



Winter 1979

An Interview With Sarah Blanding

William Cooper Jr.
University of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review>

 Part of the [United States History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Cooper, William Jr. (1979) "An Interview With Sarah Blanding," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 1 : No. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol1/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kentucky Review by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.

An Interview With Sarah Blanding

William Cooper, Jr.

“Speaking of all-round good girls, just gaze upon ‘Sally.’ She can do anything from pulling down A’s to dropping the ball in the basket . . .” Thus reads the 1923 *Kentuckian* vignette about graduating senior Sarah Gibson Blanding.

“Sally” was born on a farm near Lexington in 1898. At the age of twelve she entered the working world by accepting a job as the bell-ringer for Christ Episcopal Church on Mill Street at a salary of ten dollars per month. Her teenage ambition was to become a doctor, and she delighted in driving her Uncle Louis (Dr. A. L. Blanding) to patients’ homes by horse and buggy. The death of her father in 1912, however, forced Sarah to abandon plans for a costly medical education. Instead, she borrowed money for a less expensive two-year course at the New Haven (Connecticut) Normal School of Gymnastics.

In 1919 Miss Blanding was hired as a physical education instructor at the University of Kentucky. At the same time she enrolled as a student to work toward a B.A. degree. Upon graduation four years later, she was appointed acting dean of women, at twenty-four the youngest university dean in the country. Sarah earned her master’s degree in political science from Columbia University in 1926 and continued graduate study at the London School of Economics in 1928-1929.

After her return to the United States, Miss Blanding served as dean of women and professor of political science at the University of Kentucky from 1929 until 1941. During those years the dean lived on a farm near the campus where she raised tobacco that consistently sold for prices far above the average crop. In addition, during the summer months she served as director of Trail’s End Girls Camp.

Recognizing her outstanding administrative ability, in 1941 Cornell University named Blanding director of the New York State College of Home Economics. Within a year Cornell’s board of

trustees elected her the first dean of that college. Once when her request for \$75,000 was cut from the state budget, the dean boiled with indignation and phoned Governor Herbert Lehman to tell him: "In Kentucky, we shoot people for this." Lehman promised her the money, but Cornell's President Edmund Ezra Day was incensed that she had gone over his head to speak directly to the governor. Undismayed, "Sally" completely disarmed President Day by crawling into his office on her hands and knees with official notice of the restored appropriation gripped tightly between her teeth.

In 1946 a committee equally representing faculty and trustees elected Miss Blanding president of Vassar College, the first woman president in the history of the college. In a report to Vassar's parents and friends, the committee stated: "Sarah Blanding was chosen not because she is a woman, but because the committee unanimously felt that her administrative abilities, her well-balanced judgment, her broad view of education, her wise understanding of people, and her personal magnetism put her first among more than two hundred men and woman who were carefully considered for the position." President Blanding, beloved by students and respected by faculty, provided outstanding leadership for Vassar until her retirement in 1964. She maintained such an indefatigable pace that a visiting male college president once remarked, "I wonder how Sarah does it without a wife."

Miss Blanding holds a total of eighteen honorary degrees, including a Doctor of Laws awarded by the University of Kentucky in 1946. She is a member of the university's Hall of Distinguished Alumni and received a Centennial Medallion from the university in 1965. In 1968 the board of trustees, upon the recommendation of President John W. Oswald, voted to name a 2,700-student residential complex in honor of Blanding and former dean of men A. D. Kirwan. Miss Blanding affectionately refers to the twin twenty-three story towers as "Bonnie and Clyde."

Sarah Blanding was interviewed for the Alumni/Faculty Oral History Project, which a grant from the University of Kentucky Alumni Association launched in 1975 to document the university's history by means of interviews with former students and faculty. The project is being continued through a gift from David C. Scott of Milwaukee. It is part of the University of Kentucky's Oral History Program, begun in 1973 to enhance the value and increase the usefulness of manuscript collections now held by the Department of Special Collections. For the Alumni/Faculty

Project, one hundred and twelve interviews have now been recorded. The interview with Sarah Blanding took place on May 23, 1976, at her country home near Lakeville, Connecticut. The following are excerpts from the transcript of that unrehearsed, recorded conversation.

- C: Miss Blanding, you first came to the University of Kentucky in 1919. Would you please relate the circumstances which caused you to come to the University?
- B: Yes, I'll be glad to do that. You see, I was a poor girl and we didn't have any money. I really wanted to be a doctor but I couldn't possibly afford the long training—the expensive training. And so I was good in athletics. I could hold my own with most men in a tennis game. I had been on the high school basketball team. And so I decided that I would borrow the money and go to the New Haven Normal School of Gymnastics which was a two-year course. I needed to begin to make money. And so I went to New Haven, and when I was graduating from there I was offered several jobs in high schools at salaries—\$1600, which in 1919 was a pretty good salary. The University of Kentucky wrote me and asked me if I would be interested in becoming an instructor in physical education at the University. I, being a horse trader, said "I would be interested in your job if you would allow me to go to college at the same time I teach physical education." And of course they didn't care how hard you worked. So I have a very peculiar undergraduate record. I could take anything that came from eight to twelve o'clock, and then I taught physical education from one to sometimes six or seven for a salary of \$800 a year.

Well, the first year I took English with Frances McVey; Frances Jewell, she was then. And I took political science with Amry Vandenbosch. And I think I took French, my French grade . . . I had been a good Latin student and I thought French was easy as anything. Well, the teacher was an American and so my French . . . I read French with a fair degree of facility, but my spoken French is perfectly awful. But I thoroughly enjoyed the academic part of my experience.

The Kappa Kappa Gammas asked me to pledge and I debated about this, and I asked Frances Jewell whether she thought I should accept. And she said, "I think you can separate just student life from your professional life and if you want to join Kappa"—I had some other bids but Kappa was my first choice—"I think it would be alright." Well, we had pledge meetings, and I wasn't able to go because they always came about four o'clock in the afternoon. And so they said if I didn't appear at pledge meetings that they would have to drop me, and so I sent them back my pledge pin. Well, gracious goodness it caused a terrific fury. They came over to the gymnasium and said they didn't understand and this and that and the other so I was a member of Kappa Kappa Gamma.

And when I was graduating . . . I had majored in political science and international relationships. When I was a senior I was elected president of Kappa Kappa Gamma Chapter, and we had a perfectly charming—a beautiful, cultured Jewess as a student. And my Kappa sisters bogged down on taking this young woman and I was determined that she was not going to be blackballed, because I had always been a liberal and I had no prejudice to Jews, to Negroes. And so I simply kept the chapter sitting until three a.m. in the morning until they voted her in. And she was a magnificent student. And from that time on I think there has been no prejudice—racial prejudice in the chapter. Well, the word got around that I had brow-beaten my Kappa sisters. And so when I was graduating . . . in the meantime the first Mrs. McVey had died and Frances Jewell and Frank McVey had fallen in love with each other, and they came to me and said, "How would you like to become the dean of women?" And I said, "Gracious, I couldn't think of anything worse." "Well," they said, "would you mind taking it just until we could get somebody?" And I was perfectly willing to help them out, and so I did. I was only twenty-four. I graduated, you see, in '23 and I was young for this kind of job. And there were several old hags after it. And so, while I liked these people, I also became very interested in the job, and they would have, after three or four months—they would have had to go over my dead body to get it.

But I was only acting dean of women that first year and the second year. Now, I realized that the faculty, the academic faculty, probably would never have the respect for a member

of the physical education department, as far as educational policy was concerned, if I continued teaching in the department of physical education. And so I determined, because I was interested in education and while I recognized that physical education had a great educational value, I knew that the so-called academic faculty didn't have much respect for people's minds who taught in physical education. And because I also had become deeply interested, not only in the political aspects of our life and of the lives of other people in other countries, but I had become tremendously interested in international relationships. So I decided to borrow money again and go to Columbia and get a master's degree.

I had never lived for a year or even short times in New York. I lived at Johnson Hall, which was a woman's residence . . . graduate residence hall. And Miss Eliza Butler was the head of Johnson Hall. She was President Butler's sister.

I was fond of music. I was fond of the theatre, and so once a week I would go to the opera—sit in the family circle, way, way up in the top. I'd go to the theatre. I'd write my family that I had been to the Metropolitan Museum and they got terribly disturbed because they thought, "She'll never get her master's degree in one year."

But I was taking two courses in public law. I was taking a history course with one of the distinguished professors. And I was taking a course in constitutional law. I happened to be the only woman in it and there were about twelve or fourteen Japanese men and two or three American men. And I thought, this will be a cinch. Well, at the end . . . then I was taking a course in nationalism from Carlton Hayes who again . . . his lectures were only out of his book on nationalism and so I could read the book and Carl Van Doren was giving a most interesting lecture course on American literature. And so I'd cut nationalism and go to hear Carl Van Doren.

You had to take three examinations and write a thesis. I had written my thesis and I knew it was a pretty good one. You had to take three examinations out of the four courses that you were taking. And so I . . . constitutional law was a tough course and my gracious, those Japanese men just ate it up. I

studied like "Billy O" to even keep up with them. It was the hardest course that I took at Columbia. And so I decided that I would let constitutional law be the examination that I would not take. Nationalism—I didn't even crack a book before I went into the examination. And I got in and he put up questions on the board and I didn't even know the meaning of some of the words. I came out of the examination sure that I had failed it.

I got so depressed that I went down into the city and bought myself a dress that was much more expensive than I should have invested in. And I got back to Johnson Hall and they said, "the grades are up." That you have either passed or failed, they didn't have . . . I rushed over and I had passed nationalism. And then I was between the devil and the deep blue sea, because I didn't know whether to send the dress back or not. But I kept it, and I wore it for many years. But I never put it on that I didn't remember those awful words in the course of nationalism.

Well, then I was made dean of women, and I insisted on teaching one course in political science because I wanted the faculty to realize that I was academically acceptable. And when I rose to my feet in a faculty meeting to make a report, or to ask a question, or to express an opinion, I would be respected as an equal and not somebody lower in the scale.

Well, I have given you a kind of a short—it seemed pretty long to me—explanation with the exception of a further leave of absence that I took and went to the London School of Economics, where I studied with Harold Laski, who as you probably remember, was a great liberal—had taught at Harvard and was accused of being a Communist. Well I only was able to go for one term—the English system, as you know, has a Michaelmas term. I went over in October and in London I lived at Crosby Hall, which was Sir Thomas More's old residence, which had been moved from the city out to Chelsea. And I made wonderfully fine friends.

Actually, I chaperoned a young woman from Lexington, Kentucky. And that is a story in itself. Because the Smith family of Lexington was an old and very distinguished family.

Mrs. Smith's sister, Miss Margaret King, had been the librarian for many years. Mrs. Smith was on the advisory committee for the women's residence hall. Cynthia was next, I think, to the youngest Smith child. Her older sister had fallen in love with John Rothenstein who had been brought to the University by Carol Sax. Have you every heard his name?

C: Yes. In the music school [actually the art department], right?

B: And Carol was a wealthy man. There wasn't any money to pay him, so Carol paid John's salary. And Elizabeth, who was known as Bee, fell in love with him, and they married and moved to London. The Smith family was a little concerned about this marriage because John had become a convert to Catholicism. The Smiths were Episcopalians. Also they were a very close family, and to have one of their daughters living in London was a hard thing for them to take. And so when Cynthia decided—the younger sister—to go to London they asked me if I would look after her.

She fell in love with Bill [William Michael] Rothenstein over there. Their father was Sir John [actually Sir William] Rothenstein, who had been the principle of one of the main art groups—a great friend of Max Beerbohm's and of James Stephens.

And Sir William, the father and his wife, Lady Rothenstein, were always at home on Sunday night. And Cynthia and I were living at Crosby Hall . . . were always invited on Sunday evening to go to the elder Rothenstein's.

We had the opportunity to meet not only Max Beerbohm, who was a house guest of the Rothensteins, but many of the leading artists, economists, of London. It was a marvelous education.

I remember one night . . . well I remember this when Tagore, who had just returned from Washington, was a house guest. And Tagore had become terrifically interested in the way the Russians were trying to educate their people, most of which, of course, was propaganda, with their radios that were

in the squares and would blast out education. It was the time that Ghandi was saying that India should go back to the crafts to the simple way of making income. Then, I remember when Max Beerbohm was there. He was a great cartoonist, a caricaturist, I should say. James Stephens was also there one evening and Max did . . . James Stephens was a rather tiny man but he had very long legs which he twisted around, and Max just sat there. Well, Max Beerbohm's caricatures would sell anyplace from one hundred pounds to one thousand pounds and this was after James Stephens had written *The Crock of Gold* and his more popular things. And Stephens was very hard up, but Max handed this caricature to James Stephens, and his wife rose up and reared and said, "I will not have this in my house." Lady Rothenstein took it away from Mrs. Stephens and hid it. In the meantime, James Stephens had told her, "My God, this is worth a lot of money." And then she tried to get it back. Well it was this sort of an education, you know.

Well, when I returned to the university . . . luckily Cynthia did not marry Bill Rothenstein. She returned to this country and married an American. And then unfortunately died quite a young woman. I returned. By this time I had been made an assistant professor and dean of women and I think it is time to go into my life as dean of women.

- C: Yes, I want to do that. But first, I wonder if I might ask some questions about your undergraduate days at the University of Kentucky?

- C: During your senior year you were president of something that was called the Women's Executive Council. Do you recall, was that a counterpart to the Men's Student Council? Was that an organization for women to work with the Men's Student Council, and do you recall how the members were chosen?
- B: Now tell me what the name of it was?
- C: The Women's Executive Council.
- B: And I was a member.
- C: You were president of the organization according to the 1923 *Kentuckian*. And as I recall, it said something to the effect that

this was a group made up of the presidents of all the women's groups on campus.

B: Now I remember.

C: You were a member because you were president of the sorority?

B: Now I remember. I honestly don't remember being the chairman of it. But you see there were the heads of halls, there were the presidents of various sororities, there were presidents of the women's activity groups. For example, I had introduced into the physical education department a much broader program than they had ever had in physical education. Up to that time physical education had been at most calisthenics—formal physical education. And I believe in tennis, hockey, soccer, swimming—this sort of thing. So I had more or less formed a Women's Athletic Association. Well, probably the head of this association would have been on this council. And within the council there probably was a smaller group that made up the executive committee. And we would just talk about what some of the problems of life on the campus were. What things should be proposed and that sort of thing. It was not a very formal . . .

C: The first three years that you were at the university you coached the girls' basketball team. What kind of student support did the team receive? Had they had a girls' basketball team before then? This was intercollegiate, I believe.

B: Yes. Didn't I play on the team?

C: Well when you were . . . we're coming to that. That was when you were a senior.

B: Was it? All right.

C: The first three years you were the coach.

B: I coached. Well you see I had been a good basketball player and we did play intercollegiate basketball. I can't remember the teams against which we played. But we did have . . . I was much more interested in intramural than in intercollegiate athletics for women. I did coach and we probably played Georgetown and . . .

C: I think you went as far away as Louisville.

B: Yes, probably. And I can't remember how well we did.

- C: Well you did very well, as a matter of fact.
B: Did we?
C: Particularly during your senior year when . . .
B: When Happy Chandler coached us.
C: You relinquished your coaching duties that year and became a star forward on the team.
B: Yeah.
C: As a matter of fact you scored a majority of the points that your team scored . . .

- C: Do you recall a girls' football team called the Electrics?
B: No! I never heard of them.
C: You played left end in 1922.

- B: I think it was soccer because I did form a soccer team, and you kick the ball and the positions are also . . . but there wasn't much soccer—this was never an intercollegiate thing because soccer was practically unknown in Kentucky.

- C: How did you find time to teach, to coach, you organized track meets, gymnastics exhibitions on Stoll Field, to do that, to take classes, and still make Mortar Board when you were a senior?
B: Well, I have to say that I was a strong, healthy, young woman and it was good training for me, because in subsequent jobs many times I worked a sixteen to eighteen hour day. This was because I had good health and because I liked to do a good job and I enjoyed it, and so it didn't seem like a long, hard day. There were periods when it wasn't as hard.

- C: What was the reaction on campus among both students and faculty to all of this flurry of girls' athletic activity that you were promoting? There certainly was a great deal more in

terms of girls' athletic activities than there had ever been before at the university?

- B: Yes. Well, sometimes we had difficulty in getting a field, you know, on which to play hockey and soccer. But I don't think there was ever any real criticism of this. I think it was . . . by and large the Kentucky faculty took things in their stride and they were interested in their own departments and they didn't much care what happened in another.

- C: One of the things that I was interested in—in 1924 the Women's Athletic Association abolished intercollegiate basketball for women at the university.

B: At my insistence.

- C: Right. Why, when you had been such a promoter of athletic activities for women—why specifically were you in favor of abandoning intercollegiate basketball?

B: Because the minute you have intercollegiate athletics more time is devoted to the team that is going to compete with another institution and less time to the average run of women.

- C: Miss Blanding, how would you evaluate Frank McVey as president of the University? I'm sure that you knew . . .

B: During the first years while I was a student, and while the first Mrs. McVey was living, Frank was considered a very austere and a rather cold person. Always a good administrator, but nothing that really drew him to students. The university, until Frank McVey got there, in my estimation, was not a first class university. Certain departments were good. The department of Classics, for example, was a good department. But Frank, who had been at the University of Minnesota, and he came to us from . . .

C: North Dakota.

B: . . . North Dakota, had ideas about education and he was an excellent administrator, but not a person to whom people were drawn. Consequently, budgetwise his relationships with the legislature were never startling. He didn't have the warmth, the back-slapping thing that you have to have when you are

dealing with elected officials. Nevertheless, after the first Mrs. McVey died and he married Frances Jewell, the whole personality of the man changed and his stock went up, both with faculty, and with students, and with legislators, and with people who really counted in the state. Now, he was never a warm, gracious, informal sort of person, and yet his growth as an approachable person through the very gregarious kind of person Frances was, raised his stock no end.

C: How well did he work with the administrators who served under him? Was he a hard task master?

B: No. Except I do remember a case of discipline that I had to deal with. I was acting as a sort of detective. This was some misdemeanor that a woman student had committed. And I remember going over to Patterson Hall where I knew she was having a date with a male. I can't exactly remember what had happened. I don't think it was a case of immorality. But I went over. It perhaps was a case of stealing. Well, I thought the male student had been involved too, and they were having a date, and I stood out on the porch to get some evidence, which I got. And I got roundly bawled out by Frank McVey for this sort of thing which in those days I felt was legitimate. I would be as opposed to it now as any person on earth. But he wanted absolute honesty, you see, by the people who were being . . . by and large the heads of departments respected him very highly. And he was gentle but he never hesitated to say where he thought you were making a mistake. But he said it in such a way that it didn't offend you.

C: Do you know anything about the kind of relationship that existed between Patterson and President McVey?

B: Well, I know more about the relationship that existed between President Patterson and SGB [Sarah Gibson Blanding]. I would like to spend a minute saying that Miss Park, who was a university graduate, lived in President Patterson's home. She was devoted to him and took care of him. And I frequently was invited. I was always invited on President Patterson's birthday to come and have dinner with him. And we would always have a bottle of the most delicious wine which President Patterson probably had had in his basement for years. Now I

can't comment on the relationship of President Patterson—you know he used to tie his cow out in the yard on the campus to let it graze—this was still practiced when I was there.

C: I take it that the second Mrs. McVey certainly played a very active role on the campus.

B: I give Frances Jewell McVey credit for bringing warmth, intellectual interest, terrific interest in students, in faculty, in faculty wives. The house—Maxwell Place—became a center of a fine kind of social life. Oh, I could tell you story after story about the things Frances would do at Maxwell Place that enhanced the standing of Frank LeRond McVey.

C: They had many open houses for students I understand.

B: Not only for students. I developed what was the first Mother's Day that they ever had on campus. And Frances said, "How many mothers do you think will come?" And I said "About fifty." Well about one hundred and fifty turned up and she had arranged for the mothers and their daughters to come to tea. And, of course, the food ran out and I can just see the plain crackers being carried around towards the end of the party. But every week Frances was at home to either students, or to groups of people who were meeting on the campus, or having dinner parties for distinguished people.

C: You were instrumental in organizing a faculty club in 1929. You were on the committee that drafted the constitution for the first faculty club. What prompted such an organization as that? Had there been nothing similar previously?

B: No, there had not been. And it seemed to a group of us, and I was not really the originator of it. I am a gregarious person so I knew all members of the faculty. There was no place where the faculty could get together as people. There were faculty meetings where you got together not as people but as members of the faculty. And it seemed to a group of us, and I can't remember who the other members of the committee were, that there needed to be a center where faculty could drop in between classes. Where they could talk to each other as

individuals because too often it became apparent that too often the chemist, let us say, had no common interest with the historians or the English. They spoke their own language, but they had no conception what other departments were doing. Moreover, there was no place where the faculty as a faculty could have any social life, or a life in which different disciplines were brought together by members of the faculty speaking at an evening meeting . . . this sort of thing. There were places on the campus where a guest speaker could speak to anybody who wanted to go. But there was nothing that drew the faculty together as social human beings.

C: The 1925 *Kentuckian* described you in the following manner: "Kind, friendly, sympathetic, and easily approached but you had better walk the mark when it comes to a matter of the rules." Were you a strict disciplinarian as dean of women?

B: Yes, I think I probably was. I tried to be understanding, but where rules were broken, it seemed to me that students should pay some sort of penalty. Now, I can give you a case in point. A student in her sophomore year . . . we had a strict rule against drinking . . . and a student, who was a member of a sorority, drank and became intoxicated. After talking it over with Frank McVey, I suspended her for a semester. Which was a relatively . . . it was not as severe a penalty as most deans of women would have given at that time. But she needed to be jerked up before she became an alcoholic. And drinking among women was just beginning. It had been going on, you know, flasks at dances and that sort of thing. But not among women. So she was suspended for a semester, then allowed to come back, and because I was interested in her . . . she was a good student. Because I was interested in her, even though I had had to discipline her rather severely, but not as severely as many people would have done, I wanted her to think of me as a friend, as a counselor, and I'm glad to say that I succeeded, not in any kind of intimate way during the period—her last two years or maybe it was just one year. But as she became an alumna, whenever she was on the campus she came to see me. After I left the University of Kentucky and when I got into this part of the country, if she was ever in New York she would

come to see me and maybe spend the night. It was this kind of discipline which I think I believe in—which is a growing experience rather than a punishment.

C: What was your greatest problem as dean, do you think? Were there actually that many violations of the rules that had to be dealt with that severely?

B: There was a good deal during the depression—a good deal of stealing. Something very hard to track down. The discipline problems were not great. I do remember that when socks came in—socks for women—I looked on this with a good deal of . . . I just didn't like it much. And so I talked with some students and we decided . . . by this time there was some student government, you see. We decided we would ban socks. Well, it was . . . after a semester, I think, we thought how stupid this is. Let them wear socks. A lot of men and women riding around in jalopies was a problem—too many—and apprehension about real accidents. It was that kind of discipline more than the more extreme kind of discipline that alcohol causes . . . immorality—sleeping with men—which has developed. I mean, we have been in the recent years, in a real change in ethical standards, not only among the young but among adults as well.