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***“I Am Haunted by the Question of What I Shall Do”:
The Vocational Struggles of a Teenage Girl in the 1940s
as Seen through Her Diary Accounts***^{*}

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ABSTRACT

The immediate post-WWII era was a time of great transition and difficulty for many younger women. Among these difficulties for teenage women just graduating from high school loomed key vocational choices. Typically, these choices involved either taking up the traditional gender track role as housewife and mother, or going to college, postponing marriage, and developing a professional career. Although there have been studies investigating such circumstances, little attention has been given to the individual emotional aspects of this difficult vocational journey. In response to this void, this descriptive study seeks to gain deeper insight into the vocational struggles of one particular Midwest teenage woman in the immediate postwar era through the examination of her personal diaries.

KEY WORDS Post-World War Two Era; Women’s Studies; Coming of Age; Diary Accounts; Midwest History

“REGARDED AS THE INTELLECTUAL TYPE”

The rural Midwest witnessed several significant changes immediately following the end of WWII, including “rapid demographic shifts, ecological change and transformation in agriculture and manufacturing” (Anderson 2014:xi). Among the many different groups of rural Midwest people who were affected by these changes were young women just entering the workforce. These women encountered the complicated dual reality of “both continuity and change in their work lives, families and communities” (Devine 2014:160; Neth 1995).

Such a situation was especially difficult for young women coming of age and transitioning to young adulthood. Many of those graduating from high school, for example, suddenly found themselves being pulled between choosing a traditional gender track role as housewife and mother, or going to college, postponing marriage, and finding a professional vocation. Following this latter path was a gamble: “A woman who decided

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to postpone marriage, complete her education and try to pursue a career was likely to find it difficult, if not impossible, to gain access to a professional school or find a job in the occupation of her choice. She might also find her chances for marriage reduced if she waited too long” (May 2001:64).

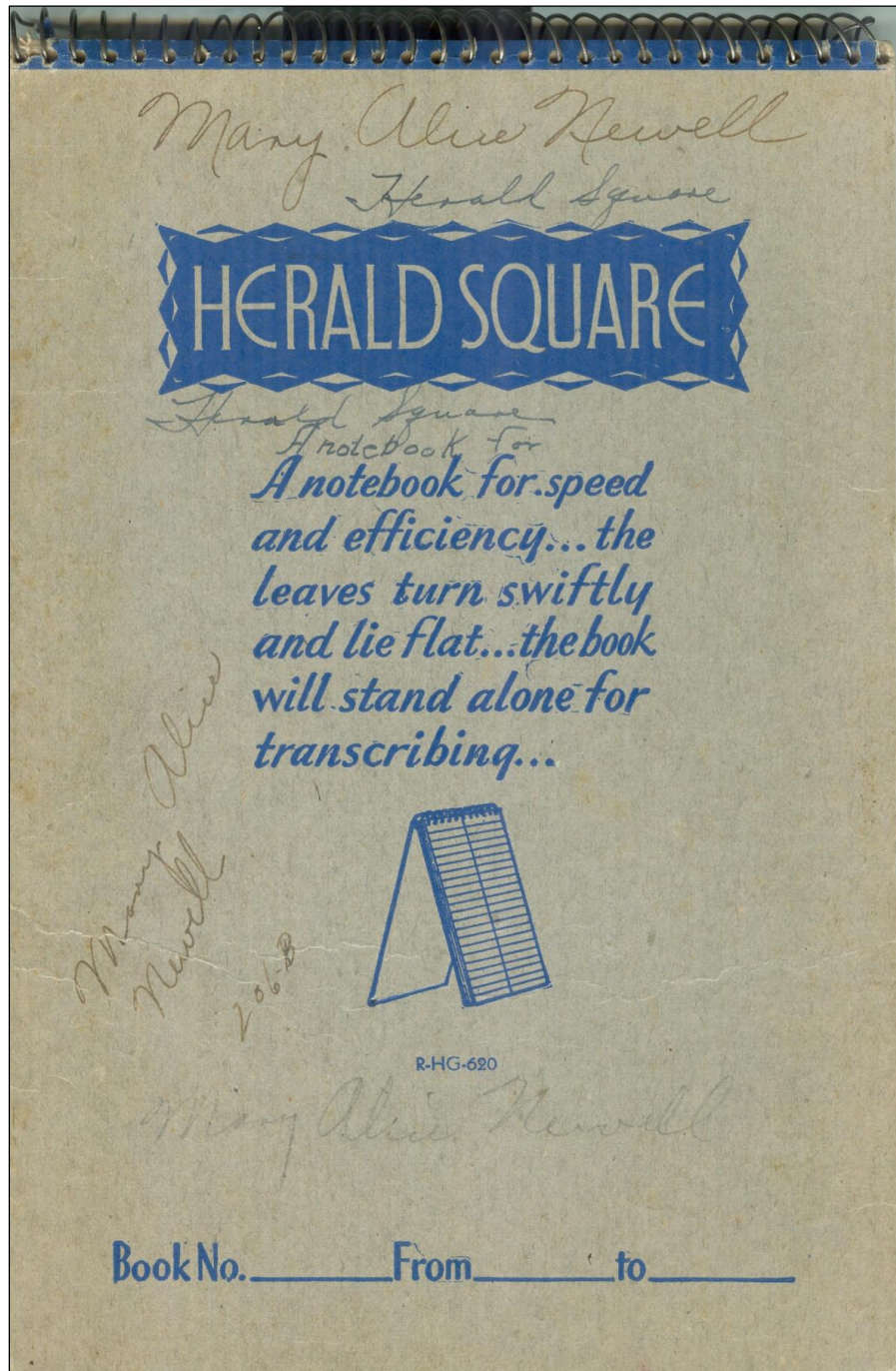
A difficult to find but rich source of material for examining the vocational difficulties of young women in the rural Midwest in the post-WWII era are diary accounts. In this regard, a young diarist can often “act as a social agent,” revealing important aspects of social conflict in a particular time and place (Honeyman 2011:78). The story of my mother, Illinois native Mary Alice Newell, as captured in her finely articulated teenage diary accounts, makes for just such an interesting case study. I came into possession of her fascinating diaries after her death in January of 2013. My family, long aware of the interesting aspects of her early life as conveyed in her diary writings, suggested I place them in the larger context of her time. I also was fortunate to have a taped interview of both my mother and her sister, Faye Newell Simpson, which shed further light on the context of my mother’s early vocational journey.

From my mother’s diary, we catch snapshot glimpses of a young woman often caught up in agonizing conflict as she pondered possible vocational tracks. Her writings show that she was tossed about in this endeavor by such forces as adult expectations, rural cultural norms, personal idealism, and the difficult economic times in postwar southern Illinois. Her narrative voice possesses an especially striking simplicity and honesty, one that springs from the belief that only she will ever be privy to these written words. Fortunately, for later generations wishing to understand the complicated world of post-WWII teenage females, this was not to be the case.

Mary Alice Newell was born on December 3, 1927, and grew up on a small farm near Waltonville, a southern Illinois village that lay nestled in the southwest corner of Jefferson County, Illinois. She was the oldest daughter of James and Vera Newell. Four brothers preceded her birth, and a sister followed. Her father came primarily from New England stock and her mother from an upland south Scotch-Irish lineage (Mills 2010).

As a teenager, Mary Alice Newell kept two diaries during her high school and early college years. The smaller of the two volumes is a slim red calendar notebook designed for keeping short daily memorandums. This first diary covers a period from January of 1943, midway through her freshman year of high school, to the end of her sophomore year in 1944. The second volume was recorded in a slightly larger, inexpensive Herald Square steno pad commonly used for secretarial note taking. The second diary spans a period from the summer of 1945 to December 1947. The inexpensive nature of these small booklets suggests both the hard economic times for the Newell family and Mary Alice’s own practical sensibility. The diary accounts used in this essay are cited as either Newell Diary I or Newell Diary II and include the appropriate page numbers.

Image 1. The Cover of Mary Alice Newell's Second Diary



Mary Alice did not write daily in her diary. Instead, her entries typically looked back at a much larger block of time, often over several months. This approach produced a rather clinical narrative, reflective perhaps of Mary Alice Newell's distrust of emotion and her innate intellectual temperament. That she was aware of her bookish tendencies is

evident in her own description of herself in the 1946 Waltonville High School class prophecy for which she served as the author: “It was at the annual school carnival in 1956 that the 1946 graduating class had its first reunion. . . . Mary Alice Newell has just arrived and is talking to the other girls. You remember in school she used to be regarded as the intellectual type.” While her classmates likely saw her as too studious to be interested in boys—she had no public boyfriends during her high school years, and her diary narratives never spoke of popular styles, songs, or movies—the final line she wrote in the 1946 senior class prophecy did suggest a secret side to her personality: “I hear Mary Alice is engaged to—well that would be telling and I happen to know she wants to keep it a secret” (1946 Waltonville High School yearbook).

In keeping with her natural intellectual tendency, Mary Alice Newell wrote diary entries that most often included long passages of dialogue reflecting highly idealistic, rational, and abstract themes such as the importance of serving some higher purpose in life and other concerns common to a thoughtful young person. Thus, those few times when she did grapple with some instance of her own disturbing thoughts and actions stand out like bright exotic flowers in a field of dry brown grass. These passages also suggest that Mary Alice possessed a strong, albeit repressed, sense of her “authentic self,” a part of her seemingly divorced from both her idealistic and rational sides (Havens 1986; Leary 2003). Such a dynamic of repression, as was occasionally demonstrated in Mary Alice’s diary, can often lead to what David Norton labeled a sudden burst of revelation, “its impact immense, for it [suddenly] transforms the world, casting [for the individual] the whole familiar existence in a new light” (Norton 1970:24).

The period of Mary Alice Newell’s diary-keeping witnessed some of the greatest changes and most dangerous times in our nation’s history, events on which the diary writer often commented. She wrote, for example, “As I realize how many events, which history will give much space to, have happened in the last few years and how fortunate I am to be living in them, I want to always appreciate this fact. Most people will probably just take these events for granted” (Newell Diary II:6). Because three of her brothers served in combat overseas during WWII for three long years without a home furlough, the war was a very personal matter to the Newell family, and this reality showed up frequently in her accounts as well. She was especially concerned about her father, to whom she was very close. She wrote how her father “has to listen to Gabriel Heatter [a popular radio commentator during WWII] every night. He thinks he’s tops. But if the war news is bad, he will turn off the radio. The anxiety and tension about my brothers is just too much for him” (Newell Diary I:23). In April of 1945, Mary Alice told of another major national event, the sudden death of Franklin Roosevelt, the only president she had ever known. While noting that her own family were “the staunchest of Republicans,” she was completely shocked and saddened by the president’s death and wondered how “history will remember such a great man.” But the “highest event on the list of important happenings” for Mary Alice was the framing and signing of the United Nations Charter. The idealistic young woman pondered “just how the world will react to it and if it really will prevent future wars” (Newell Diary II:5–6).

Image 2. The Opening Page of Diary II

Mary Alice Newell - June 30, 1945 -1-
If in later years I desire to know what this is, here is the answer: a record of a period of my life from, shall we say for convenience sake, Jan. 1, 1945 to the time when I shall grow tired and uninterested in writing any further information concerning myself, my school life, my family, my friends, the terrible War which is and has been raging, and daily incidents and happenings as I see them through young, inexperienced, and childish eyes. I intend to write as personal as I wish since this is strictly a personal record and matter and the author does not contemplate its being read by others.
Jan. 1, 1945 to June 1, 1945.
Found me in school - a junior

Apart from important world and national events, Mary Alice also wrote about the often mundane but constant local and family realities of life at that time. The need to help her family is one such constant theme. In this regard, as with most rural farm children, Mary Alice was expected to help with the constant daily chores (Elder and Conger 2000).

Her first diary, for example, is full of irritable comments about having to put down her writing and help her mother mop, cook, wash dishes, or iron. In another instance, she wrote of “being busy a lot of the time . . . turning the separator and getting \$4.00 a week” (Diary I:11).

Mary Alice’s father, James Newell, operated a small farm and also took on odd jobs such as house painting and substitute rural mail carrying to help make ends meet (Mary Newell Pierce interview 2000). Still, money was often very tight. Mary Alice reported, for example, that the family “[g]ot a car for \$35. We finally got the title and gas stamps and all but don’t drive it any” (Newell Diary I:20).

By the end of her freshman year, family financial difficulties forced Mary Alice to find odd jobs outside the household farm work to help pay for her extra expenses such as new clothes. She wrote, for example, of picking apples at Dyer’s Orchard (Newell Diary I:16). A few of these jobs were unpleasant and difficult. In one excerpt, she noted that she would be staying with a family for two weeks, “doing clothes washing, dishes and ironing.” She was very nervous about her work abilities and leaving the emotional comfort of her home: “I don’t know if I can do it or not but if I can I will be able to make up for what I spend on my clothes.” In another instance she stayed and worked at an uncle’s for two and a half weeks and received \$15. This too was an unpleasant experience. “I certainly did get disgusted a lot of the time,” she wrote, “but I lived through it” (Newell Diary I:15–16).

In many of her accounts in the first volume, written during her freshman and sophomore years, Mary Alice comes across as a bit of a goody-two-shoes. She always seemed to have her nose in a book. Her diary shows that she read a wide array of novels from *So Big*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to those by her favorite author, Grace Livingston Hill. Hill’s characters were typically young female Christian women who triumphed over difficult circumstances without compromising their religious virtue (Munce 1990). Mary Alice wrote of buying a friend one of the Hill novels, *Cloudy Jewell*, as a birthday gift: “I don’t know if she’d like the book or not but I knew I really did” (Newell Diary I:12).

Mary Alice was particularly uncomfortable with the typical young rule-breaking acts of that time such as smoking and kissing. In one entry, she wrote, “The freshman class had a wiener roast at Frye’s Woods Thurs. night I don’t think I’ll forget for a while. In it was a good time and I did some things I didn’t ever think I’d be doing a year ago or even 6 months ago. No, I don’t think there was anything exactly wrong with what I did but still if I were doing it over I believe I would do it differently.” Seeing Voris Robinson, a classmate she had an undeclared crush on, lighting up a cigarette, however, bothered her immensely: “Voris asked if anyone had a cigarette. Of course Bill did and they both smoked. It hurt me . . . but I heard and saw him with my own eyes” (Newell Diary I:7).

It was also in this first volume that she spoke to her hope of becoming a doctor, an idea that came to play the central role in her second diary. Part of the inspiration for her wanting to follow such a difficult track may have involved her natural intelligence and

the resulting expectations of her teachers. Her diary shows that she was certainly proud of her grades. After getting one set of grades, she noted, "I have several A pluses and the rest A's on my report card. . . I find Latin hard but I like it" (Newell Diary I:21). Biology, however, quickly rose to become her favorite subject, due in great part to her budding relationship with her biology teacher, Mr. Kellet.

"HER RECORD IS STRAIGHT A'S"

At the very beginning of her first diary, Mary Alice had written wistfully, "I wonder where Mr. Kellet is and what he's doing. Bet he's reading *Man and Climate* somewhere" (Jefferson 1912; Newell Diary I:2). At this time, she worried about Mr. Kellet's returning to teaching her freshman year, writing, "I do hope Mr. Kellet will be back. My fingers are crossed. I'm afraid something might happen that he wouldn't come back to teach" (Newell Diary I:14).

The admiration was apparently mutual. Deeper into the diary, she related how "Mr. Kellet showed me how to use the microscope today while the rest of the class were finishing their Latin test as I was through. He says for me put the microscopes away after we get through with them. I hope I don't forget!" (Newell Diary I:21).

The most interesting episode between Mary Alice and Mr. Kellet, one that clearly demonstrated his vocational expectations for her, occurred at the end of her freshman year. The biology teacher had approached her at a local diner in Waltonville and asked if she would be attending the senior graduation program: "He said, 'sister you must be sure and come tomorrow night.' I said I would. When he gave me my report card Friday, he asked me if that was a promise that I would come. I said yes again." On the evening of graduation, after all the senior graduates had been given their diplomas and other awards had been passed out, Mr. Kellet stood up and announced there was a last recognition he needed to bestow. Mary Alice wrote of what followed.

What do you think? An award to me for perfect attendance!
I can't remember all that he said but on the back of my
award he wrote "Another [future] valedictorian. Her record
is straight A's. She has the mental capacity to be
responsible, to realize the value of time and to make A's all
four years and into college. She is blessed with good health
which enables her to maintain a record of perfect
attendance for 9 months regardless of distance or weather."

Mary Alice then added, "And I'm going to maintain it 4 years and into college!" (Newell Diary I:11).

Soon after this, Mary Alice wrote in her diary of another event that further increased adult expectation pressures: "I don't think I mentioned it but we took IQ tests this year. Of course, I don't know what I made" (Newell Diary I:22). A few weeks after this, Mary Alice was surprised when someone came into her classroom and told her to

report to the principal's office. She was certainly puzzled but not afraid. Her study habits and pleasant obedient demeanor had always made her every teacher's favorite.

Image 3. Mary Alive Newell's senior class. Mary Alice is in the middle row, right.



As it turned out, Mary Alice's IQ scores had come back, and they were impressive (Mary Newell Pierce interview 2000). The information was kept quiet, although all the teachers soon knew of her extremely high score. Of course, her parents were pleased and excited even more for her future. Her father was especially "proud of her test scores" and strongly encouraged her now to think about college and a professional career (Faye Newell Simpson interview 2013). Her father's sudden interest and expectation that she eventually go to college may have had much to do with his own dropping out of Northwestern University as a young man and coming back to Waltonville to farm (Mills 2014).

At the end of Mary Alice Newell's first diary, we see a teenage girl beginning to address some of the issues that face teenage girls as they begin the transition into young adulthood. Unknown to her, however, were the many new and surprising events just around the corner, such as transferring to a much larger high school at Mt. Vernon, Illinois, and being interested in a boy for the first time. These events brought new stress and unexpected personal discoveries. Arnett (2000) observed that emerging as an adult may be understood as possessing five primary characteristics: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and the experiences of a range of possibilities. While all of these elements are clearly present in the second diary accounts, Mary Alice's struggle with choosing a professional vocation seemed to be the most bedeviling problem she faced.

"I LOVE SO MUCH TO PUT THESE THOUGHTS INTO WORDS"

At the beginning of her second diary, Mary Alice Newell declared her intentions to write a completely honest account of events "concerning myself, my school life, my family and my friends." There was much to write about. This particular period, surprisingly, found her "in school—a junior at Mt. Vernon Township High School in Mt. Vernon, Illinois" (Newell Diary II:1). Prior to that, she had attended tiny Waltonville High School during her freshman and sophomore years. The latter school and village were located a few miles from her house, with the town containing a population just over five hundred people. In 1929, Waltonville had boasted of being the "second city of the county" and the center of a prosperous farming area. Waltonville, an article proclaimed, "Has the largest bank in Jefferson County, outside of Mt. Vernon" (Wells 1987:5). By the early 1940s, the town was stagnated, having no population increases since 1929. It was certainly more rural-like than urban. Mary Alice, whose family lived down a dead-end dirt lane, most often rode a horse part of the way to school in Waltonville. Despite this inconvenience, she greatly enjoyed her first two years of classes at Waltonville High School, as her first diary reveals, socializing with her friends and going to a variety of events. Unfortunately, circumstances moved to change Mary Alice's school situation.

In the summer before Mary Alice's junior year, in 1944, the town of Waltonville was rife with rumors that the high school there might actually shut down. The struggling school had only 40 or so students and little in way of any extra kinds of classes, especially vocational ones. The school consisted of only three teachers and a principal

housed in five rented rooms on the top floor of the town's aging grade school. In contrast, in 1945, Mt. Vernon High School, located in a bustling town of more than 15,000, boasted more than a thousand students and employed 39 teachers. The school also offered a huge variety of courses, including full vocational training, piano, journalism, Spanish, and commercial law ("Grass-Roots School Board" 1946:50).

As it turned out, Waltonville High School did not shut down; however, Mary Alice Newell's parents were concerned enough about giving Mary Alice and her younger sister, Faye, a solid education that they paid both the tuition cost and money for room and board to send them to Mt. Vernon in the fall of 1944. The cost was certainly a heavy burden on the family. One possible motive for Mary Alice being sent to the Mt. Vernon school may have been the earlier revelation of Mary Alice's high IQ during her sophomore year. That she possessed such high intelligence likely raised her parents' expectations regarding her vocational future (Faye Newell Simpson interview). Furthermore, the fact that three of her four older brothers had dropped out of high school by this time and all of them seemed destined to work at manual labor may have added to Mary Alice's burden of carrying the educational hopes and dreams of the family.

The first section of her second diary, often written by the light of a kerosene lantern in an upstairs room of the Newell house, offers a powerful sense of growing ambivalence and tension. Writing of her time at Mt. Vernon High School, she noted, "These months sped by very quickly and, I think I can add, pleasantly and happily. I stayed in town with Faye, Peggy Place and Martha Kirk and came home to the farm every weekend." But then she added an emotional and contrasting comment: "No one who has not ever experienced it can know how much I looked forward to and *anxiously* awaited those weekends" (Newell Diary II:2). Certainly, this latter thought brings into question just how happy and pleasant the Mt. Vernon school experience really was for her.

At Mt. Vernon, Mary Alice also experienced making less than sterling grades for the first time in her school life, a very disturbing event for a student used to being at the top of all her classes. She wrote of this upsetting circumstance, noting, "I tried to study hard and make good grades but because of a number of reasons I didn't do nearly as well as I had as a freshman and sophomore at Waltonville." So often analytical, Mary Alice went on to speculate, "Perhaps the greatest hindrance was a lack of a suitable environment for study. That with a hundred other things brought my year's average to a B while I had made straight A's before" (Newell Diary II:3).

One of the hundred other things that may have affected her schoolwork included worrying about her brothers who served overseas during the war. She also worried about "the war that brought death to thousands." She pined for her brothers to come home, hoping "at least one of them might get a discharge but I suppose we will just have to keep on hoping" (Newell Diary II:5). Another, more disturbing, event occurred when her parents made an unexpected visit from Waltonville to tell the sisters about their oldest brother, Orval's, mental breakdown. Orval would suffer several schizophrenic episodes in his lifetime. The parents had just had Orval committed to the state hospital, and their

mother, Vera, “was crying which was a rare occasion” (Faye Newell Simpson interview). Obviously, Mary Alice’s time at Mt. Vernon was not always happy or pleasant.

In June of 1945, Mary Alice returned to the Waltonville farm for the summer. Her home had no indoor toilet or electricity as her apartment had in Mt. Vernon, nor was there any of the social excitement of the big city. That early summer, she helped her mother cook, carrying in wood for the wood-burning stove, and helped wash clothes with a washer “you worked by pushing an apparatus back and forth by hand” (Pierce 1985). Despite the hard physical labor, she seemed overjoyed to be home: “It was good indeed to spend quiet evenings home on the farm without having to study or write shorthand all evening. Don’t get the idea that I disliked school at Mt. Vernon nor my studies. It was exactly the opposite, but I had merely grown a little tired of it all and a vacation was very welcomed.” One troubling thought apparently loomed constantly on the horizon, however: “I have been busy here at home helping with the work some of the time and doing whatever my desire might be. Time, however, passes too quickly and I’ll soon be back there [in Mt. Vernon] studying again” (Newell Diary II:7).

The realization of having to eventually return to Mt. Vernon for school brought forth another problem for the teenager: the question of whether to follow an academic track or a commercial track during her coming senior year at Mt. Vernon High. The latter would prepare her for being a secretary, while the former was more in line with the expectations of her Waltonville teachers and of her parents, who wanted her to try for something more advanced. She related in her diary how she had “a very hard time” choosing her subjects: “I wanted to take chemistry and math but I just had to take shorthand and typing and I couldn’t take both with the other required subjects. So, after deciding first on one thing and then the other, I finally chose English IV, American History, typing and shorthand II and salesmanship.” On the surface, there was a very practical angle to her interest in classes that were termed commercial studies at that time. This angle concerned the Newell family’s always-precarious economic situation: “I have vowed to do my best in the commercial subjects because I’ve come to the conclusion that before I can go to college I’ll need more money than my parents can give me and to earn it I must work” (Newell Diary II:8).

The last part of this section of the diary is more whimsical and captures a more romantic side of the teenager: “It is growing dark and soon I shall leave this state of fancy and pull myself back into the world of my family again. But I shall write more and I hope it is soon for I love so much to put these thoughts into words which are most persistent in my mind. So, I take leave of this work until I once again visit the world I love the most” (Newell Diary II:10).

“NOT DARING TO TELL MYSELF”

The second section of Mary Alice’s second diary is dated February 10, 1946. Eight months had passed since the writing of the first section with its rather idyllic ending. Mary Alice was now in the last term of her senior year in high school. She began

the section by revealing what was for her an earth-shaking event: the unexpected appearance of her authentic self and its unexpected consequences.

Last July, after a month's vacation, I decided to work at Mt. Vernon. I obtained a position as a clerk in Woolworth's and started working at the candy counter. I rented a room on South 9th street at Mrs. Rupand's. At first it was very thrilling and I was completely absorbed in doing my best at the store. I only made fifteen dollars a week but that seemed like a fortune to me then. Busy as I was, the two months until time for school to start again passed very quickly. Faye and I had planned to stay at Mrs. Rupand's and go to school at Mt. Vernon again. But about two weeks before school started I, very surprisingly, made the decision to go back to Waltonville my senior year. Even I do not understand exactly just what prompted that decision. It came upon me suddenly one day while I was working at the store. At first I merely played with the thought, *not daring to tell myself* I would really go back to Waltonville after a year at Mt. Vernon. Then, suddenly, I decided finally and completely. (Newell Diary II:11–12)

It had been her parents' unrelenting wish that she graduate from Mt. Vernon High School that most concerned and worried her. Her diary indicates a colossal battle: "My mother begged and, at first, my father argued, but my mind was made up." Now in touch with some inner power, Mary Alice went even further in the fight, bringing her little sister into the fray. "After explaining the idea to Faye, she too decided to go to Waltonville." When Vera Newell saw that her oldest daughter's decision was final, "she too gave in." Mary Alice was also greatly concerned by what others might think and say about her unexpected decision not to return to the more prestigious Mt. Vernon High School, but she carried out her plan "without an explanation to anyone—for how could I explain to anyone else *when I didn't understand it all myself*" (Newell Diary II:13).

The dust seemed to settle rather quickly over Mary Alice's fateful decision and actions. She certainly seemed happy with her hard-earned choice, writing, "We started back to school in September. It was *wonderful* to see all my friends again—the ones I knew as freshmen and sophomores. It brought back so many memories. I liked the teachers—Mr. Smith, the principal, Mrs. Smith, Mr. Weaver and Mr. Williams." There was one sad element to her return, however: the absence of her beloved teacher, Mr. Kellett. She, however, was philosophical about the circumstance, writing, "Of course it wasn't the same without Mr. Kellett, but then you can't have your cake and eat it too" (Newell Diary II:13).

Another disappointment also soon occurred: the reality of Waltonville's academic limitations. "The subjects I took were American History, General Math, English IV and

general business,” she complained. “I regret I couldn’t have had a bigger choice of subjects but those were the only ones I hadn’t already taken. I wish I could have taken five subjects but anyway, I shall graduate with eighteen credits.” Soon, however, many truly happy and pleasant events occurred at Waltonville High, which made Mary Alice content with her choice of coming back to school there. She gave a great amount of space in her diary happily reminiscing about that year. “The main events at school were the carnival, at which Millard Kabot, my best friend, and Bob Dillard, a freshman, were chosen queen and king and the senior class play. It was so much fun getting the play up and giving it. I enjoyed it immensely. . . . Weenie roasts, parties, skating parties, movie parties and ball games all added to the fun I’ve had this year at school. I’ll always remember the ball game at Bluford and how it rained so hard on us on the way home in an open truck” (Newell Diary II:13–17).

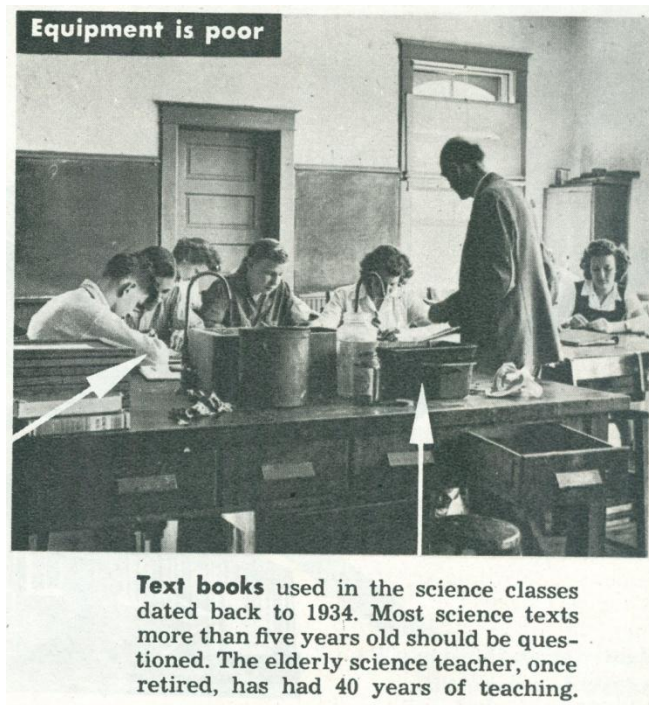
There was one dark spot on her wonderful year, however, one that she oddly did not even touch upon in her diary. In the spring of 1946, *Look* magazine contacted the school board with exciting news. At that time, the magazine was a general-interest publication with an emphasis on photographs and was second only to *Life* magazine in national circulation. The magazine asked for permission to do a full-length story on little Waltonville High School. Everyone dressed up for the visit. Photographers went around to several classes, taking photos of posed, dressed-up, and very serious-looking students. Mary Alice appeared in one photo, sitting in the back of the science classroom, her eyes glued to a book.

It was an exciting time. Students and teachers alike could hardly contain their exhilaration (Rosemary Newell Atkins interview 2013). A suave reporter interviewed several students and the entire school board, including Marion Newell, the chairman of the board and Mary Alice’s cousin. The community was ecstatic and proud that the world would soon get a glimpse of their little school. Their excitement soon turned into anger; *Look* magazine offered Waltonville High School to the entire nation as the prime example of what was wrong with thousands of American high schools in a piece titled “Grass-Roots School Board.” It was a vicious attack. “Our nation is haunted by thousands of skeleton high schools,” the article asserted. The article lay the blame for this problem at the feet of local school board members “who are uninformed and victims of petty pride.” Thousands of these so-called worthless skeleton high schools were being kept open by such boards (“Grass-Roots School Board” 1946:50).

Waltonville was portrayed as horribly understaffed and crammed into five rooms in the upper story of the aging grade school building. The board members were presented as being well-intentioned but ignorant. Marion Newell was accused of knowing “little of the school’s programs” and “wasn’t sure what subjects his own daughter studied.” Other board members were equally ridiculed, and four of the five were photographed wearing bib overalls. “These five men have community pride. They’re proud Waltonville has its own high school.” But the article went on to argue that the school was “pitifully inadequate.” Several charts and photos with brief narratives were offered to support these arguments. Perhaps the most disturbing photo and narrative showed a baby-faced boy, Henry Wyciskalla, sitting on a tractor, a cap pushed rakishly back on his head. “I’ve

hated school from the first day,” he told the *Look* reporter. “The boy had just quit school to help his father farm,” *Look* noted. “He would have stayed in school to study agriculture but the school couldn’t afford the course” (“Grass-Roots School Board” 1946:51).

Image 4. One of the photos in *Look* magazine’s scathing article on Waltonville High School. Mary Alice Newell is sitting at the back right corner.



One thing was for certain: The article completely repudiated Mary Alice Newell’s difficult decision of leaving the “model” high school at Mt. Vernon and returning to the much smaller school at Waltonville for her senior year. Further, while the article had strong merits, it seemed critical to the point of being vicious and one-sided. Positive ideas about the benefits of a small school culture, for example, were not offered. Nor were any quotes used from Waltonville students, teachers, or board members about what they felt and thought was meaningful and important about their little school. It was a lengthy and devastating article, but one that the community quickly put behind them. The community probably reasoned, and correctly so, that there were thousands of little Waltonvilles out there in the rural countryside and that Waltonville graduates had always accomplished much in life.

It is interesting that Mary Alice failed to mention one word of this visit in her diary. Several of her diary entries, however, suggest why she may have been too distracted to tackle the *Look* magazine visit.

“I SHALL OBTAIN MY GOAL”

Mary Alice’s role in the senior play that year was that of “[a] man-crazy old maid, Samantha Slade, who pulled out all the tricks in the bag but failed to capture one suitor” (1946 Waltonville High School yearbook). In truth, her diary up to this point indicates that Mary Alice had absolutely no interest in boys. An entry in her first diary about a freshman party where kissing games were played clearly conveyed her thoughts on the matter: “I didn’t especially care for the games they played. Of course no one chose me of which I was glad afterwards when I realized how silly it was. I left when they started to play post office” (Newell Diary I:12–13).

Besides Mary Alice’s tendency to be rational rather than emotional, and to be very idealistic, her own lack of interest in boys was likely influenced by her strong Methodist upbringing. As Asbury (1926) observed, Methodist churches purposely aimed to influence their young members in small-town Midwest communities long into adulthood, despite any negative repressive elements that might occur with strong indoctrination. In this same regard, one 1919 Methodist training book for Sunday School teachers working with young girls, for example, warned of the dangers of fiction, “especially those of low quality,” movies, and parties with “kissing games” (Moxcey 1919). Mary Alice’s mother, Vera Newell, a devout Methodist, did not like fiction of any kind, especially “silly romances,” as they did not portray the world in a straightforward and therefore true way. Moreover, James and Vera Newell kept a book for adolescents that warned of the dangers of hand-holding and kissing before marriage (Mary Alice Newell Pierce interview). There was also a local story from the past that was used in the family as a powerful cautionary tale regarding sexuality.

In 1924, a local Methodist Episcopal Church minister, Rev. Lawrence Hight, from the nearby community of Ina, and one of his young parishioners, Elsie Sweetin, poisoned their spouses so they could be together. The couple’s crime was eventually uncovered, and the ensuing trial at Mr. Vernon was “the most sensational to ever hit Jefferson County. Newspapers from all over the country sent reporters to cover the case, folk songs were written about the illicit love affair and resulting murders, and special trains carried spectators to the trial together.” The story came to serve as a parable of sorts, warning about the power of sexual drives and how they could easily lead to personal destruction. In December of 1925, Mary Alice Newell’s uncle, John McPherson, arranged and published a ballad about Rev. Hight’s part in the sensational murders called “Hight’s Confession.” The first two verses and part of the chorus show the ballad to be a not very well disguised moral lesson:

The Methodist Conference sent me here, a preacher’s place to fill
I brought with me my darling wife, my heart’s desire did fill.
But here I saw another one I loved for better still
The devil put it in my heart, my lovely wife to kill.

[Chorus]

Come all you men that have such thoughts, don’t let them with you dwell
They rob you of your liberty and send your soul to hell. (Horton 1990:5–6)

Although the murders and trial took place three years before Mary Alice was born, the story would be repeated for years among the Newell family. Mary Alice herself remembered it being told often as a sordid but instructive tale (Mary Alice Newell Pierce interview).

School photos taken of Mary Alice Newell during her high school days certainly do not suggest someone about to surrender to the desires of the flesh. These photos most often show a slightly chubby teenage girl wearing glasses and little makeup and always dressed in prim and proper attire. While the shortage of cloth material during the war had happily allowed girls' dress hems to rise higher, this was not so for Mary Alice. In her photos, she looked every bit to be a future schoolmarm. Thus, it is certainly eye-catching when a bit of her authentic self, noting an interest in a boy, popped out in the second section of her diary. She certainly was a bit stunned, but highly fascinated, by this completely unexpected happening.

What I'm going to say now will probably appear very silly and foolish to me five years from now but nevertheless, the record would not be complete without it. Maybe you have already guessed. I'm going to write about a boy in my life. In all of my diaries I've ever written, I've never written seriously of any boys because I just wasn't interested in them. It's different this year. I'm 18 and Ernest Bozarth, that's his name, is the most handsome boy I've ever known. I like him very much, more than I've ever cared for any boy. (Newell Diary II:17-18)

Bozarth was a junior, and the foster son of Mrs. Smith, one of Mary Alice's teachers. He also attended the same Methodist church as Mary Alice. Interestingly, after this stunning declaration, Mary Alice began to take some distance from her feelings. "I know that it really isn't love and that he doesn't feel about me as I feel about him. I know he is not the one person in this world with whom I'd consent to spend the rest of my life. However, it is interesting to note the fact that boys are making their appearance on the stage of my life." Mary Alice also observed that she did not know "just which actor the 'true one' is going to be or just when he will appear. Just the same," she added, "Ernie means a lot to me and I'm glad to have known him as a friend. I believe he likes me some too" (Newell Diary II:18).

It is interesting to note that Mary Alice, in the senior class prophecy that she wrote for the yearbook, had Ernie Bozarth married to her best friend, Mildred Kabot. "You remember that tall dark and handsome junior in 1946 that all the girls went crazy over? That's right, Ernie Bozarth. Yes Mildred married him and they now have the cutest twins you ever saw" (1946 Waltonville High School yearbook).

After the unusual interlude involving thoughts and feeling about Ernie Bozarth, Mary Alice returned to a recurrent theme in her diary—that of life after high school. Pondering her vocational future seemed to hurl her back into her rational self, back to a

part of herself vulnerable to others' expectations. The passage is rife with angst until she returns to thoughts of Ernie Bozarth.

Next Friday I shall take a college entrance examination to compete for a 4 year scholarship given by the Pepsi Cola Company. I have a very small chance of winning but I want to try anyway. My grades this year have been A's but I feel awful dumb if they were not, considering the easy subjects I'm taking. I'm not studying this year as I should be. I'm going to try to do better from now until school is out. I have so much room for improvement. I feel I've been having too good a time at school and as a result my lessons have suffered. But how can I study with that cute Ernie sitting beside me. Sometimes his smile is bewitching. I can't get my mind off of him many times in class. (Newell Diary II:19–20)

It did not take Mary Alice long, however, to analyze her way through her Ernie problem and to get more square with her rational thinking tendency: "I believe that my feelings for him will soon be over. I realize he is just another boy and I can't let anyone—not even a cute boy like him stand between me and success. I suppose by what I have been writing, one would be inclined to think I had almost forgotten my professional career. *Well, I haven't*" (Newell Diary II:20).

Mary Alice's concept of success, that of entering and doing well in a professional career, certainly fulfilled her parents' and others' expectations. It also represented the pressure, as noted earlier, felt by many intelligent young women in the 1940s to consider postponing marriage for some degree of higher education and professional work. This pressure seemed to hit Mary Alice Newell especially hard. She wrote, "As graduation comes closer and I realize I'll be out of high school, I'm haunted by the question of what I shall do" (Newell Diary II:20).

Mary Alice's particular choice of such a strong word as *haunted* deserves further examination. Gordon (1997) had much to say about social oppression and how it might create a kind of metaphoric/sociological haunting. As Gordon noted, "to be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effect" (p. ix). More specifically, Gordon spoke of a society's squelching of social justice and of the metaphoric haunting that emerges from such practices. Perhaps this idea can be applicable to a local community and family systems as well. The high expectations of Mary Alice Newell's teachers have already been noted in this regard. In Mary Alice Newell's case, this kind of haunted feeling could have certainly involved her picking up on the quiet yet powerful expectations of her parents, expectations driven by their own unfulfilled lives—the ghosts of what her parents might have been had they not turned their backs on some authentic part of themselves. This latter possibility is made even sharper when one notes how much her

father wanted his oldest daughter to go to college and pursue a professional career, a course that he had once tried to follow himself but had been unable to carry through.

Mary Alice now began to ponder with great seriousness her career possibilities. She had written in her early freshman–sophomore diary of her desire to become a doctor, this idea perhaps growing out of her relationship with her beloved science teacher, Mr. Kellett. Her receiving a four-year scholarship further pushed her in the direction of her parents' and teachers' expectations of obtaining advanced professional training, but with a slight twist. In this case, financial reality came into play:

When I wrote here last June, I wanted to be a doctor. That desire is no less urgent now but it is not the foremost idea in my mind. I can accept a scholarship which amounts to four years['] training at a teacher's college in Illinois if I'll be a teacher. I have decided to accept it. I feel I must have a college education before I can start to do anything. I won't take the scholarship just as a means to go to college and then not teach. I'll be a teacher. I prefer now to teach science in high school. Perhaps I can go to [medical] school later, beyond the four years. Then, if I still desire to be a doctor, I can earn the money. I shall strive to obtain my goal. (Newell Diary II:21–22)

This was the first time Mary Alice wrote of becoming a science teacher. As has been the typical fashion in her other entries, the analytical and idealistic side of Mary Alice spent time pondering this change in plans: "I find that I now have a strong desire to teach school and I have a feeling I may wish to make it my life's work. I believe for the right person it is a wonderful attainment." This is followed by an ode to her favorite high school teacher, Mr. Kellett: "Not everyone possesses a 'teacher's personality,' the kind of personality that causes one person to radiate the desire to learn to others. Mr. Kellett had it and I believe he gave it to me." She added, "I feel teaching would give one a deep satisfaction to know he was helping others to fit themselves to win the 'race of life'" (Newell Diary II:22–23).

Mary Alice ended this section of the diary with a rather long prayer. She spoke of someday instilling in students the greatest "*desire of all*," an object she described in the highest of idealistic terms: "Dear God, [h]elp me to do my best to graduate from high school and college fully prepared to install [sic] in our youth the greatest desire of all—the desire to seek and learn the truth." This is followed by thoughts regarding the idea of success: "Help me to do thy will and to teach others to follow after those things that are best in life and that make for happy successful living, namely truth, kindness, honesty, study, love, forgiveness and doing thy will." She ended her prayer by asking God to help her "do the greatest possible good during my little stay here on earth. Even if I never make millions of dollars, let me teach others the uselessness of making money if they

neglect to educate the mind and soul to aspire to the highest goals in life. Amen” (Newell Diary II:22–23).

The prayer, and the narrative before it, suggest the great hold that others’ expectations and her own idealized image had on Mary Alice Newell. She had certainly moved a great distance from thinking about Ernie Bozarth and from any thoughts and feelings concerning the possibility of marriage and having a family. It would be after she entered college that her authentic self and her haunted self battled to see which entity would win.

On May 10, 1946, Mary Alice sat down once more in an upstairs room of her farmhouse home and wrote another entry in her diary, this one titled “Thoughts of a Senior Three Weeks before Graduation.” Her primary goal still remained that of going to college and achieving a professional life, but she now also considered other ideas. She wrote of graduating as a metaphor for the stages in life, and included in the stages she perceived looming before her “college,” “marriage,” “a life’s work,” and “a family,” but her career still remained of the utmost importance, along with being successful. Her thoughts, especially one of the words she underlined in one particular passage, *religion*, also suggest yet another haunting force of expectation and repression for Mary Alice Newell:

I hope I shall work harder in college and know greater success there. I think I should like to help others know graduation as I have known it. I could best do this if I were a teacher. I believe I am best suited to do this. I have the ability and interest to make it worth my while to aim at teaching as my life’s work. . . . Two things necessary to my success as a teacher are religion and a single aim. . . . As I write these words tonight—it is a cold and rainy evening, just three weeks from graduation—my hope and prayer is that for me my graduation will not mean the end of school days but the beginning of good things in life. That I may go forward and do great things for God and humanity. That God will give me the power to combine all the necessary ingredients of a really worthwhile Christian life. . . . God help me. (Newell Diary II:29–31)

Though not all religious thoughts and activities are repressive, they may, however, limit the authentic self from being a strong functional part of an individual’s development (Fallot 1998).

“I MIGHT WANT TO MARRY”

Eight months later, Mary Alice Newell penned her last diary narrative. She had just returned from her first term of classes at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in

Carbondale, Illinois. It was only a 50-mile or so physical journey but was another world away culturally from her rural home near Waltonville. She began this section of her diary by telling of her high school graduation, in which she was the valedictorian of her small class, and of the surprising depression that went with leaving adolescence and entering adulthood: "It was all over too soon, and I was out of high school" (Newell Diary II:32).

That summer, she worked at a surprisingly satisfying job as a secretary. "Immediately, I went to Mt. Vernon and did typing for Pollock Abstract Company. I certainly enjoyed the work and I believe I was successful because the Pollocks seemed to hate very much to lose me when I left. I learned a lot about people and about life in general as well as office routine." There was another very practical upside to her experiences as a working person: "Then too I was able to buy some much needed clothes and save a little money." Mary Alice saved about \$100, and "with this money I had earned and \$150.00 which I borrowed from [my brothers] Tommie and Maxey, I started to college at Southern Illinois Normal University on September 16, 1946" (Newell Diary II:32-33).

Mary Alice's father was likely very excited about his daughter's forthcoming college experience. With his three older sons obviously set to carry out blue-collar vocations and the oldest son made vocationally dysfunctional with a mental illness, Mary Alice Newell now carried the burden of her family's highest vocational dreams. It was an obligation she would not be able to fulfill.

Mary Alice arrived at Carbondale in the fall of 1946 to find SIU to be a campus in partial chaos. The school newspaper, *The Egyptian*, on September 27, 1946, noted that the coming of so many recent veterans on the GI Bill drove enrollment to an "all-time high." In the same issue, one frustrated freshman student complained about the overcrowded and chaotic registration for classes that year. The article offers a powerful glimpse into the difficult time a rural freshman student like Mary Alice would have endured:

Come Monday, September 16, a day not even the faculty will forget, little alone the 1500 freshmen who had to register for two full days. The old gym was packed with students, all freshmen, trying to locate proper classes. . . . After falling back in Parkinson Laboratory, you slowly worked your way in the general direction of the old gym for an hour or so. After reaching the door, some eager registrants found themselves ahead of schedule and were invited to work their way back again. Finally, gaining admittance to the old gym, you reported to your counselor and he signed about six of the required cards you had to fill out.

After standing in several lines to sign up for particular classes, Mary Alice then had to return to her counselor and have everything okayed. The entire procedure made for a rugged start to the school year.

Getting a decent room was difficult that year, and the student newspaper further warned students to beware of landlords trying to take advantage of students. Mary Alice was fortunate, however, to be able to room with a friend from her senior class, Margret Sulcer. Her best friend from high school, Millard Kabot, and another Waltonville girl roomed nearby.

At first, having a roommate from Waltonville and two other friends close by made Mary Alice's college experiences less difficult. This circumstance soon changed, however. She reported in her diary how one friend "quit after the first week" and the other two by the end of the first quarter term. "I liked college life a lot but I didn't like being away from home," she wrote (Newell Diary II:33).

Mary Alice was forced to find other housing arrangements and endure a less compatible roommate. "When Margret left I had to get a new boarding place so I moved into the house where Mildred had been living. My new roommate is Judy Wilson. She isn't exactly my idea of a nice girl but I suppose I can live with her for the remainder of the year. However, the fact that she doesn't possess ideal habits caused me lots of unhappiness" (Newell Diary II:34-35).

The next diary passage is significant when compared to an interview taken with Mary Alice Newell in her later years. In her diary, she reported, "After my friends quit school I was very lonely[,] and living with this new girl whom I didn't like made me very unhappy and home sick. But I believe the mood is sufficiently passed now." She went on to tell about her successes in the classroom: "I was taking easy subjects the first term and for this reason, I didn't have to study too much. The term ended December 6, 1946, and I came out with a 4.7 average" (Newell Diary II:34).

Mary Alice made A's in zoology, English, and math, a B in music, and a C in physical education. Given the jolt of such a new and difficult environment, she had certainly done well. Nevertheless, she was not completely happy with her grades: "I was proud of my grades but not entirely satisfied. I am determined to study harder this term. I'm taking chemistry, trigonometry, English, sociology and physical education" (Newell Diary II:34).

At the end of her diary, preparing to return after Christmas break to Carbondale, she wrote of both hope and doubt: "I'm going to try and start in new and study harder. I'm hoping my outlook will be brighter then." She added in what would be the final paragraph of her diary:

I've had the happiest vacation I've ever had since I've been in school this Christmas. I've been home almost two weeks now and my vacation will be up Sunday. Of course I'll be a little sorry to leave but I've had such a good time that I feel I could get back in earnest now. My parents were unusually low on money this Christmas and it looked as if this wasn't going to be a very happy time, but as so many times . . .
(Newell Diary II:35-36)

Mary Alice's diary ends abruptly with her beginning comments regarding her family's economic situation of that Christmas back in 1946. What can be known about what happened next emerged in an interview she gave in 2000, when she was 73 years old. It is very reminiscent of her diary account of her surprising return from Mt. Vernon High School to Waltonville High School in 1945, as it shows another intense struggle with her parents' expectations:

In about six months after entering college, I became homesick and depressed. My Waltonville friends were gone. In exchange for my room and board, I cleaned the owners' house, cared for their children and cooked their meals. The house owners were rather wealthy, which did not help. I felt so shabby in my worn dresses and slightly ragged winter coat. One day the wife called me over and said, "I want to give you something." She handed me her winter coat. "I'm getting a new one and thought you might like to have this." I should have been happy to get it but, in fact, I felt humiliated. As the term continued, I grew more depressed. I began to eat more than I should for comfort, eating one piece of toasted bread heavily lathered with butter after another. For reasons I did not completely understand, I suddenly found myself wanting to quit school and get an office job back home. I also had decided that I might want to marry and have children. I knew, however, that my father would be dead set against this. (Mary Newell Pierce interview)

Mary Alice was correct in her assessment regarding her father. Her sister, Faye, remembered "how awfully disappointed he was" (Faye Newell Simpson interview).

Ironically, the limitations regarding the advanced courses that Mary Alice was able to take at Waltonville probably helped change the course of her life: "I was having trouble with my chemistry class. I don't know if this was because I was so distracted by being unhappy or because of the fact my high school classes may not have been as demanding. At any rate, chemistry was an essential part of the career options I was considering." Mary Alice used her shaky grade in her chemistry class as an excuse to come home: "I wrote my dad that I was failing the class and called my brother Dean to come get me. Once I was home and quickly found a job, they said little about my returning. I think they knew they could not talk me out of it" (Mary Newell Pierce interview).

During the postwar era, a growing number of rural Midwest women took jobs "in factories or as office workers, nurses, teachers, and retail clerks" (Devine 2014). Mary Alice Newell was among this group, although she did not seek a professional occupation such as teacher or nurse, as she had once thought she would. Soon after returning home to

Waltonville, she moved to an apartment in Mt. Vernon, where she took a job as a secretary at Holman Motor Company, a Ford car dealership.

By early 1947, Mary Alice began to feel the pressure that many young Midwest women were experiencing after WWII. As May (2001) noted, “Single women became targets of campaigns that would continue after the war, urging women back into their domestic roles” (p. 39). At her work in Mt. Vernon, Mary Alice met a young man named Keith Mills one day in early 1949 when he came strolling in, looking to buy a car. Keith was a handsome man, perhaps in the mold of an Ernie Bozarth, and was three years older than Mary Alice. He had lost a wife just four or so months before his chance encounter with his future wife there at Holman Motors, and Mary Alice remembered how his sad demeanor “tugged at my heart” (Mary Newell Pierce interview). The two soon began dating, and a few months later, they were married on September 4, 1949.

At first the couple lived in Mary Alice’s apartment in Mt. Vernon, but after Mary Alice became pregnant with their first child, they moved to the rather remote rural area of her husband’s people, a region in the northwest corner of Jefferson County, Illinois, called Horse Creek. The area was a unique and somewhat isolated section of the county (Mills and Hales 2013).

In just over five years, Mary Alice would have three children, with another son coming along in 1961. She would spend her vocational life as a mother and a housewife, in the fashion of many postwar rural Midwest women who chose not to seek professional careers, but rather became extremely active with other women in the local school and in her church community, much in the tradition that Rosenfield (1995) described. Reflecting over her life on her 73rd birthday, she observed, “Although I sometimes wonder what my life might have been had I stayed in college, I have never once regretted the choice I made about raising a family. My life has been filled with great challenges, memories of some hard times, but most of all, memories of raising children and running a household.”

Filipovic (2006) observed that “[d]iaries provide an immediate experience of events, before the benefits of hindsight or tricks of memory can distort or influence an account. . . . While they are not written to be historical records, the diaries end up being just that, in a powerful, personal, and human way” (p. *xiii*). Mary Alice Newell’s diary accounts certainly bear out these thoughts. She pondered and struggled often in her writings with the question of what she should do with her life. In doing so, she eventually overcame the outside expectations of adults and her own child-formed idealism. After many struggles, she came to listen to her own inner voice. She was also a product of a rural Midwest upbringing, one that offered, at the time of her coming of age in the immediate post-WWII era, the possibility of a professional life with the postponing of marriage or more traditional options. Her diaries seem to indicate that in the end, both harsh economic realities and her own personal desires caused her to choose the important but often underrated vocation of housewife, mother, and active community citizen. As historian Jensen (2006) noted, there certainly existed a strong and rich Midwest heritage regarding such a vocational choice.

Mary Alice Newell once wrote in the diary used in this study that she intended “to write as personal as I wish since this is strictly a personal record and matter and the author does not contemplate it being read by others” (Newell Diary II:1). This examination, with the support of her family, has obviously kept Mary Alice Newell’s wish for anonymity from coming to pass. It is hoped, however, that the indiscretion of publishing many of her thoughts will be balanced by the insights that her diary offers regarding the kinds of difficulties young women her age faced in the late 1940s in finding their personal vocations.

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