

**OLSON, Emma J.** December 7, 1892–November 14, 1981.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA (BA 1915), UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO (MA 1924, PhD 1932).

Emma Julia Olson was born in Fairview, South Dakota, the fourth of seven surviving children of Julia (Erickson) (1860–1929) and Sven Olson (1848–1940), both natives of Norway. Her parents farmed in Lincoln County, South Dakota, near the Iowa border. She had four sisters and two brothers: Annetta Celia (1883–1955), Anna Marie (1885–1973), Oscar S. (1889–1968), Nora B. (1894–1984), Henry C. (1898–1928), and Selma G. (1899–1978).

Olson received her high school and her college education at the University of South Dakota and earned her bachelor's degree in June 1915. From 1916 to 1919 she taught mathematics, physics, and chemistry at a high school in Milbank, South Dakota. From 1920 to 1923 she taught at the College of Industrial Arts, a college for women in Denton, Texas, which was renamed Texas State College for Women in 1934 and has been Texas Woman's University since 1957.

In September 1923 she entered the University of Chicago, studied there for four consecutive quarters, wrote her master's thesis under the direction of E. P. Lane, and received her degree in August 1924. During the second semester of 1924–25, she was acting head of the department at the River Falls Normal School, which in 1926 became the River Falls State Teachers College, and is now the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. From 1926 to 1930 she taught at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

Olson resumed her graduate work at the University of Chicago and completed the work for her PhD in 1932 with a dissertation in projective differential geometry, again directed by E. P. Lane. She was acting head of the department at Mount Saint Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas, during the second semester of 1934–35 and was assistant professor at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, 1935–36.

In January 1937 Olson joined the faculty at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. She was instructor 1937–40, assistant professor 1940–45, associate professor 1945–51, professor 1951–63, and emeritus professor after her retirement in 1963. [Frances Harshbarger](#) had come to Kent State a year before Olson and also spent the rest of her career there.

Emma Olson traveled widely in Europe, Scandinavia, and “the Holy Land.” After her retirement, she returned to the county of her birth and died at the Good Samaritan Center in Canton, South Dakota, of pneumonia and congestive heart failure at age eighty-eight in 1981. She was survived by a sister and nieces and nephews and was buried in Fairview, South Dakota.

**Organizational affiliations:** AMS, MAA, AAAS (fellow), Sigma Delta Epsilon, AAUP, Sigma Xi.

**Thesis and dissertation:**

**1924** Metric classification of pencils of conics. MA thesis, University of Chicago, directed by Ernest Preston Lane.

**1932** Conjugate systems characterized by special properties of their ray congruences. PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, directed by Ernest Preston Lane. Private edition, 1934, distributed by the University of Chicago Libraries.

**References to:** AmMSc 8, 9P–11P.

**Other sources:** South Dakota birth certificate; MA thesis vita 1924; PhD dissertation vita 1932; Owens questionnaires 1937, 1940; Register of Deeds, Lincoln County, SD; communication with Kent State University Archives; US Census 1910, 1920 SD, 1930 IL; South Dakota death certificate.

Last modified: December 12, 2008.