

# Connie M. Guion: Physician Extraordinary

By Martha Lou Stohlman, '34  
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The name of Dr. Connie Guion, already familiar to us in many contexts, will shortly be viewed by New Yorkers from a new and different angle. The Board of Governors of New York Hospital has recently announced that inscribed on its new building for out-patients will be the words, "The Dr. Connie Guion Building." Since 1932 Dr. Connie has served the hospital, notably as chief of its general medical clinic and at present as the only doctor on its Board of Governors. This means of honoring her surprises no one and pleases everyone.

Honorary degrees and citations from many sources have been converging in recent years on Dr. Connie, who is also emeritus professor of clinical medicine in the Medical College of Cornell University, chairman of Sweet Briar's development committee, and a series of other things which may be subsumed under the heading, Physician Extraordinary.

What happens to a little girl born on a plantation near Lincolnton, North Carolina, to bring her to this position in life? Books, singly and in sets, are written to answer this sort of question and a short article can obviously only suggest outstanding influences. However, Dr. Connie's own discriminating mind has been brought to bear on the problems which faced Ruth W. Smith, her biographer in a recent issue of the Wellesley Alumnae Magazine. Miss Smith has generously permitted us to draw freely on her material.

In 1871 Connie Guion's parents took their daughters to live on the family plantation. Here Connie, the ninth of twelve children, was born. Mrs. Guion shouldered a large share of the responsibility of running the plantation because her husband was often gone, fulfilling his duties as superintendent of a railway. But the twelve children who eventually made up the Guion family had, of necessity, to be converted soon from helpless little time-consumers into helpful little farmers and housekeepers, plus a variety of other professions. This plantation life furnished Connie with a diversity of facts, attitudes, aptitudes and ambitions, sometimes odd ones indeed but none went unused.

Crucial points in her career have turned on the ability to bake a cake, to climb a ladder in ankle-length skirts and enter a window, to saw off desk legs, and to raise 'possums. Along with these specific

accomplishments for meeting life's various demands, an attitude of initiative, ingenuity and responsibility was fostered on the Guion plantation. Many things had to be done every day, and if something loomed to make them hard to do – they had to be done anyway. This is excellent training for the young. Who of us works his utmost without pressure?

THE big estate on the Catawba also furnished a definitely directed motive to the small Connie. From this plantation her grandfather and five of his eleven brothers had gone off to medical school in Lexington, Kentucky. They subsequently practiced medicine formally while their mother practiced it informally, but almost as extensively, when she covered the plantation on horseback ministering to sick slaves. Family stories of these earlier generations planted in the child the notion of becoming a doctor. And there was an added embellishment: a visual picture of Dr. C. Guion calling on her patients in a carriage drawn by a pair of zebras, harnessed tandem fashion. (This stemmed from a banner day in her eighth year when an animal-loving little girl headed a circus parade on an actual zebra.)

The career of this good friend of Sweet Briar has been methodical, productive every inch of the way, with no lost motion, yet the zebra element is yet discernible. Nothing is stodgy, nothing unimaginative in the way she does things. Presiding over a meeting, she attends to business but carries her listeners along with relevant witticisms and sometimes with images as ridiculous and gay as the tandem zebras. Her manner is a blend of animation and leisure, guided by an organizing intelligence which readily communicates its lively interests and deep-felt values to others.

It is hard to realize that in 1892 Connie Guion was nine years old and could neither read nor write. But she wanted to, and there was someone to help her. An older sister working in the post office at Charlotte, North Carolina, brought Connie in to town to live with her, and saw her through grade school there.

The next step, Wellesley, was not possible without further preparation which Connie chose to obtain at Northfield Seminary in Massachusetts. Entrance examinations for Northfield were given after the students arrived, and in the year 1900 an aspiring medical student flatly failed them all. She was called in for a very special talk with the principal, who gently presented her with a schedule designed to round out her rather extensive needs in grammar, geography and other elementary subjects. Connie, now seventeen, firmly protested the proposition: "Oh, no, Miss Hall. I never expect to study these things again. I've already forgotten them once."

This novel viewpoint sufficed to throw the principal off balance and by the end of the interview Connie's schedule, which she had carefully worked out to prepare her for entrance in two years into Wellesley, was accepted, tentatively. In six weeks, with "the sympathetic guidance of all my teachers," as she gratefully acknowledges, she was passing everything and before the year was out she was actively enjoying Caesar.

At Wellesley she earned her board by baking six cakes every morning before breakfast and quickly frosting them before her first class. Her good sister in Charlotte sent a dollar a month which she always changed into dimes and "put one away for an emergency." She avers that in college she was neither smart nor a grind but some courses she found to be of absorbing interest and they stood her in good

stead when she reached medical school. Foremost among these were Anatomy of the Cat and Embryology of the Chick.

IN THE spring of Connie's senior year the head of Vassar's chemistry department sent to Wellesley seeking an assistant from among those soon to be graduated. The first candidate he talked with was prevented by a locked door from showing him Wellesley's chemistry laboratory but when he asked Connie for a tour of the lab she secured a ladder, used it to enter a window and opened the front door to him. This won for her the job as well as a compliment fifty years later from Edward Weeks, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Speaking at the inauguration of Wellesley's President Clapp, he recalled this incident and truly observed that Dr. Connie has never stopped opening windows for herself and for others.

After two years at Vassar she came to Sweet Briar. The story has been set down elsewhere of some of the things that filled her waking hours – from 7 a.m. until midnight – here. Besides teaching her classes with verve and care, doing each experiment by herself before assigning it to students, Miss Guion remodeled the chemistry laboratory. Her method was typical: hard work of her own drew to the project others whose help was essential. To begin with the desk was much too high for students to work comfortably so she borrowed a saw and began cutting it down. In those days the power plant was shut at 10 o'clock so it was by the light of a kerosene lamp that she finished her second day of sawing, along towards midnight, and was struggling to set the desk upright when Miss Benedict and Mr. Heald, a member of the board, appeared in the doorway. Mr. Heald had thought it impossible for the board to invest more money in a relatively new chemistry laboratory but Miss Guion won him to her viewpoint by demonstrating that she herself believed in it sufficiently to exert herself thus strenuously.

And besides founding the bookshop and igniting an interest in dramatics that flamed into two rival theatrical clubs, Miss Guion conducted her own research on some 'possums for the master's degree in biological chemistry that she worked on at Cornell during the summers. One of the most picturesque snapshots extant of her shows her grasping the tails of her beasts while they exercised on campus.

Sweet Briar profited from five years of this chemistry professor's inspiration before she had saved enough from her salary to go on into medical school. Sweet Briar friends beamed in vicarious pride when, in 1917, Dr. Connie was graduated from the Medical College of Cornell University with a first prize in general efficiency, a second prize in otology, and a two-year appointment as House Officer in Medicine at Bellevue Hospital. She was 37 years old when her internship was finished and life as a doctor with private practice began. The girls with whom she shared an apartment shared also her eagerness to succeed and they did all they could to draw new patients to her. These friends, together with two of her former medical professors with whom she had an office, helped her start a practice which continues to this day to grow actively.



MEDICINE has never alienated Dr. Connie from education. Two years after opening her own office she began to teach again, this time as an instructor in her former medical college and after ten years, as assistant professor and chief of its medical clinic. Later she became a full professor and continued as chief after her clinic merged with New York Hospital in 1932.

Dr. Connie's interest in students, medical and otherwise, has moved her to give generously both in money and services as an administrator to special funds, aiding medical students, to A.A.U.W. fellowships and international grants, to the national Health and Safety Council of the Girl Scouts and, since 1953, she has headed the all-important development committee of the Board of Overseers of Sweet Briar.

One of Dr. Connie's special talents is to magnetize people whom she knows in one connection into helping her – and willingly – with her efforts in another direction. For example, some of her generous patients in New York, Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney and five members of the Rockefeller family, wishing to honor Dr. Connie, gave her a most pleasant surprise by endowing in her honor professorships at Sweet Briar in physics and chemistry. Dr. Connie promptly and characteristically arranged to have these gifts named after their donors rather than after herself.

It is not a physician who is merely learned who prompts such responses in others. Together with the comfort and assurance which, indeed, knowledge can of itself often give, it is obvious that Dr. Connie gives much more. One of her friends has fittingly expressed it thus: "The sick are never 'diseased' to Connie but individuals who come seeking her help... Patients sense her deep interest in their welfare and her determination to help them solve their problems. To the chronically sick and the hopelessly ill she brings an abiding strength and bolsters their courage and gives them confidence."

Is there anything beyond this which a doctor wishes to achieve? Is there more that one human being can do for another?