

# Eleanor's Vignettes



## Perry-Mansfield Camps nationally known

So ran a headline in the *Steamboat Pilot* (Colorado) on July 30, 1959, for an article featuring the achievements of Portia Mansfield and Charlotte Perry over the past 45 years. Stories in many newspapers testified to their contribution to young people through camping and the arts. But this is the story of Portia Mansfield—dancer, teacher, and innovative camp director.

At Smith College (B.A. 1910), Portia met Charlotte Perry and Helen Smith who became lifelong friends and coworkers. The 1910 decade emphasized women's rights and responsibilities and Helen, who was active in the suffrage movement, believed that every educated young woman should contribute to society by having a job. Portia was never an activist, but her life exemplified the new ideals for women.

Dancing lessons were the high point of her college years, despite the required dress—a serge middie blouse and woolen bloomers, with four yards of cloth in each leg, topped by a circular skirt.

Portia went to New York City upon graduation to study with the Pavley-Ourainsky Ballet. Her first job was teaching folkdancing to children who lived on New York's crowded East Side. After a season of teaching dance in Omaha, she became a resident of Chicago's famous Hull House, where she taught dance and physical education. She commuted by sleeper to Omaha twice a week to continue her work there.

In 1912 Portia spent a month in Colorado with the Perry family and fell in love with the West. There she

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and Charlotte decided to open a girls' summer camp which would combine simple outdoor pursuits and a wilderness experience with dance and the arts. They knew the going would not be easy, for there was money to earn and much to learn.

Charlotte joined Portia at Hull House in the fall to start work in earnest on their ambitious dream. The next two years were busy with classes in ballroom dancing for wealthy families and their studies and work at the settlement.

By the spring of 1914 they made a modest start with a camp on Lake Eldora. There, 15 young women, many of them Smith alumnae, rode horseback, danced, and lived out-of-doors to the amazement of spectators with spyglasses. Reporters wrote about "the nymphs dancing on the green with floating scarves."

The season was a success in spite of the unwanted publicity, but a more remote site, suitable for camping needed to be found. Another winter of hard work swelled their bank account and plans crystallized.

Early in 1915, they returned to Colorado to find just the right permanent site and prepare for the first season. Friendly miners gave them a mule, unsuited for work in the mines, but responsive to loving care. The search began when Tango, the mule, could be hitched to an old buggy.

They bought 15 secluded mountain acres near Steamboat Springs and built a road, taking \$800 from their slender budget. Carpenters were employed to erect a main lodge with a wide porch for dancing. Charlotte and Portia took turns rising at 4 a.m. to get breakfast for the workmen. The rest of the day they cleared trails, stained floors, and made curtains. Six tents were set up on platforms as living quarters. Candles provided the only light; water had to be pumped from the bottom of a 200-foot cliff; baggage and supplies were carried 1/4 mile to the main house and a team of horses brought in the heavy items.

The 19 campers of that first summer were excited about the dancing, the scenery, the wilderness trips, and the western life style. They helped with the work and assisted local farmers as needed. The dance program was still too innovative for local acceptance, but the campers looked forward to returning. After the summer's expenses were paid, they had \$500 left. Portia and Charlotte now felt sure that their ideas were sound and their motivation remained high.

Winters were spent in Chicago, working and studying (even carpentering with a group of coffin makers). Each succeeding summer saw an expansion of camp facilities, as a riding program

and plans for drama and dance with local performances brought new students and teachers. Recitals by the Perry-Mansfield Dance Company in the early 20s led to the formation of touring dance and vaudeville troupes which brought income to the camp and gave valuable experience to the students. But in 1933, the project fell victim to the depression and the rising movie industry.

After 1923, winters were spent in New York where Charlotte and Portia taught at Barnard College. Portia began graduate study at New York University, receiving an M.A. in anthropology in 1933.

Portia joined the Camp Directors Association (CDA), and in 1936 was elected vice president of the newly incorporated American Camping Association (ACA), with Herbert Twining as president. This was an eventful period with the new headquarters moved to Ann Arbor and receipt of the Chrysler grant. When Twining resigned to become ACA executive director, Portia succeeded him as president.

As time passed, she found new interests and challenges and became an expert photographer and pioneer maker of films for teaching purposes. Her keen interest in other cultures led to a six-year study of the Conchero Indians of Mexico, culminating in a detailed film documentary. This was accepted as her doctoral thesis and she received the Ed.D. degree from N.Y.U. in 1963.

During World War II, Portia worked with a physician to develop exercise programs for older women and became an early advocate of dance therapy. After the war she traveled extensively in Europe, up the Nile, over the Sahara by camel, and to exotic places in the Middle East.

By 1960, camp registration had reached 400, with three camps accommodating different ages, each with its own grounds, staff, and program. A Julie Harris Theater was built, paying tribute to her long association with the camp. She was but one of many famous artists—Jose Limon, Dustin Hoffman, Agnes DeMille . . .

In 1965 the camp was sold to Stephens College, but Portia did not retire. With Helen Smith she directed a small camp for boys featuring wilderness trips and river rafting. At 83, she and a counselor took the group on a trip down the Colorado River and over the rapids.

Honors were many—notably the Governor's Award in 1970 and the ACA Honor Award in 1975. Portia died in 1979 at Carmel, where she had long spent her winters with Charlotte. In a letter to the writer in 1977, Portia

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commented, "A lot has happened since I was President of ACA . . . ACA has been sort of a BACKBONE to the camp and to me . . . Remember me to my good friends at Bradford Woods."

*Acknowledgments:* Special thanks to Nancy Swank, the *Steamboat Pilot*, the *Denver Post* and former PMC staff.

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