

BUCK, Elsie (McFarland). June 3, 1897–January 11, 1984.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA (BA 1917, MA 1918, PhD 1920).

Elsie Jeannette McFarland was born in St. Louis, Missouri, the only child of Lillian (Hope) (b. 1867) and Francis W. McFarland (b. 1863), Missouri natives. They had married in about 1896 and moved by 1900 to San Francisco, California, where Frank McFarland was a clerk in a pension office. In 1910 the family was living in Covina, in southern California, and Francis McFarland was a high school teacher. In 1920 they were in Berkeley and he was a clerk.

Elsie McFarland attended high school in Covina and Pasadena, California, before doing all of her undergraduate and graduate work at the University of California in Berkeley. She was a member of Alpha Phi social sorority as an undergraduate. After graduating in 1917, she began her graduate work and received her master's degree in 1918. She was a university fellow in mathematics 1918–19 and an assistant in mathematics 1919–20 before receiving her doctorate in 1920 with minor subject physics. In September 1920 she presented her dissertation as the first speaker at the university's newly organized women's mathematical honor society, Mu Theta Epsilon.

The next two years McFarland taught mathematics and physics at high schools in California; she was at Maryville High School 1920–21 and at Newman High School 1921–22. During the years 1922–25 McFarland taught as a part-time instructor at three schools in the San Francisco area: the University of California 1922–25, Dominican College in San Rafael 1922–24, and Mills College 1924–25.

In 1925 McFarland moved to the University of Oklahoma as an instructor and was promoted to assistant professor in 1927. She resigned her position at Oklahoma in 1931 for personal reasons. She was living with her parents, who it appears had moved with her to Norman, Oklahoma. She was a visiting PhD at the University of Chicago in the summer of 1931.

McFarland then moved to Spokane, Washington. In November 1930 she reflected on her situation in an interview conducted by Don Haacke for an oral history project at Boise State University. "I was teaching and semi-starving at a very small college in Spokane, known as Spokane University. . . . At any rate, we were not getting paid very much money. I [taught] my whole nine months there for \$360 and a box of apples and some kitchen cleanser donated by one of the students as part of his tuition. And I was sending out something like 300 or 400 letters of application all over the country. This was in 1932 . . . when jobs were very few and far between" (p. 1). McFarland then learned that a junior college was to be opened by the Episcopal Church in Boise, Idaho, on the site of St. Margaret's Hall, a school for girls run by the church.

McFarland joined the first faculty of eight at the new Boise Junior College as a teacher of mathematics and German that fall of 1932, at triple her previous salary plus room, board, and laundry. After two years the church withdrew its financial support, and the possibility that the school would close loomed so large that McFarland again sent out applications and accepted a job at Jones County Junior College, a combined agricultural high school and junior college in Ellisville, Mississippi. She was there 1934–37 before accepting an invitation from the new president of the still surviving Boise Junior College to return and teach mathematics and German.

Initially McFarland taught all the mathematics at the school and later was the ranking member in mathematics within the Physical Science Division. Her teaching of veterans after World War II was among the most satisfying of her career. In her November 21, 1980, interview she noted that “except for the first two-year students at the beginning of the junior college, I never had a nicer group of people than the veterans. I had big classes; we might have, maybe, a calculus class of 45 or 50 students, the room packed with them. The nicest, most cooperative people to work with. They knew what they wanted, they’d been out in the war, they were back in school, they knew what they wanted to do” (p. 13). She also served on many college committees including those concerned with scholarship standards, scholarship loans and grants-in-aid, and curriculum.

When McFarland originally moved to Boise, her parents accompanied her. In 1947 she married Roy M. Buck, a civil engineer, who died in 1952. She retired from the college as professor emeritus in 1968, three years after it was granted four-year status and renamed Boise College (now Boise State University). She taught an occasional course after her retirement.

Elsie M. Buck loved music and played clarinet in the college orchestra for many years. She also purchased and played a grand piano in a room in her home built to accommodate it. She and a friend made frequent trips to San Francisco for the opera. She belonged to the faculty women’s bridge club for nearly fifty years. She was active in, and served as president of, the Altrusa Club and was a member of the Episcopal church in Boise. She was fond of animals, especially cats; loved to garden; and owned a small cabin outside of Boise where she spent time in the summer.

Elsie McFarland Buck died of heart failure in a Boise, Idaho, hospital at eighty-six in 1984. Services were conducted at All Saints Episcopal Church, and she was buried in Morris Hill Cemetery in Boise. She was survived by two step-children and a cousin. The list of her heirs attests to her devotion to animals, her church, and many close friends.

Organizational affiliations: AMS, MAA, Phi Beta Kappa, Sigma Xi.

Thesis and dissertation:

1918 [McFarland, E. J.] On the general astroid and on the quasi-parallel curve. MA thesis, University of California, Berkeley, directed by John Hector McDonald.

1920 [McFarland, E. J.] On a special quartic curve. PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, directed by John Hector McDonald. Typescript. Printed version, 1923, reprinted from *Univ. California Publ. Math.* 1:389–400.

Publication:

1923 [McFarland, E. J.] A special quartic curve. *Univ. California Publ. Math.* 1:389–400. Published version of PhD dissertation. Reviews: *JFM* 49.0463.03 (E. Löffler); *Rev. semestr. publ. math.* 34, pt. 1:53 (D. J. Struik).

Abstract:

1935 [McFarland, E. J.] A construction for the tangents at the nodes of the rational plane quintic. *Amer. Math. Monthly* 42:411 #4. Presented to the MAA, Pineville, LA, 30 Mar 1935.

References to: AmMSc 4.

Chandler, Eve Brassey. “Ahead of Her Time: A Profile of Dr. Elsie Buck.” *Focus Magazine*, Boise State University, 1982.

“Elsie M. Buck.” (Obituary) Unidentified newspaper clipping.

Unpublished interview:

Buck, Elsie. Interview by Don Haacke, 21 Nov 1980. "Conversation between Mr. Don Haacke and Dr. Elsie Buck, November 21, 1980, in her home in Boise," OH-20, Special Collections Department, Albertsons Library, Boise State University. Transcript.

Other sources: Owens questionnaire 1940; University of California, Berkeley, Archives; University of Chicago Archives; communications with Boise friends (Helen L. Thomson, Lois Chaffee, Richard Ward, Janet Ward), Boise State University Special Collections, and University of Oklahoma Office of Senior Vice President and Provost; US Census 1900, 1910, 1920 CA, 1930 OK.

Last modified: July 20, 2009.