To honor Marjorie Chapman, a teacher, and her husband, an engineer in management, the “Improving Physics and Chemistry Teachers Scholarships” Endowment Fund was created at Arizona State University Foundation by Jane and Paul Jackson, to support teachers in Arizona and nationwide who participate in the ASU Modeling Instruction Program.

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A Love of School: from foster child in the 1920s to teacher.
A letter by Marjorie Chapman to her granddaughter (written in 1985 at age 74)

Yes, there was a world before space ships, artificial hearts, transplanted organs, computers, stereos, TV, and McDonalds. There was a world even before airplanes, radio, automobiles, electrical appliances, direct dialing, central heating, and indoor plumbing, though some of these were edging over the horizon of said world when this “herstory” had its beginning.

In 1911, I was born at home, the fifth Harrington child. Whether welcomed or not, I don’t know — maybe “yes” because I was a girl after three boys in a row, maybe “no” because my arrival meant another mouth to feed. My ancestry is pure New England. That’s not saying anything for or against it, just stating a fact. But I do love our New England hills! Or any other hills for that matter.

Early memories are sketchy at best. I have no recollection whatever of my father, and no early recollections of the older brothers and sister. Apparently at my father’s death, the family was broken up — splintered might be a more accurate term. I did not get acquainted with them until I was about ten or so. My first memory of a “man in the house” was of my stepfather — at about three or four. I feared and disliked him intensely. To this day I am repelled by men who chew tobacco and who drink to excess.
My early life was a life of too little — too little money, too little food on occasion (nothing but moldy bread for dinner), too few of the creature comforts, too little stability, too little affection and love.

However it wasn’t all bad. Probably around age four, I made my first friend, a grey Maltese cat that belonged to our landlady. Ever since I’ve been partial to cats. Cats love, are undemanding and never scold — except when they are hungry. I remember that first friend better than I remember any of the people of that period of my life.

Along in that same period, I visited a one-room school up the road from where we lived. That was the only kind that was found out in the country of that time. There were no buses, and there, on that day, began my life-long love affair with a school room. “Rain, rain, go away, come again another day” was the literary masterpiece I memorized that day. Quite a masterpiece to carry around in one’s mind for seventy years!

I entered first grade in a one-room school with eight grades, and there I found my place in the world. I was a good student, and a classroom became the place where I felt comfortable and competent. Do you wonder why I always wanted to become a teacher? It’s a decision I’ve never regretted.

Socially I was not comfortable or competent. We always lived on the wrong side of town, I was not pretty by any stretch of the imagination, was not very well cared for, and had not reached the stage where I could take care of myself. Today I would be considered “economically, socially, and culturally deprived” and be a candidate for “Head Start”, except that I didn’t need Head Start scholastically. It took college to give me some degree of confidence in a non-classroom environment.

As I said, it wasn’t all bad. I learned - many times the hard way - a considerable number of do’s and don’ts. Don’t cry — nobody cares. Don’t show overt anger at grown-ups — it only results in punishment. Don’t expect much from others — you’re not disappointed. Don’t make advances — you won’t be rejected. Do recognize that you are the one you can depend on, you are the captain of your soul, the master of your fate. You are responsible for your life. That doesn’t mean that I’ve always kept to these precepts, or that I think they are all necessarily good. Time has shown that some can be relaxed. People do care, people do give, people are dependable — at least some people some of the time. The last one I still recommend — be responsible for your own actions.

We were movers, rarely staying in one place for over a year or so. I remember them primarily by the grade I was in at the time. First, a little four-corners community called State Line; third, Monson: fourth, Feeding Hills; fifth and sixth, Chester; seventh, Stockbridge; eighth, Pittsfield. Each move seemed to take us a bit north and a bit west, and a bit further into the Berkshires. They were beautiful at any time of the year — and I still love them. Note - I skipped second grade.

Why did we move so much? Probably for the same reason there are so many now who move frequently from one place to another. They don’t make a success of their lives where they are and move on hoping for greener pastures. I remember the stepfather through at least a part of the third grade; then he passed out of the picture, a joy to me. At that point my mother was on her own, trying to earn a living taking in washings and doing housework for other people. One tenement was on the second floor and there was a street light across the road. I must have been a latch-key kid at that point, for I remember reading books by that light, since I wasn’t allowed to light the kerosene lamps by myself — and I had to read, just had to read.
At the age of thirteen, I left home. At this time I was living with my oldest brother and his wife, along with the other two brothers. There are vague recollections of appearing before a judge. I’ve never really known whether I was “taken” away, or “sent” away. I believe it was “sent”, for they were a young couple — only 22 — with one child, my beloved Sonny whom I’ve never seen since, and another on the way. Eventually they had eleven: nine boys and two girls. So I suppose being responsible for a young sister was more than they felt able to cope with. It hurt desperately at the time, and still does if I dwell on it. Rejection is hard to take, especially when it is our own, and it leaves one lonely for family.

Actually, leaving home was absolutely the best thing that ever happened to me. Had I stayed with the family, undoubtedly I would have left school at fourteen (the legal age then), gone to work in one of the local textile mills, and repeated the pattern of hand-to-mouth living — too many kids, not enough money — and in addition, resentment that I was trapped into that way of life.

Where was my mother during this period? Who knows! She had abandoned us. She was the black sheep of her family. I saw her only twice after that; two of the brothers, once; and the older sister, never: she died before I reached thirty. For my mother, I had no respect. Her lifestyle was not one to command respect, at least during that era. Today it would be considered fairly normal. I made a vow to myself that never would I do anything that would cause my husband or children to lose their respect for me. Maybe they’d not like me much on occasion, but they would have no reason not to respect me.

Only one of the brothers did I miss — the youngest one who was five years older than I. The other two were not very kind to a little sister. The oldest one killed my cat and burned up a French book that someone had given me. I never forgave him. The other brother was yucky. None of them graduated from high school and they had no patience with my desire for books, etc. I was the odd-ball.

I was placed in a foster home in Stoughton, Massachusetts, where I stayed for my high school years. In that respect I was lucky, for many children go from one foster home to another, continuing the insecurity that they’ve had all their lives. I won’t say it was a loving home — it wasn’t. I was there to keep house for them and help in their laundry, and that’s what I did. I guess they were fond of me in their own way, but they rarely showed it. They did send me a bouquet of yellow roses at my graduation. They fought with each other frequently, but that was nothing new to me. Didn’t everybody?

School during those years was fine. I took the commercial course, expecting to become a stenographer when I graduated. (Today they are called secretaries.) I’d given up the idea of teaching, since girls in my position did not go to college. I was not allowed to be in any of the school athletics (probably would not have been much good at them anyway), and was not overly popular socially. My sole claim to fame outside the classroom was in debating, which was a big thing in those days. I was captain of our school debating team for my junior and senior years, and president of the debating society. We would go to other schools to debate their teams. That opened up the world a bit, and was fun.

How different my high school years were from the norm now. Never did I select an article of clothing for myself. My allotment of clothes money was $32 per year. Even then, $32 didn’t buy much, so most of my clothes were hand-me-downs -- even shoes, which rarely fit properly. And I wore them, like it or not. Even for my graduation from high school, I was not allowed to have even moderately high heels. I’d bought a pair with money I’d earned in the laundry, and had to take them back. How I resented that! So what did I buy with the first money
I earned after leaving that home? A pair of green pumps with the highest heels I could find. They were most uncomfortable, but I loved them! Perhaps all this is why I’m somewhat shocked when the young demand designer jeans and refuse to wear anything that doesn’t just suit them. Guess they need a little deprivation.

At the end of my high school years, a few things happened which set the course for the rest of my life. First, I graduated at the top of my class, was valedictorian, and won the $100 that went along with that honor. Unlike today, there were no other awards. There was some flak from the family of the highest-ranking college course student. They felt that no commercial student was worthy of that honor, but fortunately for me, the school officials did not agree. Secondly, in October after graduation the lady of the house died after nearly a year’s illness — a stroke. (That was some year!) That made it necessary for me to find another place to live. In addition to keeping house for them, I had a bookkeeping job in the laundry that they owned, and I didn’t dare leave it, jobs not being too plentiful. A couple in the church I attended had an extra room that they were willing to rent to me on a trial basis until Christmas. Those two months extended into years: the Betes became my real family, giving me encouragement and affection.

That $100 and the Bete family’s encouragement and interest sparked my latent ambition to become a teacher. So I worked a year at $12 a week: paid $7 a week for board and room, and out of the other $5 I saved every cent possible. Of course, $5 went a lot further than it does now, but I didn’t exactly squander it — except for my beloved pair of green high-heeled pumps. A good friend, my caseworker, helped get me a scholarship for $250 per year from a jewelry company in Boston, as long as the grades stayed up. They did.

So, in September of 1929, I entered Bridgewater State Teachers’ College. Historically, you know what happened in October of that year. Courses available to me were quite limited since I’d had practically no background in math, the sciences, or languages, so I settled on English, history, and geography. All were happy choices. However, the business training stood me in good stead, for I did laundry jobs for teachers and office work for the head of the physical education department and for the Dean of Education at the same time, all four years, and I got to work at all the educators’ conferences that took place at the college — all at 25 cents an hour. At a summer job, actually just housework, I earned $4 a week for ten weeks. Not much, you say. True, but I never had to borrow. Some students did, but I didn’t want to come out of college owing anybody anything, and didn’t, monetarily at least. But I could never repay the Bete family for their kindness to me. I went to their home on weekends and vacations. I was the daughter they never had.

We did not have official class standings. Unofficially I graduated about fourth or fifth highest, which was not bad considering the lack of typical college preparation, and the considerable time I spent working.

College opened up the world. I had a serious boyfriend. Fortunately I didn’t marry him. I was determined to finish college, he didn’t want me to, and by the end of my senior year, I couldn’t stand him. But having him available for dances, etc. gave me a sort of social status. I made friends, some of whom are friends to this day. I learned how to meet people, thanks to the Dean of Women among others. At times I thought she was my worst enemy, but later realized she was a good friend. I had the respect of the teachers; I treasured a written comment from one of them for years. I also had the respect and sometimes the envy of my classmates. I’d had those in high school, too, but didn’t discover it until years later.

Graduation came in 1933, just in the depths of the Great Depression. There were only about five in the class who had prospective jobs when they graduated, mostly in their home
towns. I was not one of them. That summer was a period of frustration! I had a home with the Betes, who had become my family in all but name, but desperately I wanted to be independent and self-supporting. In October, Dame Fortune smiled and I got a job teaching music — completely out of my field — and geography, which I loved, in the seventh grade (five classes of them) in Southbridge, Massachusetts. I received $750 a year, take-home pay. A long-time ambition had been realized!

Overall, the Great Depression didn’t have too much effect on my life, for I was in college during the first half of it, and had a job during the latter half. It was a happy time for me in spite of not having much. But then, I’d never had much so didn’t know the difference. It affected many of my classmates. Some did “cadet” teaching until something turned up. “Cadet” teaching was working in the schools without pay. Some went into other types of work, some got married, which meant they couldn’t get any kind of work. During that period if a woman got married, she was immediately fired from her job. Actually that is the way I got my job—my predecessor got married.

By 1936, still in depression years, I’d saved enough to start graduate work at the University of Colorado. That was done in four double-term summers, and I got my master’s degree in 1939. That would be no big deal now, but then a Master’s was fairly uncommon. Why the University of Colorado? Just because it was far from home and was different. At first I’d planned for only one summer, but why waste twelve perfectly good credits?

The Dust Bowl never affected me personally, but during those summers in Colorado, I saw a bit of it, and heard more from people who did live in the affected areas. In Massachusetts we had a couple of hazy days when it was a bit difficult to breathe. The newspapers said that we were getting the dust.

After marriage in 1940 I taught for two years. I was earning $1800 a year, top pay for a teacher with an advanced degree. Then I became a full time housewife, and fairly rapidly, mother of three. Housework as a career was completely stultifying to me. Some people don’t want to do anything else. More power to them, but it was not for me. So after twelve years I went back into teaching, and stayed in it for twenty-one more years. It satisfied a deep need.

This is adapted from a much longer letter from Marjorie H. Chapman to her granddaughter, Carla Jackson, in November 1985. For years Marjorie and her husband, John, lived in Thompson, Connecticut, where they raised three daughters: Jane (mother of Carla), Ruth, and Lee. Marjorie retired in 1975 after 30 years of teaching. Ten years later she wrote, “I’d still like to teach if I could get out of playground duty, lunchroom duty, bus duty, bathroom duty, report cards, reports, reports, and more reports, and discipline.” She was a teacher until the end of her life; her last 9 years were at an assisted living center, and each Friday at coffee hour she gave a short talk -- usually on the origin of a word -- followed by jokes. She said, “At my age, the best thing I can do is help the residents forget their pain.” Her last talk was in May 2014. She experienced much pain in the last six months of her life, but until mid-June she continued to do crafts for 6 hours each day and to read. Her heart stopped beating in August, 2014, at age 103.

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