

Ever wonder what happened on campus during the turbulent sixties? The alumnae magazine carried lots of wonderful stories, telling parents and alumnae about the latest events, and explaining how the administration was handling all the unrest. Here is a prime example, written by Dean Catherine Sims, in the summer of 1970. By Ellen Apperson Brown '72



### Twelve Days in May, 1970 (Sweet Briar Alumnae Magazine)

The military action in Southeast Asia and the tragic events at Kent State University in May evoked an emotional response and action from students everywhere which surely are unprecedented in the history of American education. No institution of which we have any knowledge remained tranquil or untouched.

What happened at Sweet Briar? Did the College close? What did our students do? What will be the ultimate effects? These and many more questions have been asked repeatedly by parents and alumnae as well as by those who are just curious and have no connection with the College.

A definitive answer is impossible to give, for each of us at Sweet Briar viewed the events differently. Each of us reacted and interpreted the last twelve days of term subjectively, influenced in our judgement by our positions, our ages, our political convictions, our responsibilities and our relationships to the students and their parents.

As editor of the Sweet Briar magazine we were faced with the difficult assignment of presenting to the alumnae a picture of the Sweet Briar community from May 11 until; Commencement June 1. The problem, we considered, was solved after we heard Dean

Catherine S. Sims speak to the alumnae who were back for reunions. With her permission we are reprinting the talk she gave at the Alumnae College. If the printed words fail to convey the charm and conviction with which she spoke, please remember this was not prepared as an article for publication but as an informal talk to members of the Sweet Briar family.

Doubtless some students and faculty will think this does not fully portray the excitement and the total involvement they felt. Probably some of the administration will think this is too sanguine a portrayal. But we print this with gratitude for we consider this a clear and unbiased account of "The Happening" as Mrs. Sims terms it.

And from our several viewpoints, as a Sweet Briar alumna and parent as well as a member of the administration, we believe that Sweet Briar's response to the national crisis should command respect and support from alumnae, parents and friends.

Elizabeth Bond Wood '34



## Twelve Days in May

By Dean Catherine S. Sims

My original assignment this morning was to bring you some information about matters academics at Sweet Briar. A few months ago when the program was first discussed, I had in mind making some remarks about curricular changes at the College over the last twenty years or so, commenting on departmental offerings and new courses, on student interest as indicated by enrollment and election of majors. But in view of the "Happening" which began early in May, I thought that you would prefer to hear about it.

Let me say, first, that I do not have enough information to attempt to give the whole story of the "Happening." I have collected some material which might help to tell the story, but I know that the collection is incomplete and I have no information at all about a good many interesting matters and no answer to offer to some of the questions I will be asked.

Last fall, when students in various colleges and universities began to express their concern about the war in Southeast Asia, we had a teach-in at Sweet Briar, a session which lasted all one afternoon and I believe into the evening. From time to time some of our students have gone to Washington to participate in demonstrations. In November, there was a candle-light procession one night around the Quadrangle. I think about 75 students participated in a silent and orderly expression of their concern.

The numbers involved in these earlier affairs were few and the campus as a whole was, to be frank, very little touched by them.

The new direction, as it seemed, of United States foreign policy indicated by the extension of the war into Cambodia, a little Asiatic kingdom which many of our students probably could not have found on the map, and the tragic events on the campus of Kent State University combined to stimulate Sweet Briar as in many other places a stringer, a more general reaction and expression of concern, of determination to learn, to be heard.

To what extent the development of the movement of concern and protest here was spontaneous, to what extent it may have been associated through individual Sweet Briar students with organized groups elsewhere, at other colleges, I do not know.

At any rate on the evening of Thursday, May 7, a rally was held in the Quadrangle attended by about 100 students and 2 or 3 members of the faculty. Some of the students were listeners and observers only. The rally lasted about 40 minutes and there was a discussion of means by which Sweet Briar students might share the activities of their fellow students on other campuses. There was discussion of a "strike", of a teach-in, of a trip to Washington over the weekend of May 8-10.

Following this a group of students, calling themselves the Steering Committee, planned a teach-in which took place on the afternoon of May 11, Monday. There were speakers, mainly students, although a few members of our faculty participated as well as two teachers from the University of Virginia and Hollins College. There was a student from Kent State University who spoke very quietly and effectively. There were two from the University of Virginia; there was one at least from Princeton. The meeting began in the Quadrangle after lunch, moved to Grammer Commons, and then in the late afternoon moved back to the Quadrangle.

That evening at seven o'clock a community meeting took place, and a large number of students and many members of the faculty were there. It lasted several hours and there were a number of speeches, all turning on what Sweet Briar students might do to show that they were concerned about the great questions facing the country. Some of the speakers were students; several members of the faculty spoke; I was asked to speak and did so very early in the meeting.

There is no doubt that the meeting had been planned by and was dominated (I use the word not in a pejorative sense but as a statement of fact) by the Steering Committee and that the Steering Committee knew what they wanted. They wanted a "strike," a suspension of classes, the cancellation of examinations, of all the usual activities of the College so that the time could be spent on organizing a movement of protest against the policy of the Nixon administration in Southeast Asia. During the course of the meeting it became clear that some

people were interested not only in foreign policy but in domestic problems and students were urged, for example, to campaign for the election of certain candidates running for the city council in Lynchburg.

A vote was taken, ballots being passed around, and by a two-thirds majority the meeting voted its support of a resolution which had been offered providing for a voluntary suspension of classes, effective May 11, the day of the meeting, with the statement that "Sweet Briar will reconvene on September 21, 1970 on its pre-May 11, 1970 basis." The resolution incorporated the provision that a student might arrange with her instructors to accept her grade based on work completed as of May 11 or might accept as "incomplete," the work to be completed by October 15, next.

*It should be stated first of all that this vote had no binding force. The group which voted had no authority to commit the College or its faculty to any course of action.* It should be further pointed out that for a long time Sweet Briar College has had a policy of voluntary class attendance so that any student who wished to participate in any activities of protest had the freedom to do so.

The next day, May 12, it was easy to see that there was no strike and that classes were meeting on schedule and many students were attending them. No check was made. No one, to my knowledge, can say for certain but my information is that with one exception classes were held by the instructors as scheduled although in some cases the classes were given the opportunity of attending a seminar or discussion which happened to be going on at the same time the class met. A number of instructors reported good attendance; some said attendance was better than usual.

The faculty met in a called meeting on the evening of May 12 and adopted the following motion:

The students of Sweet Briar College by a majority vote at an informal meeting of the community on May 11, 1970 indicated their awareness of the gravity of the national crisis and their desire to alter the normal course of academic affairs and

expressed their willingness to pay some price for the privilege of demonstrating their concern in appropriate ways.

Valuing this expression of concern but faced also with the responsibility of holding to the standards by which alone any academic judgment has value, the Faculty of Sweet Briar College agrees that:

- 1) The final examinations will be held as scheduled but
- 2) Any student who elects not to take the final examinations will not receive an automatic grade of F for the examination but will receive a determination of her grade based on the judgment of the individual member of the faculty concerned. Any student who elects this course of action will communicate her decision to the faculty members concerned immediately.

Examinations were held as scheduled. I cannot tell you how many students did not take their examinations. However, of the 3000 individual examinations which were scheduled, 57% were taken. Some students took none of their examinations; some took one or two or three; some took all.

During the weeks of May 11 and May 18 and through May 25-26, there was a variety of activities on the campus. There were many speeches the first week. A calendar of activities was published by the Steering Committee. On Thursday, May 14, for example there was a meeting of a group called the Committee for a New Congress at 9:00. Other events that day were a mixture of strongly partisan talks, *pro* or *con* one position or another and of non-partisan presentations such as that by Professor of Government Thomas V. Gilpatrick on canvassing. Activities at other colleges were included. The attendance at these meetings varied. It was substantial for the first few days; it began to taper off after classes ended on May 15. A pro-Nixon group, calling itself "Give Nixon a Chance" was organized on May 12 or 13 and they brought speakers and held meetings.

A majority of the members of the staff of the Sweet Briar *News* decided to discontinue publishing the *News* and some of them put out a few issues, five I think, of a dittoed sheet called the *Sweet Briar Free Press*. I think the word "free" refers to the fact that it did not cost anything. It was published "in coordination with the Steering Committee" and made no pretense at being partial although the five issues I have read indicate that statements from those of another point of view were accepted by the editors of the *Free Press*.

It is just far enough behind us, the “Happening,” to make it possible to estimate its value. On balance, how is it to be judged? Was the “Happening” on the whole to be regretted or to be praised?

Let me list the *cons*, first, as they occur to me. First, there was some waste of time. It is a question how much you learn after you listen to the fifth or sixth speech on the same topic, especially when those who are making the speeches are not specialists and are largely repeating what they have read somewhere. There was (I have to be frank) a sameness about the speeches and seminars.

Second, some students took advantage of the situation. Some left the College for the summer or even before May 15. They did not participate in the activities on campus; there is no reason to think they did so anywhere else. They skipped their examinations to the extent that their instructors allowed them to do so. Some people took some examinations, but not others, making their decision on whether or not the instructor was willing to freeze the grade without the examination, *and* if their grade was satisfactory.

The meetings from May 11 through noon on May 15 took place in the Refectory Quadrangle with amplifiers. People were disturbed. There was interference with those who wished to study in their rooms. There was no way to avoid hearing the blare from the Quadrangle. On Friday, May 15, the Steering Committee was told that the activities would have to be moved. They took place over that weekend in the Emily Bowen Room, and on Monday the 18<sup>th</sup> the loud speaker was set up in the area between Dew Dormitory and the Gymnasium. The “Give Nixon a Chance” people were the first to use the new location. They brought a member of the Nixon Cabinet on the 18<sup>th</sup>, and he could be heard by people in the dell area but not outside it. Yet, though there was some disturbance, the libraries were available, and except for the first two or three days not crowded. The reference materials like the *Congressional Quarterly* were in heavy demand for a few days as people looked up the names of their Congressmen.

Some students might have benefitted more from attending classes than from going to seminars. I say might, not wishing to assume that I know that is best for people. I have in mind students whose work had been very poor all year, whose academic future was in jeopardy, who should have gone to their classes.

I must, with regret, comment on some of the oversimplification of the problems of which I feel some of the speakers were guilty. I regret the fact that some of the students seemed no more aware after two weeks of the “Happening” than they were at the beginning, of some of the stubborn issues in Viet Nam, the issues which have made Viet Nam a major problem for presidents of the United States.

I regret the theory of “instant expertise” which led some students and even some older members of the college community to consider themselves qualified to “educate” other people on the basis of their own very slight study of the matter. I regret the intolerance of some people. I regret very much the emotionalism of the large community meetings, the speeches made which did not in my judgment emphasize a rational approach but rather an emotional one. I regret the incidents which reminded those with a good memory of some meetings which took place in another country some 35-40 years ago.

Against the cons, there are the pros. First, and perhaps this is the main one, and all the others derive from it, *the “Happening” was a genuine educational experience for all of us*. It woke up some students who had never before thought of themselves as citizens. They are nice people, but totally unaware of the body politic and their part in it. It was an educational experience in that many of our students learned some facts they never knew before. They found out where Cambodia is. They found out the Congressional district they live in. They found out the names of the Congressmen and their Senators. They perhaps wrote their first letter to their Congressman or Senator. They found out where the *Congressional Quarterly* is in the Library and what you will find in it. As an old teacher of political science, I rejoice!

They learned some facts of life about their fellow students. Some whom they had admired, or at least liked, disappointed them. The “*goofers off*” were identified easily and early, the ones who took advantage. Many learned some facts of life about themselves. Some found



that they had the ability to speak, that they could organize. They surprised themselves, and this was true of all the organized groups, the Steering Committee, the "Give Nixon a Chance" group and the Committee for a New Congress. Others found that they could both go to their classes, complete their course work, take their examinations and also carry on some activities, inform themselves, participate; that it was not an either-or proposition: either you participate or you study, but you can't do both. They found they could do both, and this is a lesson worth learning for life.

Some learned a little humility and that is a very valuable lesson to learn early. One girl, bright, a good student, but never before interested in public matters, attended a few seminars, read some material handed out to her, and then went to the shopping center in Amherst one Saturday to "educate" the people there. It was she who got the education. She talked with a couple of men who had been in Viet Nam. She discovered that other people, people in overalls or cotton house dresses, weren't as uninformed as she thought they were. I met her early in the afternoon on her return and she was indeed humble, even somewhat embarrassed. She said, "I couldn't answer their questions. They knew more than I did." There is, I am sorry to say, a kind of arrogance not unknown in the academic world which assumes that people who have not gone to college and don't have advanced degrees are therefore ignorant, waiting to be educated. This young woman (she was graduated on May 31) has had this silly nonsense knocked out of her head, and I hope for good.

At best, the experience enhanced respect for freedom, for the society in which we live, with its many imperfections but also a tradition of freedom. At best, the experience enhanced our students' belief that it is right to allow the discussions and expression of different points of view, that there is room for disagreement, and that those who disagree may be equally honest, equally sincere.

On the whole, the "happening" was worth the price we paid for it; that is, it was worth it *if there is a carry over*. ...If the concern, the desire to participate, continues. If the girl who attends the seminars writes for the Free Press, or organizes the "Give Nixon a Chance" group continues her activity after she leaves college. Time will tell how much our students really

learned, and particularly if they have learned that foreign and domestic problems will be with them for the rest of their lives and that the efforts of a concerned citizenry will be needed for the rest of their lives. **If we turn out a few lawyers concerned not merely to practice law but to make themselves experts in some aspect of the law, so as to reform antiquated procedures; if we turn out a few writers willing to work hard, to get up facts, to follow up stories; if we turn out, that is, some competent specialists, and a much larger number of active, interested, public-spirited citizens, willing to work through democratic procedures to improve our society, then it will have been worthwhile!**



Martha von Bismarck