

An American Woman

History examines what it meant to be female in early America

By KATHY PARRISH

The life stories of two dozen famous men are in the prestigious Library of American Biography.

But up until this year, no woman's biography had made the collection.

Now, for the first time since the series began in the early 1950s, the biographies of two women appear.

And the study of history is richer for it, believes the area historian who authored one of the volumes.

"National histories have been totally devoid of women," explained Charles W. Akers, whose "Abigail Adams: An American Woman" was recently nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

"Clearly Mrs. Adams was an exceptional woman. But there were thousands of exceptional women," added the Avon Township resident.

"Her life demonstrated what a woman's life was like in early America."

"If you and I kept diaries for 40 years and had it all revealed, we'd all seem nuts I think," Akers recently to a book discussion group.

More than half the letters had never been published. This gave the historian a fresh look at his subject, whose grandson had edited her published letters.

"He polished her style and cut out things he felt were beneath her dignity. It was the best tradition of 19th century editing," said the author.

"Mrs. Adams never went to school and was embarrassed by her punctuation. But she really had a way with words."

"This really is her book. All I did was take her word and put them into narrative."

But while letters give a biographer insight, working from them can be a problem too. "We usually don't exhibit our nastiness in letters," admits Akers.

"This isn't Abigail. It's Abigail standing back and writing about herself yesterday."

AS WELL as being the first biography of Abigail Adams based on the Adams Family Papers, the book looks at her life in light of new research on women during the period in which she lived.

It tells her story, but also explores the importance of marriage, meaning of pregnancy and childbirth to mothers, second-class legal and political status of women and the place of religion and morality in early America.

But Akers emphasizes that the wife of John Adams didn't lead a typical life. She was raised in affluence and was always attended by servants. She

lent response" to both volumes. Intended to sell mainly in paperback on campuses, Akers' book is already in its fourth hard-cover printing.

"Now there are two women to balance all the others," kids the professor, who this semester began teaching a course on "Women in Early America."

The class grew partly out of his book research, which made him more aware of what it meant to be a woman in colonial and revolutionary America.

"By looking at the history of women, we begin to raise new topics like the history of childbirth," explained Akers.

"I'm much more convinced now about the importance of everyday life — health, childbirth, disease — in history."

The first biography of Abigail Smith Adams since the Adams Family Papers were opened in the 1950s, the book is based on about 2,000 family letters.

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was surrounded by books, married a man who "respected her intellect and valued her counsel" and lived in the "leading metropolis of the western world."

But Mrs. Adams "denounced the potential for tyranny in the legal subjugation of wives to husbands" and believed a woman should be "free to make a prudent choice of a mate" and limit the number of children she bore. She also added her influence to the growing demand for education for girls.

When asked if Mrs. Adams was a feminist, Akers said, not if the criteria for feminism is advocating the right of women to vote, run for public office and work outside the home.

"BUT SHE appears to be an early feminist in the field of education. She advocated equal education for women," he said.

"She freely admitted her failure to get her brightest, most famous son to dress neatly," said Akers. "John Quincy Adams was a perfect slob, just dirty."

The historian believes that Mrs. Adams's greatest failing was not any

maternal deficiency but her inability to pass on to her grandsons the proper respect for a woman of her ability.

"John Quincy seemed to regard his mother as an exception," he said.

Akers does not agree that Mrs. Adams was an exception, even though she was able to move easily from a

salibox cottage in Braintree, Mass. to mistress of a 40-bedroom villa in France.

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community calendar

EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER

Friday, Dec. 26: Registrations are being taken now for preschool classes which begin the week of Jan. 5 in Fairview Early Childhood Center, 28500 Oakcrest. In-person registration is necessary. Parents have option of times and days. Inquiries taken by calling Jean DeNaro in the center, 626-8335.

ONE WOMAN SHOWS

Friday, Dec. 26: The works of Agnes Hodge in a one-woman show remains in Farmington Community Library on Liberty Street and the works of Annetta Lind remains in Farmington Hills Community Library on 12 Mile Road through Dec. 31.

STUART LITTLE

Saturday, Dec. 27: "Stuart Little," movie shown for elementary school age children at 2 p.m. in Farmington Hills Community Library on 12 Mile Road. No charge.

THE HOBBIT

Monday and Tuesday, Dec. 29-30: "The Hobbit," special holiday vacation program suitable for all ages at 2 p.m. Monday in Farmington Hills Community Library on 12 Mile Road, and at 2 p.m. Tuesday in Farmington Community Library on Liberty Street. No charge. Reservations are not necessary.

NEW YEAR'S EVE PARTY

Wednesday, Dec. 31: New Year's Eve Party, with dinner and dancing, sponsored by Brodhead Farmington Hills VFW, begins at 7:30 p.m. in the VFW post, 23414 Orchard Lake Road. Reservations, at \$25 each, are taken by calling 474-8180.

SECOND EDITION EXPANDS HOURS

Friday, Jan. 2: The Second Edition Farmington Community Center's resale shop, extends its business hours beginning this date. The shop will be open weekdays from 11:30-2 p.m. and again on Thursdays from 3:45-5 p.m.; on Saturdays from 9 a.m. to noon, on the second floor of the center, on Farmington Road, north of Ten Mile Road.

ENRICHMENT CLASSES

Monday, Jan. 5: Registration opens for all enrichment classes offered for the winter term by Farmington Schools Adult and Community Education department. Registration may be made by mail or in person, at Ten Mile Community School, 32789 Ten Mile Road, weekdays from 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m. or 7-8 p.m. Monday through Thursdays. Classes begin the week of Jan. 19. Inquiries will be taken by calling the school, 474-5233.

ZURUCKGEHEN

Wednesday, Jan. 7: "Zurückgehen," an exchange program of music sponsored by Farmington Musicale, features Beverly Stief, soprano and Gwen Krupp, pianist, at 12:30 p.m. in Farmington Hills Community Library, 32737 12 Mile Road. Open to guests. No charge. Babysitting facilities available.

SKI CLINIC

Thursday, Jan. 8: Free cross country ski clinic introduces the sport to all persons over the age of 8 at 7:30 p.m. in Farmington Community Center, 24705 Farmington Road. Classes begin Jan. 9 in Beechwoods Touring Center, Nine Mile and Beech Roads, Southfield. Students benefit with group rates offered through the center.

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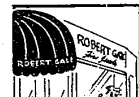
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