History of the Department of Electrical Engineering (1920-1929)

The Appointment of Henry Jordan, The Department’s First Female Students, and the Continued Growth and Expansion of Department’s Facilities and Student Body

Following a few more transitions within the first two years of the decade, a degree of stability was brought to the department with the appointment of Henry Jordan to Department Head in September of 1921. Under his guidance, the department continued to grow over the course of the decade. At a time when the average matriculating class of Colorado Agricultural College was composed of about 120 students, only one student had been awarded a degree in Electrical Engineering in 1920. By 1929, however, fourteen students were awarded degrees from the department. With the expansion of the student body, also came the addition of new educational facilities. During the years of 1925 and 1926, substantial additions were made to the old ‘Electrical Building.’ A north and south wing were added, each of which functioned as student laboratories.

In 1921, Colorado Agricultural College was recognized as a “Distinguished College” by the War Department for its contributions to military training programs, which included the Electrical Engineering department’s wartime training of soldiers in telegraphy and ether communication. The department continued its engagement in the regional community and played an important role in Denver’s National Western Stock Show of 1924. The various engineering departments of Colorado Agricultural College united to produce an exhibit entitled “Education with Practice,” which stressed the application and utilization of electricity on the farm. The display used photos and lantern slides to convey its message, and engineers offered the public information about the introduction of electricity in rural areas as well as new opportunities in industrial careers.

Additionally, the first course for women offered by any engineering discipline was made available by the electrical engineering department during this time. In 1920, the department announced its “First Course For Girls,” designed to offer instruction on electricity in the home. It paralleled the generally accepted college curriculum for women during this period, which was essentially focused on domestic training. The course taught women how to locate and replace fuses, repair broken lamp and iron heater cords, care for and repair simple problems with washing machine motors, replace snap switches, care for home lighting, and so forth. It should be noted that no degree was made available, and that more substantial electrical training was not offered for women of the college at this time. It is

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3 Carl Chinburg.
4 Anonymous, “C.A.C. Recognized as a “Distinguished College” by War Department for their Military Branch Training Program During the War,” News Notes, August 13, 1921.
5 Anonymous, “Electricity on the Farm Stressed by Exhibit, News Notes, February 2, 1924.
not until 1932, when Civil and Irrigation Engineering became the first of the engineering subfields to permit a woman, Alice Pennock, to pursue an actual engineering degree at C.A.C., that women began participating in engineering courses being taken by their male counterparts—and even then their population within the engineering disciplines remained sparse. Furthermore, their entry into the field was met with derision by some of their male contemporaries. Female engineering students often struggled to be taken seriously by the men in the department. Alice Pennock’s entry into the Civil and Irrigation Engineering department was reported on by the Collegian in an article titled “Engineers are Invaded by Member of the Weaker Sex.” The work celebrates the entry of the “lady engineer” into the department only because the engineering department has far too long “escaped” the fate of other departments on campus—having been finally “invaded by the weaker sex.” The work goes on to raise concerns about Pennock’s self-admitted fear of spiders and snakes as a potential impediment to her ability to pursue bridge building as a profession. Such attitudes reflect contemporaneous sentiments about the capability of women as professional and intellectual equals to men, and throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the majority of women that entered Colorado Agricultural College pursued degrees in domestic care.

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7 “Engineers are Invaded by Member of the Weaker Sex,” (Fort Collins, Colorado) The Collegian, October 5, 1932, page 1.