regarded as part of his equipment.



MABEL BARBEE LEE

She was the Dean of Women at Colorado College during the liberated days of the 1920s. (Photograph from Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.)

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I had learned to take strikes and riots, and an occasional murder, in stride. But I had grown rusty in the amenities, and had forgotten what was and was not done “by the best people.” My one asset was the fact that I had spent my own undergraduate years under a wise and accomplished Dean of Women [Ruth Loomis].

The widespread violation of the Volstead Act [prohibition of alcohol] had much to do with the flaunting of college authority when I took office. No campus escaped.

Sometimes mothers who had been brought up to believe the “lips that touch liquor must never touch mine” were not adverse to getting a bit high at country club parties, and making light of it.

Males Needed Protection

By the time their daughters were ready for college, they were apt to have learned not only to condone the hip flask but to expect it. And sons were likely to be more impressed by the ability of their fathers to make bathtub gin than by their knowledge of literature and history.

Deans of Women met with other educators to discuss the “crisis in modern colleges.” The moral fabric of the nation, they said, was rotting; the future was at stake. It was a great day for orating, but few came forth with concrete plans.

How could the cigarette menace be checked? What was to be done about the roistering, “unladylike” Charleston? Swearing was on the increase, “coarsening a girl’s voice, defiling her mind.” What could be done to stamp it out?

The fiction that men were the aggressor in petting had broken down. Girls were “leading them on at the risk of imminent disaster.” It was the male student, it seemed, who needed the protection of the Dean of Women!

Football rallies had changed from the well-ordered affairs of other years. Songs were racy, laughter suspiciously loose and raucous. Blanket-tossing, once a mild form of hazing limited to freshman boys, had begun to include girls.



THAT 1920s LOOK

Eleanor Bullock, photographed for the 1927 yearbook, typified the Colorado College woman student of the Roaring Twenties. (Photograph from Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.)

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Crisis in a Blanket

I never knew when I would see one of my squealing charges sprawling in the air, her legs describing fantastic angles in the light of the roaring bonfire, while the crowd yelled and shouted wisecracks. Shades of my own Dean [of Women]! What would she have done in a crisis of that sort?

She might have made rules, or even suspended the young hoydens. But such whips had lost their sting. They belonged to the period of “phony goodness.” Instead, the coeds were warned to wear gym bloomers under their skirts on rally nights. Oddly enough, our little charges soon lost their exhibition value and the boys let them alone.

Football games were, of course, the main attraction, but the unpredictable conduct of the crowds was equally exciting. Drunkenness was particularly conspicuous in a small college, and even more offensive.

I remember vividly one homecoming celebration. The grandstands were full of loyal alumni. Autumn sun slanted across the slopes of Mt. Manitou; the air was spicy with the fragrance of yellow chrysanthemums. The band played *Another Little Job for the Undertaker* while the fans sang and stamped their chilly feet. The [Colorado College] Tigers were pushing and shouldering their opponents up and down Washburn Field.

Everybody was happy, until our team was penalized fifteen yards, within two feet of a touchdown. Obscene hoots came from the bleachers not far from where I sat. Police rushed over and began struggling with two gesticulating coonskin coats. I couldn't see the wearers' faces as the pair was escorted through the rear gate. If it had occurred to me that this was also the route to the women's [dormitory] quadrangle, I might not have sat back so complacently.

Jessie, our maid, had no idea how the two fellows got in my quarters at Bemis Hall. She only saw them as they left. Never before had the Dean [of Women's] sanctum been so violated!

Bottles on the Mantel

[The Dean of Women's apartment] was a charming place little changed by the succession of occupants or the passing of years. Its wide picture window framed Pike's Peak. Books lined the walls. Above the rose

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brick fireplace a painting of a Venetian sunset by Iwill lent warmth to the flowers on the console table. Generations of students had gathered here on Sunday evenings to sing around the piano, or listen, as they watched the pine logs glowing, to readings from Thoreau, Whitman or William Ellery Channing.

But my bibulous callers cared little for such traditions. Sofa pillows were scattered about the room, a burnt hole still smoldering in one of them; cigarette butts littered the hearth; empty gin bottles stood on the mantel. And on my desk was a note in round, adolescent writing which read, "Thanks for the hospitalities, sorry to miss you. To hell with the referee!" It was signed, "A couple of hell-bent yoakels."

A committee was appointed to find the culprits, but faculty members were particularly naive and helpless in dealing with student misconduct. They ran into a conspiracy of silence. It was suggested that they give all male undergraduates a test on how to spell the work "yokel," but that might have netted an embarrassing lot of boys.

Nobody knew anything. Police failed to take down names; they were always tolerant during the football season. Townspeople were certain they were Colorado College students, but the students denied this indignantly. No loyal Tiger would be guilty of such acts! I was not so sure, but when I pressed the matter with one senior, he said, "You might as well forget it; nobody would squeal. Not even a girl - who knows when a guy might be in the same boat?" And there the matter rested for the time being.

I came to pray secretly for the home team's defeat. Victory always meant trouble. The bigger the score, the wilder the celebration. Most of it centered in and around the women's dormitories. I could hear singing and yelling in the distance where the shirt-tail parade was forming, long before the marching feet reached the quadrangle. As they approached, Bemis Hall seemed to tremble with foreboding. Upstairs the girls were running through the corridors, calling to each other, climbing out on window ledges and roofs, and clapping their hands in unison for the snake dancers winding down the driveway.



WOMEN'S DISCIPLINARY COUNCIL OF 1926

Women students accused of breaking the social rules were judged and, if necessary, punished by this council of five women students and, at upper left, Dean of Women Mabel Barbee Lee. (Photograph from Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.)

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Midnight Invasion

One midnight after a triumphant game I stood in the door, watching the oncoming horde. Torchlights cast weird shadows on the yellowing maples lining the square. As they flashed on the windows crowded with dark figures in pajamas and robes, a high, feminine voice called, "Come on in! Come on in!" Such an alluring invitation needed no repeating. I had to think fast. Jimmie, the leader, was already rushing up the steps. How comical he looked in his red union suit, a "KEEP OFF THE GRASS" sign slung over his shoulder! He grinned at me sheepishly, and I had to smile in spite of myself.

"The fellows want to come in and dance," he said. "What're you going to do about it?"

"At this hour?" I said, trying to look unconcerned.

"Sure!" chorused the others, shoving against the door. "We want in, we want in. Come on, fellows, we're goin' to raid the Dean's beanery!"

"Now wait a minute," I said. "You boys are crazy - the house can't possibly hold you all."

"We like a tight squeeze," shouted one. "Come on, don't let 'er bluff us."

Dean's Dilemma

They meant business; their faces were grim now. I realized that a compromise would have to be made.

"How would you like it," I said, suddenly inspired, "if the girls came out, instead, and danced with you on the lawn?"

The idea stunned them. This was something new and startling. Never before had the coeds been allowed out in the middle of the night.

"Did you hear that, fellows?" shouted Jimmie. "She's going to let 'em out -"

"On one condition," I said, pressing my advantage. "The whole thing must end by one o'clock."

"It's a deal," said Jimmie, "Give a hand, you guys."

Six lumbering athletes carried our best piano to the center of the quadrangle, and immediately the place came alive with swinging, swaying boys and girls. I walked over and stood by the bonfire. The "NO

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PARKING” and “PLEASE” signs crackled merrily in the flames as if glad to come at last to a useful end. The moon was high above old Cutler [Hall], like a ball that had just been kicked for a goal. The crowd hailed it with lusty songs.

*Oh, you can not twist the Tiger’s tail,
You’d better not try, you’ll surely fail -*

I was about to join in when I caught sight of a reporter from the [Colorado Springs] Gazette. Sudden fear gripped me. What would he make of this affair tomorrow? I could see the headlines: “College Dean Sanctions Midnight Brawl.” I could see, too, the size of the next freshman class diminishing; gifts to the endowment fund canceled; and me on the carpet before the Board of Trustees.

But no word appeared in the paper; the reputation of the Dean of Women remained intact. However, I did not escape a sly nudge in a ditty which the students wrote for the spring minstrel show. It was sung to the tune of *Mr. Gallahger and Mr. Shean*:

*Oh, Dr. Duniway,
Yes, Mrs. Lee.
Did you ever have a Dean as nice as me?
Ain’t the halls kept nice and clean,
Ain’t the Quad kept nice and green
Since I’ve been Dean at old C.C.?*

*But, Mrs. Barbee Lee,
Yes, Dr. D.
Is your moral uplift all that it should be?
I’ve heard rumors that the men
Keep the girls out after ten.
Is this true, Mrs. Lee?
Absolutely, Dr. D.*

Shirt-tail parades became routine after a while. But fraternity serenades were of another stripe, in no way related to the sweet, romantic moonlight crooning which fluttered the hearts of my generation.

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Late Sunday night was chosen for these modern, saxophonic orgies. One week for the sweethearts of Sigma Chi, another for the wearers of Beta pins, and so on through the alphabet. The fraternity men, unlike the footballers, coasted stealthily into the quadrangle, concealed in trucks and sedans. Their presence was not even suspected until the blast of kettle-drums sent a shudder through the house. Skyrockets streaked through the air; red flares lit up the square like an inferno.

I could hear the scraping of gravel, and the laughter of girls dancing together on the roof above the commons [of Bemis Hall]. Sometimes in the sudden flash of a Roman candle, I would recognize the pretty face of a freshman who must have crept down the fire escape snuggling against the manly shoulder of the driver of a yellow roadster.

The spectacle often lasted a full hour and sprang many surprises. Competition ran high. Fraternities which were strong in muscle but weak in music resorted to desperate measures for the limelight. Hula dancers, blues singers, fire eaters and contortionists were commonplace. Outraged church people telephoned the President and wrote letters to the [*Colorado Springs*] *Gazette*, but others gathered on the sidelines to chuckle and clap. Boredom set in finally, driving the students to search for other, quicker ways to shock the town and bedevil the faculty.

Alone, Tee-Hee

Freedom and self-expression for the women, at least, began to wear thin in spots. The all-college dance had resolved itself to lines of stags and wall flowers. But the girls were still able to sing merrily about their solitary state:

*“Oh, I must go to the all-college dance
Alone, tee-hee, alone.
And sit by myself with the chaperon
Alone, tee-hee, alone.
But if some lad should smile at me
I’d look at him and giggle with glee
Possibly then I would not be
Alone, tee-hee, alone.”*

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They became philosophical in the knowledge that, sooner or later, propinquity in classes and laboratory would accomplish what the dances had failed to do.

Colleges are no longer the same with the men going off to wars. And times have changed for Deans of Women. Some now call it a vanishing profession. Counselors and Directors of Women's Affairs are moving in, armed with Ph.D. or M.A. degrees in Psychology. Experts in human behavior, grounded in Freud and Adler and equipped with charts, graphs and surveys, are retained as consultants. They speak the strange language of nondirective techniques, inferiority complexes, and aggressive drives.

The counselor for women, wherever she may be, no longer has to worry about setting a good example; there is no question about what she is for. If you should visit her office she might offer you a cigarette from her monogrammed case. She has her own house at a comfortable distance from the campus. If you came to dinner she might serve a glass of sherry, or a cocktail.

But as I contemplate her, so competent and sure, so preoccupied with cumulative record and conference cards, a wave of nostalgia comes over me. Somehow the sound, the fury, and the gripping excitement have gone out of the job.

Immorality Today

And the stormy young rebels, where are they now? Scattered over the world and across the country. Solid citizens with families, living in white cottages on broad, elm-lined streets.

Not so long ago I received a note from one of them, a prosperous, respected leader in his community. He was thinking of sending one of his daughters to the "old Alma Mater," but he was seriously concerned about what he called the immorality of young people today.

"What is America coming to," he asked, "when even our privileged college students are behaving like a lot of hell-bent yoakels?"

Where had I seen that misspelling before? Even the handwriting with its trace of adolescent awkwardness was oddly familiar, and suddenly memory carried me back to the homecoming weekend almost three decades ago.