

Reminiscences

AN APPRECIATION
OF MARY VIRGINIA
HARRIS

BY PHOEBE RESNICK

MARY VIRGINIA HARRIS, a devoted volunteer and supporter of the Penn Museum for more than 40 years, died on Monday, April 12, 2004. She was 93 years old.

Mary Virginia began her association with the Museum in the 1950s, after a distinguished career

as a Dean at both Maryland College for Women and Pine Manor Junior College and as a U.S. Naval Officer. Always proud of being one of the original WAVES during World War II, she volunteered for active duty in 1942 and, as Officer in Charge of Instruction, authored the handbook *Guide Right* (1944). She served as Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Navy, Active Reserve from 1946 until retiring in 1965.

Mary Virginia's interests in education, history, world travel, and community service led her to the Museum, where she was a Senior Founder of the Volunteer Guide program, serving as a guide herself (1957-97). She was also an Honorary Member of the Women's Committee.

She was perhaps best known for her work with the Near East Section and its Iranian excavations, both in the field and at the Museum. Under the direction of Robert H. Dyson, Mary Virginia served as Volunteer Registrar (1969-77) and Volunteer Archivist (1969-96) for the Hasanlu Iran Project. In 1989 she wrote an *Expedition* article on plants—wild flowers were one of her passions—for a special issue on Hasanlu. In 1998 the Museum honored Mary Virginia by dedicating the exhibition catalogue *Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur* to her.

I first met Mary Virginia when I started a new Public Information Office at the Museum in 1980. We became friends, and she wanted very much for me to succeed. She would drop by to tell me things I should know, including her



opinions on what I should do. She was a friend to many, always kind, considerate, welcoming, encouraging, and generous. She loved people of every age and place and was especially supportive of students. She was energetic, up on current events, and ever ready for a party and a good laugh. A marvelous listener, she was genuinely interested in others and cared very much for her friends. We shared many interests, and our friendship grew even after I left the Museum in 1986 and after she moved from Swarthmore to Dunwoody Village in 1997. In these last years, she asked me to help her prepare her obituary, and she even selected the above photo.

I cannot begin to tell what Mary Virginia meant to many people for many years at the Museum. The following are only a few representative voices, in tribute to a very loving and original lady. We honor her by remembering.

Mary Virginia was the epitome of the intellectually engaged volunteer.

Susan W. Catherwood, Chair Emerita, Board of Overseers and Women's Committee



On the shores of Lake Urmia, Iran in 1970.

What distinguished her was her unselfish dedication to the well-being of many generations of talented students at the Museum. She was a “hidden teacher.”—Ben Reina, Professor Emeritus, Anthropology

She knew all the players, living and dead, and was always available to answer questions, guide research, or set off on a new quest.—Elin Danien, volunteer guide and former Events Coordinator

An indomitable woman with an adventurous spirit who left an indelible mark on all of us who were privileged to know her.—Betsy Straw, Outreach Coordinator, Education

She was up front, straightforward, forceful, charming. . . . You couldn't help but like her.—Richard Zettler, Associate Curator-in-Charge, Near East Section

Her time, energy, and generosity were boundless to friends and especially to the Museum. She will be sorely missed.—Bonnie Crosfield, Museum Receptionist

A most memorable party was for 40 guests on two mule barges on the New Hope Canal. It suited her just fine to watch the world flow by on a sun-dappled afternoon, surrounded by people she loved.—Bruce and Beatrice Nichols, Museum Catering Company

Mary Virginia Harris was the kindest person I have ever known.—Gillian Wakely, Education and Exhibits

In 1968, Bob Dyson recruited her as a volunteer registrar for my excavation at Hajji Firuz. The team was wonderful. . . . Her passions besides poker were plant collecting, taking pictures, and making sure that we all had something interesting to eat and drink at cocktail time.—Mary Voigt, Near East Archaeologist, College of William and Mary

She took great interest in people, taking special care with the many students who passed through the Project on their way to becoming fully trained archaeologists. Just ask Bill Sumner, Matthew Stolper, and Harvey Weiss.—Maude de Schauensee, Associate Editor, Hasanlu Publications

On the digs she created order out of chaos and could elicit discipline from big-headed 20-somethings. . . . She encouraged us and inspired us.—Vincent Pigott, Archaeometallurgist, and Susan Howard, Business Executive (London), former graduate students

“Miss Liberty Belle” added her spirit, determination, and many talents to the Museum's Near East Section and Hasanlu Iran Project. . . . She contributed hours of cataloguing and collating data, even some copy editing while at Dunwoody. Her work and enthusiasm provided a very necessary element of continuity in all these efforts. . . . We called her “Miss Liberty Belle” after she appeared at an early 4th of July celebration in a red, white, and blue paper dress! Long may her memory wave!—Robert H. Dyson, Museum Director Emeritus and Near East Archaeologist 🏠

DONATIONS

Donations in honor of Mary Virginia Harris may be made to “Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania” (Hasanlu Project), c/o Penn Museum's Development Office.