

**ABSTRACT - Mary Frances McFeeters Robinson, Wake Forest Faculty and
Department Chair, Romance Languages, retired**

**Mary Frances McFeeters Robinson Interviewed on July 11, 2008, at Salemtowne in
Winston-Salem by Anne R. Phillips
Audiotapes to Z. Smith Reynolds Library
Abstract by Anne R. Phillips**

Mary Frances McFeeters Robinson was the daughter of Milo McFeeters, who grew up on a farm near Jamestown in western Pennsylvania. Her mother's father was a minister of the Reformed Presbyterian Church; Mary Frances' parents met at Geneva College. About 1911, her father was sent as a "short term" missionary to teach English and science at Assiut College in Egypt. Assiut, a city of about 60,000, was half way between Cairo and Luxor. Mary Frances' mother was a public school teacher in Vermont for a while.

In the fall of 1914, Mary Frances' parents went to England by ship and were headed to Egypt via the Continent. But when England declared war on Germany, the McFeeters couple were stranded; Herbert Hoover helped get them passage to Egypt, where the couple taught at Assiut. In 1916, the parents took a neutral vessel to Athens, but, again, things heated up in WW I. The couple finally got passage from Greece to the United States. Mary Frances was born in Ithaca, New York.

The Presbyterian mission board sent Mr. McFeeters back to Egypt. By 1921, the entire family was back to Egypt, where the parents spent two years in Cairo learning the language. Then back to Assiut College, 1923-1927, where Mr. McFeeters served as science department head. Furlough back in the States; Mary Frances attended fourth grade in southern Ohio.

Mary Frances recalled earliest memories in Egypt. In Assiut, she attended a one-room school house on mission grounds and had a French teacher in grammar school. The missionary children could not go off campus.

Later, Mary Frances attended the Schutz School in Alexandria. Then to college in the fall of 1936. She chose Wilson College in Pennsylvania, where she received a four-year scholarship for tuition, board, and room. Other missionary girls were college friends. Mary Frances graduated from Wilson in 1940 and wanted to teach in high school in Pennsylvania. But jobs were scarce, so she headed to Cornell, where an aunt and uncle lived, and took more courses so she could be certified to teach Latin. She taught in three rural schools in New York States in the Finger Lakes region.

Summers 1944 and 1945 - to Syracuse University, where she was a graduate assistant in Romance Languages, teaching and studying French, Spanish, Latin, and English. American WWII veterans, G.I.'s, were returning in great numbers to

colleges, so Mary Frances was hired at Syracuse to teach full time while she did her own graduate studies. The G.I.'s were excellent students; Mary Frances did that teaching for three years. Total years at Syracuse: Fall 1945 to Fall 1950.

Fall 1950 - Miss McFeeters received a scholarship to study in France for her dissertation research. Took some courses at the Sorbonne and much independent research at various libraries in Paris, including the Bibliotheque Nationale. Her concentration was in twentieth century French literature and in Moliere. With other students she was able to attend many plays in Paris and to eat in cafeterias and restaurants at a student rate. She made friends with students from all over the world who were studying in Paris.

Observations on Paris in 1950: Paris not bombed during WW II, but there were many accounts of malnutrition in the city. By 1950, the Marshall Plan was not full blown. Miss McFeeters was careful not to ask about wartime activities of French people—whether collaborators or resistance fighters. Trips outside Paris, specifically to Rouen, revealed towns badly damaged by Allied bombers in WW II.

January 1952 - Miss McFeeters returned to Syracuse to complete her studies. In Spring 1952, Jack Parker was a colleague; he had been appointed to teach French and Spanish at Wake Forest in 1950. Mary Frances McFeeters came to Wake Forest to teach French and Spanish in 1952. She and Nan Leonard rented rooms in the home of Dean and Mrs. Bryan in old Wake Forest.

When Mary Frances came to Wake Forest, she was “shocked” by segregation. She had not lived south of the Mason-Dixon line before and had not witnessed blacks having to use different public restrooms from whites, or drink at different water fountains, or find lodging in different hotels. Blacks and whites in the town of Wake Forest lived in separate sections; the Wake Forest College student body was white.

In 1954, Miss McFeeters became the first woman faculty member at Wake Forest to earn the doctorate. She found the Wake Forest students “very polite,” in contrast to her Syracuse students. For example, at Syracuse, “if the bell rang, there was no need for the professor to even finish a sentence.” At Wake Forest, “students waited until [I] let them go.”

On December 26, 1955, Miss McFeeters and Dr. Paul S. Robinson of the Music Department were married. Dr. Robinson had done studies in music at Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and had joined the Wake Forest faculty to teach Organ and Church Music in 1952.

Mary Frances said that “the college moved us” and that the new campus was “a good bit of red mud at first.” She and Dr. Robinson lived the Apartment Number 1 of Faculty Apartments until they had their home built at 1939 Faculty Drive, where

they lived for forty-five years until they moved to Salemtowne. On the new campus, her office and classrooms were in the library before Tribble Hall was built.

More women than men were faculty in Romance Languages, especially in French, on the new Reynolda campus. Mary Frances McFeeters Robinson was Chairman of the Romance Languages Department for seven years, but she enjoyed teaching as well as those administrative duties. She started the semester abroad program in France for Wake Forest students. During Summer 1971, she took three weeks to look at the best place in France for that semester program. Her strong feeling was that the program needed to be located in the provinces and not in Paris. Rationale: if Wake Forest students were in Paris for study, they might not get out into the provinces. However, if students were in the provinces for a semester, they would most certainly go to Paris. So she chose Dijon in Burgundy.

In the Fall of 1972, Dr. and Mrs. Robinson took their daughters and the first crop of Wake Forest students, about seven or eight, to Dijon. Later the French study-abroad program attracted as many as twenty students per semester.

At the end of our visit, Mary Frances McFeeters Robinson showed me the lovely embroidery work that her husband had done—a small tablecloth and also an embroidered panel that hangs on the wall of her apartment at Salemtowne.

When I arrived at Mary Frances' apartment for this interview, she was studying a text of Egyptian monuments and a map of the Nile. It is obvious that Mary Frances McFeeters Robinson is a student of world cultures and that all of us in the Wake Forest community are beneficiaries of her broad learning, sound scholarship, and excellent teaching.

A.R.P.