

A CAREER OF SERVICE AND LEADERSHIP

by Delmer I. Davis

For five decades, **Merlene Ogden** devoted herself to improving the lives of students and faculty. Her career contributions as a teacher and administrator have been crucial to effecting beneficial changes at Andrews University.

Actually, Andrews University did not yet exist when Merlene Ogden first arrived in Berrien Springs and joined the faculty of Emmanuel Missionary College (EMC) in the fall of 1955. Raised in a family of teachers, she had known at an early age she also wanted to teach. With a bachelor's degree from Union College, she first taught all the English, instrumental music, band and women's physical-education courses at Platte Valley Academy for four years. During the summers, she took graduate courses at the University of Nebraska, graduating with a master's degree in English in 1954, one year before her move to Michigan.

Teachers today often complain about overloads and how hard they have to work. One wonders how they would have fared in 1955, given the type of teacher loads that were expected. In her early years at EMC, Ogden taught three sections of composition each term, plus all of the women's physical education courses. Her "free time" was mostly consumed with quickly changing into suitable clothes for her divergent classes and running back and forth between Nethery Hall and Johnson Gymnasium. Housing was not a high institutional priority for single women teachers in those days. For part of that first year, she occupied two rooms with a bath over the quarters of another faculty family, rooms which had no kitchen stove, no kitchen sink, no refrigerator, indeed no kitchen. After buying a second-hand refrigerator and a hotplate, she survived for many months, doing her dishes in the bathtub.

Never one to accept the status quo, however, she began to institute changes for the benefit of her students. Her women's

physical education courses were essentially all of one kind—a sort of composite of various exercises and sports instruction tucked into one course. In contrast, men's physical education courses had already taken the shape of what is commonplace today—separate classes in such sports as softball, basketball and volleyball. Ogden helped to spearhead a revision in women's physical education so women, too, had the opportunity of taking various courses similar to the men's curriculum. She also organized and directed the women's intramural sports program at EMC. Interestingly, she led a faculty women's team in several of these intramural sports events, a team so successful that eventually they were barred from playing because they almost always won. Finally, she was also instrumental in creating a new physical education minor curriculum for women.

Perhaps the biggest change in the history of the institution occurred in 1960 when Emmanuel Missionary College became Andrews University. Interestingly, this drastic change was an event Merlene Ogden experienced from long distance. Every summer since coming to EMC, she had been traveling back to Nebraska to work on her doctorate in English at the University of Nebraska. She was on study leave for two years, from 1960–62, finishing her course work and her comprehensives. When she returned in the fall of 1962, the new university was in the middle of an ambitious building program and the student body was considerably larger, with a strong contingent of graduate students.

For Merlene Ogden, this change to Andrews University was measured by the



Left: Merlene began her career at Andrews University in 1955.

English department's fledgling master's degree program in English, a change that resulted in new colleagues and advanced classes taught to graduate students. No longer responsible for women's physical education courses, she now centered efforts completely on the English department curriculum. Always an enthusiastic and charismatic teacher, she launched a regular graduate seminar in Hawthorne. While teaching full-time, she completed work on her doctoral dissertation, a study of the literary relationship between Nathaniel Hawthorne and John Bunyan. Her doctorate was awarded in 1964. Over the next two decades she continued to offer the Hawthorne seminar, but later added an additional graduate course, the seminar in Thoreau, an author she found particularly appealing because of his affinity to nature.¹

As interested as she was in the content

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Right: A member of The Society of Andrews Scholars is mentored by Ogden in 1979.

of these two graduate seminars and the authors represented in the courses, however, she always took a far greater interest in her students and their well-being. As she says today, “I wanted to inspire students to reach their individual potentials, to do their best and to be all that they could be.”

Former students in English courses remember Ogden as one of their most engaging teachers. Present English department faculty member Beverly Matiko recalls that Ogden “had a talent for making demanding literature accessible,” that “she would always have us write in-class response papers to the reading,” instead of “giving us objective quizzes,” and that “I appreciated the invitation to engage with the literature on that level.”

Bruce Closser, another present English department member, remembers Ogden “brought such enthusiasm and energy to her teaching that even if you didn't care all that much for Thoreau, it was hard not to feel excited about your assigned reading.”

An important change in Merlene Ogden's academic life came about as a result of her codirecting a European study tour organized by Union College in the summer of 1960. Travel soon became a main focus of her life. Delighted with the experience on the Union College tour, especially in the way it opened the eyes of students to different cultural, artistic, literary and historical contributions, she organized the first Andrews University European Study Tour for the summer of 1964.² On that tour, members visited 16 countries in 83 days. Always known as a champion organizer, Ogden planned all the

details of the tour—the boat trip across the Atlantic (later tours would travel by air), bus, hotel and meal arrangements, boat trips in Europe, castle, cathedral and gallery visits, plus making sure Sabbath services were conducted. Tour members remember her as tireless on these tours.

Notes Beverly Matiko, “We could hardly keep up with her. She pushed herself and she pushed us and I will always be grateful.”

Famous for her ability to economize, she made it possible for more than 800 students to go on one or more of the 13 tours (generally one every-other year) she led during the next three decades. Not only did students get a feel for various cultures, but they also enrolled for up to 6–12 credits of course work. The bus (or coach) became the classroom as teachers and students made presentations over the loudspeaker system while traveling from place to place. Students also did reading, took quizzes and tests, and orally presented research papers prepared prior to the tour while traveling on the bus.

But the tours were not all business. No one has ever been better at melding a diverse crowd of people into a tight-knit group than Merlene Ogden! Each tour group would become a family and she became the “mother” in charge not only of education but also of planning organized fun—shopping trips, enjoying scenic spots, and making sure that students took plenty of photos to show the folks at home! Today, Ogden recalls the tour experiences with particular affection. “The students came back different people with opened eyes about different cultures. In many ways, the





Left: As a teacher, Merlene gained the respect and admiration of her students.

Right: Merlene celebrated the Honors program with L. Monique Pittman, current director, at the 2007 Alumni Homecoming.

tours were the greatest experiences of my life.” So successful were these European tours, she decided to try short United States versions during spring breaks to New England sites or to the Washington, D.C. and Williamsburg areas, a travel and study tradition that also continued for many years.

Although one would think that she was amply busy with her course teaching and her tours, her rapport with students and her organizational ability led the university administration to appoint her sponsor of the Undergraduate Student Association for several years in the 1960s. In this role, she provided wisdom and some caution as the Andrews University campus rather quietly traversed the age of student protest in the United States.

An important change in Ogden’s experience at Andrews University occurred when she was asked to take over the directorship of the Honors Program in 1969. Although the program had been in place for a few years, it was under her directorship the program really began to flourish.³ As director of Honors, she had to cut back on her teaching in the English department, but this was more than made up for with the additional Honors courses she began to offer and with the responsibility of organizing and pushing the program into regional acclaim because of its eventual size and distinction. She would continue as director of Honors for 25 years until 1994. For a number of these years,

she served as president and also executive secretary of the Upper Midwest Honors Council.

The late 1970s brought more big changes to both Ogden and Andrews University. In 1977, she was asked to become assistant dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Two years later, in 1979, she was named associate dean. In both roles, she continued to guide the Honors Program. She also became chair of the General Education Committee, where she led in establishing various innovations and changes in the general education curriculum, including helping Andrews University become a pilot school in the assessment of general education by means of the innovative COMP/ACT assessment tool. She also was in charge of processing all academic petitions for the college, a role that allowed her to help countless students meet graduation requirements.

As a result of her tireless work ethic, her people and organizational skills, and her enthusiastic leadership, she was asked in 1981 to serve as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, a position she continued in until 1991. As the college dean, she spoke ably for the “family” of faculty members in her school. As with her classes and tours, she paid particular attention to rewarding the teaching faculty and especially the chairs of departments with thoughtful thank-you notes and token gifts to show her appreciation for their helpful contributions.

As a department chair during her tenure as dean, I can testify to how tirelessly she worked to establish a family feeling among her faculty and students in order to make learning as comfortable and fulfilling as possible. Yearly, she initiated the practice of taking representative department chairs to the national meetings of the Academic Chairpersons Conference in order to help them become aware of how best to administer an academic department, a tradition which has continued to this day. She also established the custom of taking all the department chairs and their families away for a special weekend retreat during winter breaks to nearby resort motels, a much-appreciated gesture given the usual cold and snow. In the evenings, the heated swimming pool and hot tub were always popular sites, but the days were given to discussions of college issues, while Sabbath was a time for spiritual fellowship and interchange along with perhaps a visit to a local cultural or scenic site. Even in tight budget years, she always managed to find funds for this kind of team-building activity.

While dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, she also led in the efforts to establish new majors and to reinvigorate continuing curricula. After several years of careful planning in close contact with the required professional accrediting associations, for example, she helped pave the way for the offering of the physical therapy programs at both Andrews University and Kettering College.

Very importantly, during her years as college dean, she dealt yearly with the tensions and difficult choices resulting from several years of financial stress at the university. Perhaps adapting her skills at running a large tour economically, she learned how to shave departmental budgets with innovative approaches throughout her school, while at the same time consistently voicing the central importance of the College of Arts and Sciences to her fellow administrators. And “fellow” administrators is, indeed, a key word, for when she became dean, she was the only woman in the Andrews University higher administration

1. She linked her lifelong hobby of photography to her interest in Thoreau and developed two photographic essays which were displayed at the Thoreau Lyceum in Concord, Mass.. Later, she co-authored *Walden: A Concordance*, published in 1985 by Garland Publishing Company. 2. Meredith Jones Gray traces the history of this first tour along with information about some of the other tours in a *Focus* article, “Travels with (Mother) Merlene,” Summer 2006, 28-29. 3. See the accompanying article in this month’s *Focus*, 20-21.

“The students came back different people with opened eyes about different cultures. In many ways, the tours were the greatest experiences of my life.”



and would continue to be so during her tenure as the college dean. Thus, her viewpoints were often uniquely different from those of the men around her, and her presence was helpful in increasing their understanding of how women can serve effectively in administrative roles.

Particularly in the late 1980s, Ogden became more and more involved in the complicated process of continuing and establishing affiliation agreements for the offering of Andrews undergraduate degrees in several overseas Seventh-day Adventist institutions. She began making visits to these campuses and piloting ways in which the teachers overseas could more easily communicate with their Berrien Springs counterparts. It is no wonder, then, that as retirement age loomed, she decided to put aside her long-time administrative duties in the College of Arts and Sciences in order to become more fully involved in solving problems for the various university overseas programs.

In 1991, she was named dean of Affiliation and Extension Programs, a position she continued in until 2004, although for the last ten years of this service, she was officially semiretired (yet working full days and often well into the nights—a habit that she seemingly could not put aside since she could always find problems that needed solving and programs that needed improving). As dean of Affiliation and Extension Programs, she regularly traveled the world, with particular emphasis on coordinating the undergraduate affiliations, which at one time included six separate

campuses with many hundreds of students enrolled in pursuit of Andrews degrees. She also monitored and helped process much of the paperwork for a variety of Andrews extension graduate programs throughout the world. In all of these efforts, she once again was tireless in emphasizing the needs of students and faculty on the various campuses, trying her best to adapt the various academic programs to the local sites with an eye to what such campuses could reasonably afford while not sacrificing academic quality. To insure that quality, she set up course and teacher review processes for all undergraduate offerings so that departmental faculty on the Andrews campus could judge how effectively the teachers overseas were instructing their courses by means of sample syllabi, homework and exams.

That kind of quality control and attention to communication details led the North Central Association in 1999 to cite the Andrews University affiliation and extension programs as models for other schools to follow. But in spite of such accomplishments, her greatest satisfaction always came when the various undergraduate overseas schools received their own government charters to offer their own degrees, thus freeing them from the Andrews University umbrella. This, after all, had been the original purpose in setting up the overseas affiliations in the first place. In her final years as dean of Affiliation and Extension Programs, she was key in helping more than 200 graduate students finish their master's of science in administration degrees

in International Development around the world.

As she looks back at her many years as an administrator, beginning with her directorship of the Honors Program in 1969, Ogden is particularly grateful for the years in which the late Arthur Coetzee acted as her mentor when he served as vice president for Academic Administration and as provost for Strategic Planning. “He was always open to new ideas and approaches and he was also good at critiquing my ideas,” she says.

Although retiring from all official connections with Andrews University in 2004, Ogden continues her interest in world travel. Through Ogden Tours, she leads a minimum of two tours a year to exciting sites abroad. Many of her tour members are former Andrews students and faculty. Still devoted to the overseas Adventist schools, she also volunteers weekly at the James White Library, putting donated books on the database for SAIL, an overseas program that allows Adventist colleges and universities around the world to add books to their libraries for the cost of shipping. The recipient of numerous honors from Andrews University over the years for her devoted and selfless service, she continues to put friends, former colleagues, students and tour members first as she seeks to better their lives.

Delmer Davis, professor of English, emeritus, is a longtime friend and colleague of Merlene Ogden. For many years they served together in the English department and later in administration while he was dean of the School of Graduate Studies and vice president for academic administration.