

Minnie E. Wells

At age four in the spring of 1909, Minnie Wells came to Alaska by steamship, made the portage from Saint Michael to the Yukon River, and traveled by sternwheeler on the Yukon, Tanana, and Chena Rivers, upstream to Fairbanks. She and her mother had made the trip to join her father, serving as Clerk of Court in Fairbanks. Resigning his post, her father worked at mining in the Goldstream Valley, but the family left Alaska in the fall of 1910 and settled in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Late in life, in a fragmentary memoir, Dr. Wells wrote that her childhood experience in early Fairbanks helped influence her to pursue an education through doctoral studies so that she could return to Alaska and teach here.

She had been born in 1905 in Denison, Texas, the daughter of Oscar A. and Mayme Wells, natives of New Bedford, Ohio. Earning a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Missouri (Columbia) in 1925, she began graduate study at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, and traveled to England to do research. In 1938 she received the Doctor of Philosophy degree from New York University. Her area of specialization was Medieval Studies, in particular Chaucer. Dr. Wells's first teaching positions were at Southeastern State College (Durant, Oklahoma), University of Tulsa, Hood College (Frederick, Maryland), and Ward Belmont College (Nashville, Tennessee).

Her quarter-century of service with the University of Alaska began with the end of World War II, in 1945. She taught courses in both written composition and British and world literature. Her first students included returning veterans of the war supported by the G.I. bill of rights and self-supporting Alaskan women and men who worked seasonal jobs to pay for college education. Joining her in Fairbanks were her mother, who died in 1950, and her younger sister.

Over the years Dr. Wells served on a number of occasions in administrative positions: dean of faculty, department head, division head of Arts and Letters (before the University was organized by colleges with academic deans). She was instrumental in initiating graduate study in English literature at the University. She worked constantly to maintain high academic standards in her own work and in the work of her students. Teaching remained her prime concern.

During the latter part of her tenure with the University, Dr. Wells pursued a research interest in early Alaskan literature. She retired in 1971 as Professor of English, Emeritus. She and her sister, Elizabeth Suckling, moved first to Wasilla, where they had built a house, then in the 1980s to Sequim, Washington. Mrs. Suckling died in 1988.

Minnie Wells spent her last years in Port Angeles and Fox Island / Gig Harbor, Washington. One of her students once observed that Dr. Wells always tried to go to church on Good Friday. In the spring of 1995 she was baptized and confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church at Gig Harbor. She died on March 18, 1997. Her ashes were returned to Wasilla, where they rest near those of her sister.