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Freya at 100.

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F R E Y A a t 1 0 0

BY ANN HACKWORTH '82, M.A.L.S. '95

*"You who have come in answer to the call
Of Freya, goddess ever young and old,
Hark to hear her ancient story, sweet with time,
And hear the secret of the seasons told..."*

—From "Freya," by Dorothy Baldwin '28,
written for Halloween 1927

At Reunion 2003, eighty-four alumnae returned to Hollins to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Freya, Hollins' oldest student organization. Three Freya alumnae from the class of 1933 took time to reminisce and marvel at how the organization evolved since the days of Miss Matty's presidency.

"When we started at Hollins in September 1929, girls came with fur coats," the first woman began. "There were some very rich people."

More than 150 students made up the freshman class of 1933.

The alumna continued, "You know, the [Wall Street] crash came a month later."

Thirty-seven young women would graduate.

"We were a poor little group," added the second alumna.

Among these three women were a class president, a May Queen, a noted writer, a gifted singer, and all were strong students, so it is not surprising they were tapped to be members of Freya, then Hollins' most esteemed honor society. They shared happy memories—of their spooky initiation, their new membership pins, their good works such as planting crocus bulbs in the fall—and their determination to finish their Hollins education during the country's worst economic crisis.

They paid their tuition "by hook or by crook," said the second alumna. She had come to Hollins on a high school scholarship. No one took graduation for granted.

"We took every [campus] job there was," said the first.

The second alumna had an entrepreneurial streak. "There was nothing between here and Roanoke, no drug store," she said. She was able to sell—for a commission—sundries from out of her own room, a job that provided her with much-needed funds.

The three women were fascinated to hear a Freya member from the class of 1998 describe the group's more recent activities. For more than thirty-five years, the younger woman explained, Freya has helped administer a scholarship fund—for a student in need who most nearly reflects "the spirit of Hollins"—and it oversees a loan fund for medical, academic, or transportation emergencies.

The second alumna said: "We needed *your* Freya to help us out!"

In her *Illustrated History*, former Hollins art history professor Frances Niederer briefly described Freya's beginnings: "A group of students got together in 1902 to revive the moribund May Day festivities. As charter members of the Fairies of Freya, they put on their first production the following spring."

In Freya's centennial year, the university handbook calls the organization "a group of anonymous students dedicated to the principle that concern for the community is a creative and vital force."

Is today's Freya anything like the one that was born at the Hollins Institute? How do Freya alumnae come to feel bonded for life? Look closely, advised a Freya alumna from the class of 1962. "There's a timeless quality of Freya and its members," she said. For her and for Hollins in the past century, Freya has "represented continuity in a time of great change."

The secret initiation ceremony has been the main opportunity for Freya members to learn about the history of the group. The following passage, from a collection of Freya documents from the mid-1950s, is probably typical of the legend passed down over the past century:

In the year 1903 a group of Hollins girls felt the need of some organization which should embody the ideals by which they sought to live; That by union under the bond of common purpose they might preserve these ideals, and that as 'a little leaveneth the whole' these girls in living day by day the principles which they acknowledged, might exert an influence for good...

In Freya[®], Norse goddess of love, beauty, and fertility, early members found a decidedly feminine model whose ideals were also those of Hollins founder Charles Lewis Cocke. "The organization solemnly pledges itself," the passage continued, "to exert whatever influence it can toward the preservation of the founder's great dream."

Firsthand accounts of Freya's beginnings are sparse. Many Freya documents were likely destroyed in the Pleasants Science Hall fire of April 1925. Only one member of the Hollins community could be found to describe the group's early objectives—and take credit for its formation.

In December 1939, the *Hollins Columns* published a story headlined "Dr. McBryde, Founder of Freya, Tells of Designing Hollins Seal." The story described a visit to campus by John McBryde, chair of the Hollins English department until he retired in 1903.

Of founding Freya, the *Columns* wrote: "He said he wanted a secret organization with a festival like the Mardi Gras. The members, called fairies of Freya, were to be the best leaders and the best students on campus."

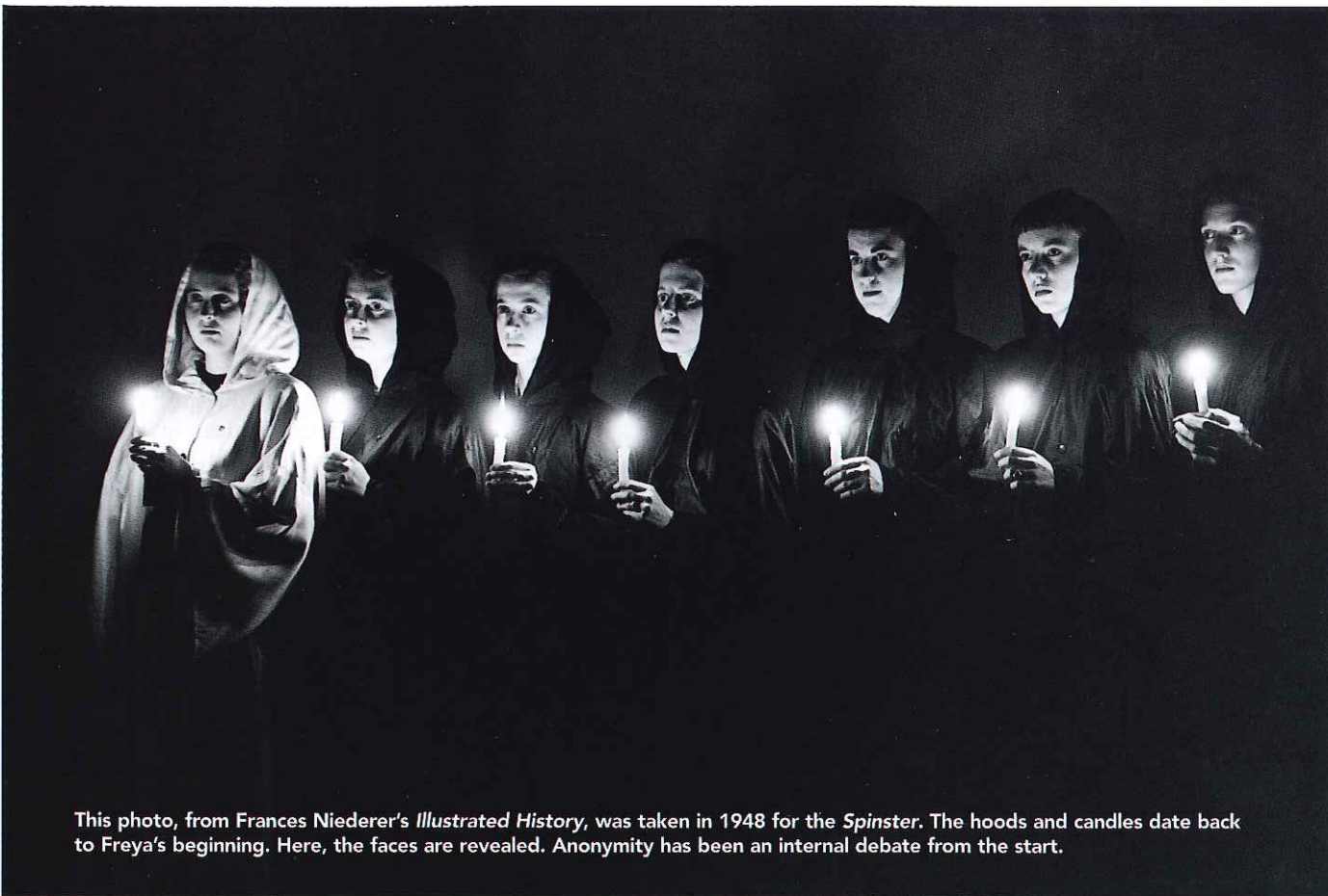
The *Columns* story did not say whether McBryde approached the students with the idea, or what part he played in the development of the group's rituals.

The program for the inaugural Freya-sponsored spectacle in 1903 promised "A pleasaunt entertainment as devised and presented by the Fairies of Freya to do honour to the Merry Moneth of Maie And holden on the lawnd of the afternoon of Freya's Day."

Nothing in the archives confirms the debut of Freya's symbolic nighttime walk, the tradition its members have called its most tangible connection with

familiar bird-like Freya symbol. Freya's presence in the 1912 *Spinster* is even more dramatic, with its depiction of a group of robed figures participating in a fire ritual beneath a full moon (complete with a fluttering bat). On another page, a Freya fairy flies out of a flower blossom, as if reborn.

Though devoid of fantastical drawings or symbols, Freya's page in the 1924 *Spinster* is remarkable. For the



This photo, from Frances Niederer's *Illustrated History*, was taken in 1948 for the *Spinster*. The hoods and candles date back to Freya's beginning. Here, the faces are revealed. Anonymity has been an internal debate from the start.

Other sources, including photographs, illustrate how Freya's roots wrap around the May Pole tradition that was so prevalent in southern women's schools in the nineteenth century. In its first fifty years, perfectly in keeping with the celebration of a fertility goddess, Freya was best known for its original May Day pageants, staged in the Forest of Arden. Freya members elected the May Queen and her court, who played the role of the audience for the elaborate performances.

the community. Early members walked at Halloween (also the occasion for original pageants), May Day, and Founder's Day.

The introduction of cloaks and candles and other mystical symbolism is more easily documented through Freya's nebulous presence in the *Spinster*. In 1905, the Fairies of Freya spelled out their name in a stylized script with an etching of a hooded figure holding a dead serpent and a skull. The cloaked figure is superimposed on the now-

first time in its twenty-one-year history, Freya made public the names of its members (all juniors and seniors). Freya's internal debate about anonymity would continue to the present day.

In announcing the first Freya reunion in May 1930, the *Hollins Alumnae Quarterly* declared, "Hollins is in a period of transition which will bring a crucial moment for Freya." The college was in the midst of severing its business ties with the Cocke family.

In 1932, Miss Matty surrendered the deed to Hollins to a board, making Hollins a publicly owned college.

Changes occurred not only at the corporate level. Hollins students chose to pare down the number of campus organizations; in 1929, the students took the dramatic step of banning sororities.

Freya survived, but its members and alumnae were asking serious questions about its future. "Shall she branch out into a national organization, such as Mortar Board?" the 1930 *Quarterly* inquired, "or shall she continue as an organization the development of which has been wrapped up with the development of Hollins?"

In November 1933, *Hollins Student Life* (precursor to the *Columns*) announced several "striking changes" taking place within Freya. During Convocation, Helen Stephenson, chair of the group, announced that "walking" would be restricted to May Day and Founder's Day; that there would be no more Halloween pageants; and that all new members would be announced to the student body. Perhaps most significantly, the article reported, "the requirements for membership were placed on a definite basis instead of [on] the personal opinion which has previously determined the choice of new members." Stephenson declared that the new criteria would come under three categories: scholarship, leadership, and creative ability.

The changes were made clear in the *Spinster*. The 1936 yearbook described the student organization as "a most significant and enduring part of our college life," and praised Hollins' now-less-secret secret society. "Freya, first among honorary organizations of the campus, is the symbol of Hollins in its richest and fullest sense; and the sight of its black-hooded members in solemn procession about the quadrangle on a Founder's Day night is at once an inspiration and a challenge."

The challenge loomed large for the chair of Freya for the class of 1939. In a telephone interview, she recalled wanting to guide Freya back to its "original mandate" so that it did not

become "strictly a substitute for Phi Beta Kappa." Although the main criterion for initiation was good grades, she said, "we didn't want to invite someone who had only spent her time in the library."

By the end of Second World War, Freya had adopted an even more spiritual attitude. In the 1947 *Spinster*, members wrote:

As a student organization, it chooses to membership those girls who seem to be guided in all they do by a spirit of love for Hollins and a sincere aspiration for creative living.



"Our class grew up in a hurry," said a Freya alumna from the class of 1947. "So many of my classmates and I had lost friends, boyfriends and brothers in the conflict."

When she joined as a senior, she said in a telephone interview, "being a member of Freya placed before me an ideal, something I could try to live up to." She struggled a moment to define what "creative living" means for her. "For me, it means not living just for myself but using my talents (whatever those talents may be) to care for those around me."

In April 1948, the *Columns* published a lengthy "forum discussion" about Freya, which had been the subject of recent "strong criticism." The *Columns* aimed to allow all sides to air their

positions. "Two Seniors" railed against the discrepancy between Freya's worthy goals and the failure of its "spiritual program," taking particular aim at the midnight walk, which the students called a "hoodooistic-appearing ritual."

In response, the members of Freya explained: "The fact that the ideal evades the grasp is what inspires the reach." Freya's members, they added, "who are chosen for an initial capacity for growth, maturity and responsibility must feel that pull and make the reach and inspire others to do the same."

Freya did not have the last word: "An Ardent A.D.A." dismissed Freya because its "goals are intangible and subjective and since it accomplishes little positive work as an organization on campus."

Evidently, Freya took the criticism to heart. In 1952, the organization announced the debut of its Founder's Day forum, a project it believed was "in keeping with the spirit of Founder's Day and with the ideals of the Founder," the *Hollins Alumnae Magazine* announced in its winter 1951 issue. "Sensing the need for even more academic stimulation at Hollins, Freya felt that a forum which featured student work concerning some specific intellectual problem would create interest, thought and enjoyment on the part of every student."

By 1953, wrote Frances Niederer, faculty committees rather than Freya supervised May Day events, which included a riding show and an informal cotillion.

Freya continued to redefine itself in the early 1960s. A faculty committee had taken over the Founder's Day forum, and in February 1962, the college installed a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa to honor scholastic distinction. The 1962 *Spinster* discontinued the practice of publishing members' names. Instead, members published the Freya-bird emblem and underneath, the phrase that has been the motto of the organization ever since: "...But in the discrepancy that falls between what one could be and what one is, there lies the greatest challenge."

The motto originated in Freya's address to the 1950-51 student body. When she rediscovered the passage, said a Freya alumna from the class of 1962, it immediately spoke to her feeling "that Freya was something to strive for." She recalled in a telephone interview how Freya took up the challenge on a group level by quietly fixing the squeaking seats in the Little Theatre; on a personal level, she said, she was moved to befriend a troubled classmate.

In September 1966, the *Columns'* front page announced a record enrollment of 932 students. On the same page was an article in which Freya declared, "Freya deals with unique problems

leaders ... position holders." For this generation of students, Freya tried to serve as the eyes, ears and conscience of the student body.

That spirit inspired an alumna from the class of 1980, who recalled a racist incident in one of the dormitories. "Freya stepped in," she said, by writing a letter denouncing the behavior. "This is a student group that can say, 'This is not what this school stands for,'" she added.

She, like so many other Freya alumnae, has conflicting feelings about anonymity. Freya accepted myriad challenges, she said, "but no one knew what we did," and that lack of awareness

end, Freya has befriended the lesbian community on campus. But the issues are not so easy to pinpoint as they were in the past, Fuller Carruthers added. "The university is working on a big business model. Even twenty years ago it worked on a family model."

Freya's responsibility reflects the change, says Fuller Carruthers. In the past ten years, the group has become more financially accountable, whereas before "it existed on a shoestring." Today, alumnae may receive a tax credit for their donations.

In the past few years, "Freya became increasingly aware of its history," said an alumna from the class of 1997.

"The fact that the ideal evades the grasp is what inspires the reach."

and situations on campus through furthering meaningful communication between and among the students, faculty, and administration." The group pledged to publicize members' names in the spirit of "open and effective communications."

During the upheaval that struck even Hollins during the late sixties and early seventies, Freya made itself heard, if not always seen. In letters to administration officials concerning the campus drug policy, admission of black students and the new parietal system, Freya was articulate and often angry. In one letter, Freya scolded the president that "the unnecessarily harsh tone of the [drug policy] statement reflects a rigidity inappropriate to an enlightened academic community."

"Freya was a reflection of the seventies," said a 1974 graduate. "Members were feminists and highly opinionated. They were not star athletes, student

still leaves the group open to criticism. She cited Freya's involvement in improving the experiences of day and international students. In addition, "The first impetus toward the new library came about in a Freya meeting," she said.

Some Freya alumnae used the word *ministry* to describe Freya's purpose. In that spirit, members have for many years written letters of encouragement to people in the community—for a job well done, after a death in the family—a practice that an alumna from 1989 took to heart. "That, to me, was what made anonymity worthwhile," she said.

"The most important thing they do is the least visible," said university chaplain Jan Fuller Carruthers '78, Freya's faculty advisor. "The emergency loan helps nine or ten people in real crisis every year," she said.

Her job is to help members "perceive where they can make a difference," she said in a telephone interview. To that

Members often discussed Freya's perennial issues, such as anonymity, the group's perception on campus, and its legacy. "Freya seeks to be a living organ," she said, "not an institution."

**Freya members pronounce the name of the organization "FRY-ah," as in Friday, which shares its root with "Fria," goddess of love from Old High German. However, at least one edition of Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary recommends "FRAY-ah" as the proper pronunciation, which is how most non-initiates say it.*

Ann Hackworth is layout editor for *The Roanoke Times* and a contributing editor to *Hollins* magazine. Beth Harris, special collections management librarian, and Laura Tuggle '98, assistant director of development and alumnae communications, helped with research for this article.