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## MAY CHENEY'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE MODERN UNIVERSITY

*Anne J. MacLachlan*

CALIFORNIA AT THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY experienced rapid population growth and a tumultuous expansion of its education system. Immigrants to the state as well as the reproduction of established settlers led to an upsurge in school age children and not enough schools or teachers to accommodate them. The school system expanded from "not more than twenty real High Schools in the state" in 1890 to one hundred and ten in 1897.<sup>1</sup> Such institutions of higher education present in the state at that time were not able to train adequate numbers of teachers, and indeed qualifications to become a teacher varied greatly, with as little as an incomplete high school or normal school education being enough for elementary school teaching, although after 1875 new teachers had to be at least eighteen years of age.<sup>2</sup> The University of California played a very significant role in all of this, on one hand through the training and provision of teachers, and on the other by the active participation of its pedagogy faculty in shaping high school curriculum and in the organizing institutions for the K-12 system such as the State Board of Education.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the complicated educational needs of the developing state in turn did much to shape the university and define its internal structure and organization. More remarkably, one practical, farsighted individual, May L. Shepard Cheney '83, clearly understood the nature of these needs and worked to create the university offices which could satisfy them.

One of these needs was to place Berkeley graduates in high school teaching positions appropriate to both the graduates' qualifications and the districts' requirements. Before it came to the attention of the president of the university, May Cheney was already trying to satisfy the state's demand for teachers through the operation of the Pacific Coast Bureau of Education. Located in San Francisco, the Bureau was run by herself and jointly owned by her husband, Warren Cheney '78. At the time this was the only placement bureau in the state. It had been established by May Cheney in 1887 "with the distinct purpose of registering women graduates of Eastern Colleges in order that the great demand for teachers in California might be met."<sup>4</sup> From 1892 through January of 1893, the Bureau placed twenty-eight Berkeley teachers, the number rising gradually to forty-eight between January and October 1897; a total of over 210 Berkeley graduates were placed. As the very first organization of its kind, Cheney's Bureau was "frequently used" by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to find teachers particularly for "the many newly organized schools in Southern California."<sup>5</sup>

While the Bureau was very successful, steadily placing among others a growing number of Berkeley graduates, and the president of the university was satisfied with its work, he felt that the university should have its own appointment office. May Cheney herself was far from satisfied about how the university recommended its graduates, and she felt strongly that the procedure then in use was politically damaging for



May L. Shepard, 1883.  
*University Archives.*

the growing university. In a letter to President Kellogg on September 13, 1897, she detailed the inefficiency of the current practice and its consequences:

You know that in past years the recommendation of graduates for teachers' positions has been made by any member of the faculty of whom inquiry might chance to be made, who without any conference with other members of the faculty, or even with the head of the department most concerned, and without opportunity for learning the special needs of the school, often endorsed teachers on the basis of classroom knowledge alone. The result must often be a failure, even in cases where the graduate might have been a success in some school to which he was better fitted. Such a failure always reacts upon the University, because in no case where a teacher is endorsed by a member of the Faculty can the school authorities be made to understand that that teacher has not been endorsed by the University. Moreover it often happens that contradictory recommendations are given by different members of the Faculty, and in the end the position goes to some outside teacher.

The time has come when some plan must be adopted for recommending graduates with due regard to the difficulties of each position, and with unity and authority in the University recommendation. For the success of its graduates in the secondary schools depends the whole relation of the University and the schools—perhaps it is not too much to say the whole future of the University.<sup>6</sup>

In this same letter she indicated her interest in becoming the person to develop new procedures and coordinate recommendations, pointing to her ten years experience with her bureau. As Kellogg and May Cheney clearly had a very good working relationship he gave her the flyer of the Harvard University Appointments Committee (begun in 1895) and asked her to think about how Berkeley could manage the process in a way more consistent with the needs of the campus and community. The result was a tightly argued letter to him in which she commented extensively on the Harvard procedure and detailed how the process could work at Berkeley. She argued that the placement season for teachers in California occurred during the months of July and August, two months later than in the East, and long after faculty had left for their well-earned rest. So it was impractical to involve large numbers of faculty in the process when they were not available. Moreover, she argued "We want to concentrate the responsibility, fix it with one person and let it be the main business of that person to prepare himself to discharging the duties of this particular office." These duties are the recommending of graduates, and the person who does so "may be known as the President's Secretary as most of the letters of inquiry will be addressed to him. The advice of the Schools Committee would take the place of that of the committee known at Harvard as the Appointment Committee, and whenever necessary other members of the Faculty could be freely consulted by the person in charge of this work." In a usually infallible argument when proposing something new to an administrator, she went on to point out, "This plan will have the advantage of making use of the machinery already in operation at the university. The matter of keeping the office open during the summer vacation can be attended to without adding to the duties of the Faculty, and the recorder's office can be relieved of its almost unbearable strain."<sup>7</sup>

Given the perfect unanimity of purpose, on October 12 May Cheney was proposed and approved for the new position she had outlined and was appointed effective January 1, 1898. Stanford, it will be noted, began its teacher placement office the same year under the dean

of the School of Education who continued the more common custom of supervising and directing teacher placement as an extension of his academic responsibilities. The Berkeley office, however, pioneered the use of an "Appointment Secretary," and created over the years a formidable mechanism for finding jobs for teachers which continued to lead all other California placement organizations in the volume of placements in the state. May Cheney's original bureau was sold, but it continued as a major placer of teachers.<sup>8</sup>

Because May Cheney took a position at the university which was newly created for her, her initial salary was cobbled together from that of a "typewriter" (typist) and a clerk, coming to \$55 a month. She was not very happy with the situation, and in a detailed letter to the regents she described the vast scope of her responsibilities, all of which rapidly became the work of many people in separate offices not long after her letter was written. The letter is instructive as it shows the modern university in formation. Her primary activities fairly quickly led to a full-fledged placement office, but she also served as secretary to the president, and collected and disseminated information



May Cheney, ca. 1920.  
*University Archives.*

about and for other institutions, augmented by providing speakers and lecturers for high schools, creating the groundwork for what became the Office of Relations with Schools. She further handled the "accrediting relation" with high school principals for the recorder (registrar), in reference to the university's certifying of high school programs of study as adequate for the admission of graduates to Berkeley. In addition, May Cheney undertook the certification of teachers; while related to appointment work, it was an extra time-consuming process involving working with faculty, securing recommendations, and issuing the actual certificate. In May 1898 she reported certifying more than 100 teachers in that month alone. If this were not enough, she collected and distributed to the press what she calls "authentic news in regard to University affairs," developing a practice of news collection from faculty which would become the Public Information Office.<sup>9</sup> The woman certainly deserved more than \$55 a month and apparently must have received it since her salary in 1904 was reported to be \$1,000 per annum.<sup>10</sup> More significant than her salary for posterity, however, is the way in which she laid the logical groundwork for evolving university functions.

During the time that May Cheney was operating the Pacific Coast Bureau of Education the state of California, the first state to do so, required college graduation as a condition for a high school teacher's certificate in 1893. This was followed in 1905 by a mandate from the State Board of Education that required supervised practice teaching before issuing a teaching certificate. A central issue, therefore, in placing teachers was certifying their qualifications. All of the "Appointment Offices" which developed in the beginning of the twentieth century in California colleges and universities became the offices of record for the teaching credential and other students' official records, such as transcripts and letters of recommendation.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, today the teacher placement section of the UC Berkeley Career Center still fulfills this function, although in a very different form.

At the turn of the century, however, office practice, while manifesting many characteristics of the modern university placement office, differed greatly from that of today in the important respect that registrants did not then have free access to all possible positions. Instead, the appointment secretary maintained a file of qualified teachers and as vacancies arose selected from this filing system a few to apply, who then did so directly. For May Cheney, the proper selection of candidates for a particular job was the heart of the appointment secretary's work, since a successful placement not only profited candidate and district, but advanced the interests of the university. This practice of personal selection by the secretary continued until 1964 with the passage of the first civil rights laws guaranteeing equal access to all positions.

Remarkably, the University of California office had 3,217 registered teachers on file in 1925, far more than any of the other twenty-seven agencies in the state. With such a population to serve, there was a need to dispatch business rapidly, resulting in the "interview plan." This meant that the agency, including the University of California, made interview rooms available where school principals and superintendents could meet with candidates. According to the 1926 study on which this discussion on office practice is based, usually only from one to three candidates were recommended for any one position. Indeed, a fair number of registrants—around ten percent of those registered with the university office—were hired without any interview in the most rural areas of the state. By this time the University of California was primarily placing high school teachers and they continued to assist graduates from other colleges to find positions.<sup>12</sup>

The "interview plan" laid the foundation for the modern practice of "recruitment," most commonly for non-teaching positions in the private and government sector. This is the practice today in which recruiters arrange with the Berkeley Career Center to interview students in rooms designed for this purpose. Organizations stipulate degree level and field and the Career Center screens potential interviewees on this basis and schedules the interviews. Very little of this occurs anymore for teachers since they are now encouraged to apply directly through public advertisements or teaching fairs and ask that their credentials be mailed to the district they are applying to.

Although May Cheney could not have foreseen the economic and political vicissitudes of the twentieth century with their devastating impact on labor markets, in 1913 it was clear to her that a mechanism was necessary to connect graduates to technical and business positions. In her annual report to the president in that year she invoked Harvard again, pointing out that in addition to their appointment secretary, they had another office in Boston for the recommendation of its men for technical and business positions. She recommended that the University of California have "headquarters in the heart of San Francisco, where employers seeking men can find lists of available candidates, with their qualifications plainly stated, and the opportunity may be offered for a personal conference."<sup>13</sup> Not one to give up on an idea whose time had come, in 1915 May Cheney continued to press for such an office, which she called a "vocational bureau," suggesting an alumnus from the business world to "set up" in San Francisco for business placement. By 1918 she appears to have succeeded as she requested from President Wheeler the immediate naming of someone as assistant appointment secretary at \$85 a month.<sup>14</sup>

In 1919 her office had over 3,000 requests for teachers and other "professional workers." Her office at this time employed three overworked people including an assistant appointment secretary. The high volume of work was facilitated by the installation of a "Findex," a device which apparently permitted rapid selective sorting of candidates to be recommended for particular positions. But still, these three people dealt with 15,000 letters, 8,519 visitors to the office and registered 2,310 candidates in the eleven months between July 1918 and May 1919.<sup>15</sup>



May Cheney viewed good placement work as an important part of the structure of education in the state. She was always aware of the functioning of the entire structure and paid attention to every new development. In 1899, as she was establishing the Berkeley appointment office, she became interested in the relationship of the university to the state normal schools. She was particularly concerned about the founding of a new normal school in San Francisco and its encroachment on the prerogatives of the university. The founder of this new school, Frederick L. Burk '83, had won agreement from the Los Angeles boards of trustees that graduation from high school was required for admission to the normal school. However, he wanted to additionally require recommendation for matriculation at the university. This requirement was already in effect for the Los Angeles State Normal School (the future UCLA), but he wanted Berkeley to administer an admission examination and



May Cheney, 1936. *University Archives.*

for the students to be regularly matriculated at the university. In her mind, Burk's suggestions raised serious issues of governance and the question whether normal schools should be affiliated with the university. In a letter to the regents she expressed her concern that all the implications for the future of the university be considered.<sup>16</sup>

The relationship of the university with normal schools and its implications for both the K-12 system and the university was a persistent concern for May Cheney. In 1912 in her report to the president she draws attention to the fact that "the center of interest [in the schools] has shifted from the so-called 'culture' subjects to those which make for social and industrial efficiency, and the university has made little to no change in its method of preparing teachers." For her, the issue was that "the office [Appointment] has been unable to harmonize what the university offers with what is demanded," and she goes on to point out that the state normal schools, "designed to supply the ranks of the 10,000 elementary school teachers of the state, have been reaching out toward the high schools, whose force of 2000 teachers could easily be recruited by universities." Both the normal schools and school principals were asking the university to respond to the demand for high school teachers in domestic science and arts, manual training, industrial and mechanical arts, drawing and music, agriculture, physical training and hygiene. As unqualified people were teaching these subjects, May Cheney called on the university to take vigorous action since the maintenance of scholarly standards of work in the university must depend upon the sound foundation provided in the secondary schools.<sup>17</sup> Her advocacy in addressing essentially vocational education at this time was parallel to her advocacy for a vocational placement bureau in San Francisco, both part of broad trends in society and the economy that she believed the university was overlooking.

Her interests, however, were far broader than preserving the pivotal position of the university in the education of the state. She was very actively engaged in the progressive causes of her day: against the squandering of natural resources, the destruction of the environment,

“the waste of national vitality through unhygienic living conditions, child labor and preventable disease.” Most particularly she was against what she called the “waste of thinking power,” and was called upon as a recognized national leader in teacher development to suggest ways to improve the quality of teaching in the United States, and the placement of teachers in appropriate positions. Her suggestions, made in an invited contribution to a report prepared for the Division of Superintendence of the National Education Association in 1915, amount to a systematic program for placing teachers in individual states and in the nation. The essence was to standardize where graduates registered, what kinds of materials were collected for the candidates, and who was in charge of placement, in an effort to avoid duplication of services—often incomplete—as well as “vexation of the spirit.” She also advocated a federal clearinghouse for information about states’ systems of education with particular attention to where the best teachers were trained, and an actual appointment function for senior administrative officers such as university presidents.<sup>18</sup>

May Cheney had a particularly long and distinguished career as the Berkeley appointment secretary, staying in her position for forty years and leaving an indelible imprint not only on the encouragement and development of teaching in the state, but on university structure and policy. Her reach became national; she served on many national boards and commissions, but the record of her distinguished service is scattered and largely unknown. Her obituary focuses on her graciousness and friendliness that assisted young men and women into their careers. It continues: “Her good judgement has built a remarkable reputation for the Appointment Secretary’s Office in schools throughout the country. Her friendly ear and quiet smile have relieved the worried school administrator, and cheer the anxious neophyte in teaching. As long as the university endures, the Spirit of May L. Cheney will be a living force in that most important of functions for higher education, the teaching of teachers, and their distribution to the schools and colleges of the State, the Nation, and far distant lands of the world.”<sup>19</sup>

## ENDNOTES

Thanks to Carroll Brentano, Janet Ruyle, Geraldine Clifford and William Roberts for their assistance in locating material.

- 1 May Cheney to President Kellogg, September 13, 1897. Regents’ records, CU-1, box 19; University Archives, University of California, Berkeley.
- 2 Geraldine Joncich Clifford, *“Equally in View”: The University of California, Its Women and the Schools* (Berkeley: Center for Studies in Higher Education, 1995), 13.
- 3 Professor Elmer E. Brown to President Kellogg, May 27, 1899. Regents’ records, CU-1, 25:4. Professor Brown alone visited thirty counties in the state during the academic year in the course of school visitations and lectures to teachers’ institutes and other educational gatherings.
- 4 Lucian P. Farris, “Present Practices in Office Technique of Teacher Placement in California” (Master’s thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1926), 11. It appears to have been run by May since her husband, Warren, advertised his own business as “real estate and insurance agent” in the *1894 Blue and Gold* (Berkeley, 1893).
- 5 Addendum by May Cheney to her letter to President Kellogg, September 30, 1897. Regents’ records, CU-1, 17:33.
- 6 May Cheney to President Kellogg, September 13, 1897. Regents’ records CU-1, 19:32.
- 7 May Cheney to President Kellogg, September 30, 1897. Regents’ records CU-1, 17:33.

- 8 Farris, 12.
- 9 May Cheney to Regent Reinstein, May 6, 1898. Regents' records, CU-1, 19:32.
- 10 Regents' records, CU-1, 28:24. An instructor earned between \$750 and \$1400, while the President earned \$10,000.
- 11 *Annual Report of the President*, 1913, 46-47.
- 12 Farris, 13-49.
- 13 *Annual Report of the President*, 1913, 46.
- 14 Reports to the President, CU-5 series 1, 52:39 (1912); CU-5 ser.2, 1914:379, 1915:10, 1916:593, 1918:672.
- 15 President's records, CU-5 series 2, 1918:672, 1919:261.
- 16 May Cheney to Regent A.S. Hallidie, July 24, 1899. Regents' records, CU-1, 19:32.
- 17 *Biennial Report of the President of the University* (Berkeley, University of California, 1912), 51-52.
- 18 President's records, CU-5, series 2, 1915:10.
- 19 Robert Sibley, in *California Monthly*, June 1942. Thanks to Carroll Brentano and Maresi Nerad for this source.

### **May L. Shepard Cheney (1862–1942)**

May Cheney '83, lived for many years in a wooden residence located on the east side of College Avenue, north of Bancroft Way—a building which stands to this day, now in the middle of the campus, just east of Wurster Hall. Here she raised her three sons: Charles '05, a city planner who designed Palos Verdes Estates in the 1920s; Sheldon '08, an art and theater historian who founded *Theatre Arts* magazine; and Marshall '09, an Oakland physician. A university residence hall was named in her honor in 1959.





Student waiting for train on Shattuck Avenue, ca. 1899. Note Warren Cheney's shop behind horse. *University Archives.*