

Maud May Babcock , President of the National Communication Association, 1932

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In this essay, I hope to touch the surface of the process of rediscovering Maud May Babcock, a truly extraordinary voice in so many ways.¹ To provide a context for her life, I initially provide family background regarding Maud May Babcock. This background is provided by a description of her education, teaching career, publications, and performances. In the most extensive section, entitled “Professional Affiliations,” I focus on Maud Bay Babcock as the National Communication Association 1936 President. I conclude this reconstruction by focusing on some of Miss Babcock’s “Other Interests” and then what I believe are appropriate comments about “Maud May Babcock, the Personality.” But, first, some of the familial origins of Maud Bay Babcock.



Family Background

Miss Babcock, as her students affectionately referred to her, was born on May 2, 1867 in East Worcester, New York and died at the age of 87 on New Year's Eve in 1954. The University of Utah Library Register of Maud May Babcock Records makes mention of a sister who attended the Baltimore College of Physicians and Nurses during the years 1892 and 1893 but does not verify her graduation from this institution. There is also mention of a brother, William Wayne Babcock, Jr., who attended the University of the City of New York in 1894 and, according to Joseph F. Smith, a former student, was five years younger than Maud and became “one of the world’s great surgeons.” Of these three siblings—and there may be more—it would appear from the dates of their college attendance that Maud was the oldest and William was the youngest. While the education and occupation of their parents is unclear at this time, correspondence among the children suggests a cultured and educated family orientation.

Education

Miss Babcock received her B.A. from Wells College, New York. She also received a Bachelor of Elocution degree from the National School of Oratory of Philadelphia in 1886 and graduated from the Lyceum School of Acting (later the American Academy of Dramatic Arts) in New York City in 1888. She also attended Chicago University and spent two years studying in London and Paris. In 1939, one year after her retirement from the University of Utah at the age of 71, Miss Babcock received an Honorary Doctorate from the university.

Teaching Career

Prior to her long and distinguished career at the University of Utah, Miss Babcock taught at the Engleside School for Girls in the Berkshires, at Rutgers College, and in the public schools of New York. She taught a summer session at the University of Wisconsin (1921). She also studied and taught at Harvard University for three summer sessions (1891, 1892, and 1893) and, apparently, applied for a permanent position there. Correspondence from her sister

consoles her for not getting the appointment at Harvard, indicating that most people work a lifetime to qualify. Susa Young Gates, Brigham Young's daughter, was a student in Miss Babcock's summer session class at Harvard during the summer of 1892. Miss Babcock went to the University of Utah in 1892 as professor of oratory and speech, and she verified in 1947 that Mrs. Gates was responsible for her coming to Utah. This announcement was on the occasion of a birthday—it is not clear from the writing whether it was Miss Babcock's or Mrs. Gates's birthday. If it was Miss Babcock's, it would have been the occasion of her 80th birthday. It appears that shortly after her arrival at Utah, Miss Babcock joined the Mormon Church. Correspondence in 1893 from her mother expresses concern over Maud's interest in the Mormons and requests that she not join them.

Upon her retirement in 1938, Miss Babcock claimed to have had the longest active service of any faculty member at the university: 46 years. According to Joseph F. Smith, she taught elocution and physical cultural at the university in the morning and at the Brigham Young Academy in the afternoon during her first year. Following this first year, her name appeared in the catalogue and her personal history parallels the early history of the field:

- . 1893–1894: Instructor of elocution and physical culture;
- . 1896–1897: Director of gymnasium and instructor of reading, elocution, and physical culture;
- . 1897–1898: Assistant professor of elocution and physical culture and director of gymnasium;
- . 1903–1904: Associate professor of elocution and director of women's gymnasium;
- . 1904–1905: Full professor of elocution (and single-handedly the department of elocution);
- . 1917: Professor of public speaking (as the department name changed to public speaking); and
- . 1927–1938: Chairman, department of speech (as the department name changed to speech).

The department had grown from one to eight members during her tenure. Miss Babcock organized the University of Utah Dramatic Club in 1985 and staged productions in a facility loaned to her by the Mormon Church. The club is claimed to have been the first in the country and it did have the longest consecutive record of annual productions. She personally produced over 300 plays, a number of which occurred after her retirement. Several references are made to "Mrs. Bumpstead Leigh," a 1913 production that Miss Babcock directed again 23 years later in 1936—the year of her NCA presidency. Of the 11 original players, 10 returned along with the student stage manager. The 1936 cast included two judges, a surgeon, two attorneys, the Attorney General, and the Governor of Utah. In 1916, she spent a semester directing at the Washington Square Theatre in New York City. Two years later, Miss Babcock is described as "the leading spirit" of and "instrumental" in bringing the first university-subsidized professional theater in the United States to the University of Utah during the period 1918–1922. Hence, she was a pioneer in the college Little Theater movement.

Publications and Performances

Miss Babcock's first love was performance studies, or what she referred to as "oral reading" or "interpretation." She wrote several books, including *Interpretive Selections for High Schools* and *Interpretive Selections for College*. In addition, a series of articles on teaching interpretation and distinguishing interpretative presentation from impersonative presentation appeared in the 1916 volume of *The Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking* (1916a, 1916b, 1916c) and seem now to be classic in defining the differences between interpretation and acting—at least, I can clearly see the comparative features she discusses posted in two columns on the chalkboard of my college class in interpretative reading at Wayne State University 40 years ago—24 years after she wrote about them.

In all of her writings on the subject of interpretation she credits Alfred Ayres, her professor in New York, with “planting our feet on an intellectual basis.” She rejects memorization as a technique in lieu of recreating the thoughts and feelings stimulated within the literature and practicing reproduction of these in speech and action. How much practice? Until the language has been internalized and the reader is no longer reliant on the printed page.

A brochure of Dramatic Recitals and Interpretative Lectures by Miss Babcock (n.d.) is included in her papers at the University of Utah. The wide range of literary classics in her repertoire; the varied topics of her lecture recitals, “A Birdseye View of Literature”; and, especially, the press cuttings from throughout the United States testify to her ability and career as an outstanding performer.

Just one brief example:

Miss Babcock is an artist in every sense of the word, and as she deftly painted each word, picture of each poem, one was forced to gaze upon the veil of imagination, where those portraits of fancy become real objects. [Ogden (Utah) Standard]

The brochure includes a picture of “Some of the four thousand who listened to Miss Babcock’s reading of Abraham Lincoln from the parapet of the great Lincoln Monument at the University of Wisconsin, July, 1920.”

Professional Affiliations

Miss Babcock was active professionally. Some of her activities included:

- . President of the national dramatic fraternity, Theta Alpha Phi, for three years (1920–1922);
- . Member, Delta Kappa Gamma, the national education sorority;
- . Honorary member, National League of American Pen Women and of Pi Alpha Pi;
- . Trustee, Utah School for the Deaf and Blind (22 years); President (12 years);
- . Chaplain, Utah State Senate (probably the first women in the United States hold this position);
- . Charter Member, National Association of Elocutionists (1892–1917);
- . Charter Member, National Association of Teachers of Speech (1917);
- . Associate Editor, Quarterly Journal of Speech Education; and
- . NCA President (1936).

Miss Babcock became the second woman to ascend to the presidency of the National Communication Association. She was unopposed, as was the custom at the time. The only reference to a possible pathway to the presidency is the mention of her associate editorship of QJSE. She was single at the time and never married. Alfred Ayres is the person mentioned by Miss Babcock as a mentor. A handwritten document that appears to be a resume reads, “Pupil of Alfred Ayres, Eleanor Georgan, Moses True Brown, etc.” Miss Babcock writes only of Ayres. The only other mentioned influence seems to be Susan Young Yates, Brigham Young’s daughter, who was instrumental in Miss Babcock’s move to Utah.

A draft of a 1916 letter from Miss Babcock to the National Association of Teachers of English uses the occasion of their 25th anniversary to express her “earnest desire” that the disciplines of speech and English have a closer affiliation. She refers to English as the “fundamental discipline

on any educational level" and praises English teachers who are also teaching oral English as a "great help in convincing educational authorities of the great value of oral english [sic], and oral interpretation of literature." Then she states her belief that reciprocity in academic training should exist for teachers in either subject—a degree or teaching certificate in either subject should require at least a minor in the other field. The outcome, says Miss Babcock, would be teachers in each field better grounded in the other and a "clear mutual understanding and mutual appreciation, which I, for one, so much desire." This is one of the few references to herself in the professional writing I've read, suggesting that the desired closer affiliation between the two disciplines may have been a personal professional goal.

Miss Babcock's description of the 21st convention further implies that her concern is with training at the elementary and secondary level. The President's Message, a letter to fellow teachers entitled "Convention call" and announcing the 21st annual convention of the NATS meeting jointly with the National Convention of the American Speech Correction Association in St. Louis at the Statler Hotel on December 29, 30, and 31, 1936, provides praise for the men and women in the profession who worked to place speech "in the present unqualifiedly recognized position in the college and university educational world." Then Miss Babcock goes on to say that "From now on we must needs turn our efforts to a most vital, an almost unplowed, educational field—the elementary and secondary school levels."

She continues,

Without good speech training in these levels, we, who are teachers in the upper levels, are building without a trained speech foundation. It is now necessary in the upper levels, to build a foundation, that should have been made on the lower levels. Our Association must increase its activity in this direction and secure better speech training on the lower levels, and more definite preparation for instructors who must teach in the elementary and secondary schools. This is the work of the college and university.

That this area is of personal interest to Miss Babcock is also suggested by the title of one of her publications, *Handbook for Teachers*. It is difficult to know whether Miss Babcock had any leadership credibility problems. She was held in very high regard. However, as only the second woman among the first 21 presidents, it is possible that her gender might have raised credibility issues. Miss Babcock's interest in elementary and secondary school education might also have been a source of concern. In any case, in reference to her role at the University of Utah, Joseph Smith described Miss Babcock as "a fighter."

He continues:

It is not to be wondered at, as the first woman on the university faculty, she had problems. But she eloquently and firmly stood her ground, always on deep-seated principle, and became a formidable champion of any cause, principle, or procedure which she espoused. Everything written about Miss Babcock suggests that she was very congruent person—her beliefs, her rhetoric, and her behavior seem to have been in amazing alignment. She expected perfection of herself and was able to elicit the same from her students. Perhaps her leadership credibility problems were few and small.

Other Interests

Miss Babcock is described by Joseph Smith as "indefatigable." Exercise was an integral part of her life. Her home and her summer cabin in the Wasatch mountains were open to her present students and alumni. Joseph Smith describes the hikes that were required of visiting students

and Miss Babcock's gourmet meals, which she prepared after the hikes while students reclined in various stages of exhaustion.

Apparently, Miss Babcock made several trips to Europe and Asia and often conducted student tours. Her collections included dolls from all countries that were dressed in authentic costumes which she used as models for costuming plays and operas.

Miss Babcock's high energy also transformed her social consciousness into social action. A series of letters exists that were an exchange with Madame Chiang Kai-shek in 1938. The first is regarding a contribution of 10 dollars for the aid of Chinese victims of the Sino-Japanese war. Miss Babcock received a two-page letter of gratitude in return. Then Miss Babcock, along with a woman who spent a summer with her in China, organized a "silver tea" and open house on Easter Sunday. After four hours, they had entertained 200 people and collected \$52.45. Miss Babcock rounded off the amount and sent a check to Madame Chiang Kai-shek for \$55.00 for the Women's Relief fund. Within two weeks, Miss Babcock received a letter of appreciation. Subsequently, this effort materialized into a local Chinese relief group.

Assisting young women seems to have been a theme for Miss Babcock's social action—she founded the Lucy Mack home for girls.

Maud May Babcock, the Personality

Joseph Smith said that Miss Babcock could not be known through biographical data such as that described above. He writes: "The inspiration, the unswerving rectitude, the dynamic influence—these had to be experienced." He remembers her as a small woman of about five feet three or four who dressed meticulously and paid special attention to color harmony. Smith shares a memory of hearing an eminent artist refer to her as "a symphony in color!" Smith describes her as wearing "a dark velvet toque, a deep lavender velvet jacket with a white fichu at her throat, a light lavender pleated silk skirt, grey stockings and grey shoes."

I imagined this "symphony in color" as I closed my eyes and listened to "Interpretation as I taught it," an audio tape of Miss Babcock's final address before this association in November, 1950, at the age of 83. The speech was her answer to how she taught interpretation in 1900, a half-century before. The concise simplicity of her language was augmented by the clarity of her enunciation and the strength of her voice. It was easy to be caught up in the dynamic, well-modulated energy of this petite individual.

It occurred to me that if she were chairing this panel today, she might well say to us all: On this occasion of five living women past presidents honoring the five more who have passed on, it occurs to me that having women as presidents of this association is important to the panelists and, perhaps, to the audience. Perhaps, it would be wise, if this be the case, to stop writing and talking about it and start going about the business of encouraging more women to assume the position!

Note:

[1] I am indebted to the Special Collections Department of the University of Utah Libraries and especially to Dr. Malcolm O. Sillars, Professor Emeritus of the Department of Communication at the University of Utah, for many of the materials employed in the writing of this essay.

While the resources provided were truly appreciated, and while the materials contained in these archives were undoubtedly an accurate reflection of circumstances at the time, it should be

noted that many of the citations and references for the material in these archives are incomplete by today's citation standards. In the references below, given the archives available, I have provided the most complete citations that could be provided.

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