

**MOODY, Ethel I.** February 9, 1905–April 11, 1941.

WELLS COLLEGE (BA 1926), CORNELL UNIVERSITY (MA 1927, PhD 1930).

Ethel Isabel Moody was born in Rushville, New York, the second of two children of Alice Arminda (Stearns) (b. 1866) and Edward L. Moody (b. 1865), both natives of New York State who married in 1889 in Rushville. The family lived in Gorham in Ontario County, New York, about six miles from Rushville. Her father was a farmer, who in 1921 was president of the Ontario County Sheep Growers Co-Operative Association, Inc. In the late 1920s he was town supervisor. Her brother, Robert E. Moody (1897–1992), graduated from Cornell in 1918, the year Ethel Moody entered Rushville High School. He was a teacher and was, after his retirement, the Gorham, New York, town historian.

After her high school graduation in 1922, Moody entered Wells College in Aurora, New York, about fifty-five miles from her home. Letters dating from the fall of 1922 in her brother's papers give an indication of her first few weeks at college. "I see right now where I'm going to flunk everything except math" (Robert Moody Papers, #2473. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library). She writes that she likes everything she is taking except history. She also writes that she likes her mathematics professor, Dr. Hollcroft, who is head of the department, and notes that there are four in her math class with the others being sophomores and juniors. In a later letter she mentions that the other girls got C's on the math quiz and that she got an A. She also says that she will try out for basketball but does not think that she will make the team.

Moody graduated from Wells with high honors in mathematics in 1926. Virgil Snyder, who later became her thesis and dissertation advisor at Cornell, wrote a letter of recommendation for Moody on February 19, 1930, to [Eugenie Morenus](#) at Sweet Briar College. In it he described how he and another Cornell professor had been invited to conduct the 1926 honors examinations in mathematics at Wells College. "We sent up a series of five three-hour papers, together covering all four years, and after the papers had been written, we read them. Miss Moody, one of the candidates, was awarded High Honors. I met her and invited her to come to Cornell, which she did, the following September" (Sweet Briar College Archives). Moody attended Cornell on a scholarship, wrote a thesis under the direction of Snyder in algebraic geometry, and received her master's degree in 1927.

During the summer of 1927, Professor T. S. Fiske, professor of mathematics at Columbia University and secretary of the College Entrance Examination Board, asked Snyder to recommend an advanced student to assist in the clerical work and statistical study of the Board's ratings. Snyder proposed Moody, who was appointed, and, as he explained in his February 1930 letter of recommendation to Morenus, "after two weeks of routine work she was offered the position of director of this work, in charge of 80 girls." Moody returned to Wells as an instructor for the academic year 1927–28, substituting for [Evelyn Carroll \(Rusk\)](#) who was absent on leave for graduate study at Columbia. During that year Moody taught solid geometry, college algebra, trigonometry, analytic geometry, calculus, and projective geometry.

Moody then returned to Cornell to complete her doctoral work. She was appointed an Erastus Brooks fellow upon her return, and at the end of the first year she was reappointed. Snyder noted in his 1930 letter of recommendation that this

happened despite the fact that “there were several worthy competitors. This is an honor unique in the history of this Department at Cornell University.” Her major and first minor subjects throughout her graduate work were algebraic geometry and mathematical analysis, respectively; her second minor for her doctoral work was philosophy. Her 1930 dissertation in algebraic geometry was directed by Virgil Snyder. Snyder’s 1930 letter continues, “In geometry she has had thorough courses in Projective Geometry, Advanced analytic geometry of two and of three dimensions, Algebraic curves, Cremona transformations, and the Theory of algebraic surfaces, and of mapping. In every course she had done strictly A grade work. The thesis is on a group of cubic Cremona transformations in space, and is one of the very best that has been written under my direction.” Moody was the twenty-first student, and eighth woman, to receive a PhD under Snyder’s direction.

Early in 1930 Moody received a letter from Eugenie Morenus, head of the mathematics department at Sweet Briar College, a college for women in Virginia, telling her of an expected vacancy in the fall of 1930. The vacancy was created because [Julia Wells Bower](#), who had been an instructor there since 1927, was leaving to resume graduate work at the University of Chicago. Snyder’s letter of recommendation assured Morenus that “with a sympathetic environment,” he was “sanguine that Miss Moody [would] develop into an unusually good teacher and investigator of mathematics. . . . She is . . . in vigorous health, of attractive appearance, and pleasing manners, and of a particularly winsome and agreeable personality” (Sweet Briar College Archives). Moody took the position and spent three years as an instructor at Sweet Briar.

In 1933 Moody moved to Pennsylvania State College, again as an instructor. She wrote her mother that “I have so much more sympathy for these kids than I did for the ones at Sweet Briar” (Robert Moody Papers). Moody spent the last eight years of her life as an instructor at Penn State. Publications from this period consist of reviews and a short note in the *Bulletin* of the AMS. She also contributed several solutions to the problems section of the *American Mathematical Monthly*, two which were published. Moody was active at the national level in Sigma Delta Epsilon, a fraternity for graduate women in science, and was treasurer in 1939 and 1940.

In the late 1930s, writing for her entry to *American Women: The Official Who’s Who Among the Women of the Nation*, Moody described her religious affiliation as Congregational, noted that she was a member of the American Red Cross, and wrote that her favorite recreation was horseback riding and that she was the author of articles for professional journals. She registered to vote as a Democrat in 1940.

Moody bought an automobile, a 1935 Chevrolet Deluxe Coupe, for \$275 in the fall of 1939. New York and Pennsylvania drivers licenses from then indicate that she was five feet four inches tall, weighed about one hundred thirty pounds, and had gray eyes and light brown hair. At age thirty-six, on April 11, 1941, Moody died of a fractured skull “when her automobile left a highway near Rushville and plunged down an embankment” (Obituary). A letter of condolence to her mother from the dean’s office in the School of Liberal Arts at Pennsylvania State, notes that, “In my conversation with other College Officials . . . I soon learned how much they feel the loss of Ethel. . . . You can be comforted with the fact that while she was with us, she was truly a teacher and a character which inspired her students

to the higher ideals of life. She not only taught the higher ideals of life but lived them herself" (Robert Moody Papers).

**Organizational affiliations:** AMS, MAA, AAAS, Sigma Delta Epsilon, AAUW, Sigma Xi, Pi Mu Epsilon, Phi Kappa Phi.

**Thesis and dissertation:**

**1927** Quartic surfaces invariant under a Cremona group of order sixteen. MA thesis, Cornell University, directed by Virgil Snyder. Typescript.

**1930** A Cremona group of order thirty-two of cubic transformations in three-dimensional space. PhD dissertation, Cornell University, directed by Virgil Snyder. Typescript. Printed version, 1930, reprinted from *Amer. J. Math.* 53:460–74.

**Publications:**

**1931** A Cremona group of order thirty-two of cubic transformations in three-dimensional space. *Amer. J. Math.* 53:460–74. Published version of PhD dissertation. Reviews: *JFM* 57.0798.02 (F. Schaale); *Zbl* 001.22401 (E. G. Togliatti).

**1939** Review of *Trigonometry*, by H. K. Hughes and G. T. Miller. *Amer. Math. Monthly* 46:354–55.

**1941** Review of *College Algebra*, by H. T. Davis. *Amer. Math. Monthly* 48:400–401.

**1943** Notes on the Bertini involution. *Bull. Amer. Math. Soc.* 49:433–36. Published posthumously. Reviews: *MR* 4,253c (V. Snyder); *Zbl* 061.32705 (M. Zacharias).

**References to:** AmMSc 5–6; AmWom 1935–40.

"Gorham Girl Again Awarded Fellowship." *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 15 May 1929. (With photograph.)

Obituary. Unidentified newspaper clipping, 12 Apr 1941.

**Related manuscript material:**

Robert Moody Papers, #2473. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

**Other sources:** Owens questionnaire 1937; Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library; New York State Archives; communication with Sweet Briar College Archives; US Census 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930 NY.

Last modified: July 20, 2009.