

**WIDDER, Vera (Ames).** December 12, 1909–May 18, 2004.

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN (BA 1931, MA 1932), BRYN MAWR COLLEGE (PhD 1938).

Vera Adela Ames was born in Milestone, Saskatchewan, south of Regina, and was the daughter of Margaret Ophelia (Mooney) (1876–1960) and Charles Edgar Ames (1878–1980), both originally from Ontario. Her mother attended school in Brussels, Ontario, and became a seamstress; her father attended five different rural schools and later farmed near Milestone. Her parents, who had known one another in Ontario, married in 1905 after their families moved to southeastern Saskatchewan. There were five children: Margaret Iola (b. 1907), Vera, Charles Roy (b. 1912), Alice Isabel (b. 1914), and Thelma Gertrude (b. 1916). Writing for the 1984 Milestone local history book, Roy and Thelma described their early years: “We recall a home where we found love, caring, fun, and discipline. Dad led regular family worship. Mother loved to read and often read aloud to us. We were encouraged in our school work and in music. When we were small Mother and Dad played piano and violin for family singsongs.” The children “attended Milestone School, the daily trips [being] made with horses. . . . Both Iola and Vera attended Regina College to obtain grade 12 as that grade was not taught [then] in Milestone” (*From Prairie Plow till Now*, 84, 85). The family was active in the Milestone United Church, a local union of the Methodist and Presbyterian churches.

Vera Ames originally intended to take a teacher training program after finishing high school so that she could teach in a country school. However, as she reported in 1981, “farming was prosperous in the late ’20s and my parents asked if I wanted to go to university. I thought that was a nice idea so I did. I planned on taking teacher training and teaching high school when I finished university” (Smithsonian tapes). Ames attended the University of Saskatchewan from 1928 until 1932, when she received her master’s degree. She had earned her BA in the customary three-year program, with high honors in mathematics, in 1931. That year she was also one of two awarded the University Gold Medal, given only to those “whose standing is considerably in advance of that required for High Honors or Great Distinction.” She later wrote that she “had been able to finance [her] senior year, thanks to the generosity of Professor Dines and Dean Ling who paid [her] out of their own pockets to mark their calculus students papers” (*From Prairie Plow till Now*, 85). She spent her last two years at Saskatchewan as an assistant in the mathematics department.

After receiving her master’s degree, Ames was a resident fellow at Bryn Mawr College 1932–34. The following year she was a substitute instructor at H. Sophie Newcomb College for Marie Weiss, who was studying with Emmy Noether at Bryn Mawr College that year. Nola Anderson (Haynes) was chairman of the mathematics department at Newcomb at the time. The next year Ames was a part-time teacher at the Baldwin School in Bryn Mawr, while continuing her graduate studies at the college. In 1936–37 she was a teacher at Miss Fine’s School in Princeton, New Jersey. Ames returned as an instructor to the University of Saskatchewan in 1937 and remained there for two years. In 1938 she received her doctorate from Bryn Mawr with a dissertation directed by Anna Pell Wheeler on systems of linear equations in infinitely many unknowns. A shortened version of the title, “Linear equations with  $n$  parameters,” appeared on the 1938 Bryn Mawr commencement program and in the announcement of her dissertation in the *Bulletin* of the AMS.

Vera Ames and David Vernon Widder, who had met at Anna Pell Wheeler’s summer home in the Adirondacks, were married on June 12, 1939. David V. Widder was born March 25, 1898, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; received his BA 1920, MA 1923, and PhD 1924 from Harvard; and was on the faculty there at the time of their marriage. He had taught at Bryn Mawr 1924–31. He remained on the faculty at Harvard until his retirement in 1968. He was assistant professor 1931–32, associate professor 1932–37, and professor 1937–68. He

was a Sheldon fellow in Paris 1920–21 and a National Research Council fellow at Chicago and Rice 1926–27. He had a Guggenheim fellowship in 1935–36 and Fulbright fellowships in 1955–56 and in 1962–63.

Vera Widder was an instructor at Cambridge Junior College 1942–44 and 1945–47. She was a lecturer at UCLA during 1948–49 and at Tufts College 1950–51. According to her obituary, she also tutored as a volunteer as part of the Boston school integration program and in the Concord prison. The Widders had two children: a son, David Charles, born in about 1940, and a daughter, Edith Anne, born in Boston in June 1951. Vera Widder wrote in 1984 that she has a “son with a Masters in Engineering who works with computers and robots, and a daughter with a PhD in Biology who sometimes sails the ocean in research vessels” (*From Prairie Plow till Now*, 85).

Vera Ames Widder and D. V. Widder both contributed written reminiscences to a symposium in honor of Anna Pell Wheeler sponsored by the Association for Women in Mathematics and held at the joint mathematics meetings in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in August 1980. Vera Widder wrote, “Though Anne successfully combined career and marriage, it was not an easy road. During most of the long years of Mr. Pell’s illness, she carried a heavy teaching program and the economic problems of living on a woman’s salary. During her happy years in Princeton, as a professor’s wife, I suspect she was influenced by a fairly prevalent attitude: ‘One career in a home is enough’ - words used by George David Birkhoff [D. V. Widder’s advisor at Harvard] to me in 1939, soon after Dave and I were married” (1982, 10).

Both Widders were skilled pianists and bridge players. David Vernon Widder died of a heart attack at their home in Arlington, Massachusetts, on July 8, 1990. A memorial service was held in a United Universalist church in Arlington. Vera Widder remained in Arlington until 1998 when she moved to Sarasota, Florida, where she died at age ninety-four in 2004. She was survived by her two children, two grandsons, two great-grandchildren, and a brother and two sisters. Contributions in her name could be made to Planned Parenthood in Sarasota. Her estate plans included gifts to Bryn Mawr College and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

**Organizational affiliations:** AMS, MAA.

**Dissertation:**

**1938** [Ames, V.] On systems of linear equations in Hilbert space with  $n$  parameters. PhD dissertation, Bryn Mawr College, directed by Anna Pell Wheeler. Typescript. Microfilm: 1944 [Widder, V. A.], University Microfilms, #670. Abstract: [Widder, V. A.] *Microfilm Abstracts* 6:96–97.

**Publications:**

**1982** Vera Ames Widder. In “Anna Johnson Pell Wheeler (1883–1966): Colloquium Lecturer, 1927,” ed. B. A. Case, 10. *AWM Newsletter* 12 (4): 4–13. Adaptation: 1996, “Reminiscences about Anna Johnson Pell Wheeler.” In *A Century of Mathematical Meetings* ed. B. A. Case, 311–19. Providence, RI: American Mathematical Society.

**References to:** AMSc 8, 9P.

“Vera A. Widder.” (Obituary) *Arlington (MA) Advocate*, 27 May 2004.

**Other source:** Owens questionnaire 1940; Smithsonian meeting tapes 1981; University of Saskatchewan Archives; *From Prairie Plow till Now: Milestone and Districts*, Milestone History Book Committee, 1984; [FAS Memorial Minute: David V. Widder](#), *Harvard University Gazette*.

Last modified: August 1, 2009.