

# Newsletter of The

# Katherine Anne Porter Society

Volume 5, Number 1

May 1998

## Katherine Anne Porter's Coffin: The Last Word?

By Paul Porter

**Editor's Note:** After reading Dr. Clark Dobson's reminiscences of Miss Porter in the last issue of the newsletter, her nephew Paul Porter sent the editor his own recollections related to the famous wooden coffin. Curiously enough, the editor has recently exchanged correspondence with Willy vonBracht of Kalispell, Montana, who operates the Sweet Earth Casket & Cradle Shop, the successor of the firm from which Miss Porter purchased the coffin in 1974.

Aunt Katherine was captivated by the idea of having a wooden coffin after seeing a news photograph taken of the funeral of one of her long-ago friends in Mexico, Adolfo Best-Maugard I believe it was, although I am not positive. I got nowhere trying to find the coffin she wanted in New York City, just some very amused reactions from the funeral homes I contacted; but KAP serendipitously came across an advertisement by a maker of wooden coffins in Montana, and she immediately sent off for one. When it arrived it was almost comically too large for her, and the detailing was not at all what she had in mind; but perfect or not, she had a coffin.

Easily, freely, with no sense

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## Remembering Katherine Anne Porter

**Editor's Note:** The following remarks were made at the business meeting of the Katherine Anne Porter Society at the American Literature Association Conference in Baltimore, Maryland, on May 23, 1997. The reminiscences of Dr. Clark Dobson, a Dean at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, appeared in the last issue of this newsletter. Those of Sister Kathleen Feeley, former President of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland who is currently the Director of Special Education for the Baltimore City Schools, appear below. This portion of the recollections also includes responses to questions raised at the conclusion of Sister Feeley's remarks.

**Kathleen Feeley:** I met Katherine Anne Porter about the same time that Clark did. I had just finished writing a book on Flannery O'Connor. I had studied Katherine Anne Porter's relationship with Flannery O'Connor. I became president of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland in 1971. The year before, I was interning on the campus and saw in the newspaper that Katherine Anne Porter was living at College Park. And I said, "Aha!"

While I'm talking I'm going to pass around these photographs of Katherine Anne Porter and Flannery O'Connor. This is the 1970 birthday party we had for Katherine Anne Porter.

**Clark Dobson:** And I baked the cake.

**KF:** The other ones are all her apartment. You can just pass them around. And I will search everyone on the way out, if anything is missing.

So I called Katherine Anne Porter on the telephone and said I'm Sister Kathleen Feeley, and I'm at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland. I would love to come down and meet you. She was so gracious she invited me to come. Sister Maura, who was the head of the English Department at that time, and I went down to see Katherine Anne. We were welcomed in her beautiful apartment in College Park. We talked for a while, and it was my goal to get Katherine Anne to come and give some special occasion lecture at Notre Dame. So we

invited her first for a religious event, because you know she was raised a Catholic, and we appealed



*KAP and Flannery O'Connor at O'Connor's home, 1965, Papers of Katherine Anne Porter, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.*



*KAP in her Westchester Park apartment, College Park, MD, 1975. Photograph by Paul Porter. Papers of Katherine Anne Porter, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.*

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## Katherine Anne Porter Society

The *Newsletter of the Katherine Anne Porter Society* is published at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, by the Katherine Anne Porter Society, with the sponsorship of the UNLV English Department. Membership inquiries and renewals should be directed to Darlene Unrue, Department of English, University of Nevada, Las Vegas 89154-5011, unrue@nevada.edu. Entries for the annual bibliographical essay on Porter should be addressed to Janis Stout, Department of English, Texas A & M University, College Station, Texas 77843, j-stout@tamu.edu. Articles, announcements, and comments for the newsletter should be sent to Beth Alvarez, Archives and Manuscripts, McKeldin Library, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742, ra60@umail.umd.edu.

The officers of the Katherine Anne Porter Society are Beth Alvarez, President and Newsletter Editor; Darlene Unrue, Past President; and Janis Stout, Secretary. Members of the Executive Committee are Beth Alvarez, Virginia Spencer Carr (Georgia State University), John Edward Hardy (emeritus, University of Illinois at Chicago), George Hendrick (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Janis Stout, and Darlene Unrue.

### KAP Society Annual Dues \$10

Katherine Anne Porter Society annual dues are \$10 a year. Checks made payable to KAP Society/UNLV Foundation should be mailed to Darlene Unrue, Department of English, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-5011. The KAP Society has tax exempt status through the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Foundation, the fundraising arm of UNLV.

## Remembering Katherine Anne Porter

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to her Catholic sensibilities which were always there, even though she was not a practicing Catholic. So we invited her for a mass for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8, 1970. We went down and picked her up and brought her out. We have a beautiful convent chapel, and she went to Mass with us. She went to communion, and she was so moved by being with sisters again. She had been raised in a convent school so she had a lot of contact with sisters.

After the mass, we had a small dinner with about six or seven sisters. We lingered over the dinner. Katherine Anne was full of reminiscence, talking about New Orleans, talking about the events in the convent, and probably making up this and that. She had this gorgeous emerald on her finger, and she told this whole story about never having any money until she sold *Ship of Fools* to the movies. Then she bought this emerald. She took the ring off and passed it around the table, and we all tried it on. And at the end of that meeting, she just enjoyed herself so much that, when we took her back to College Park, I asked her if she would come for a special program we were having for women. Notre Dame was opening a new program for women the next year after I became president. I asked her if she would come for a very special occasion.

Well, she came the next year. She wore a caftan, a beautiful caftan, to the Immaculate Conception Mass. The next year, when she came back, she had on a jeweled white pants suit. It was just gorgeous. In the auditorium were about eight hundred women, there to inaugurate a series of lectures about and for women. We gave KAP the stage and a microphone, and she just talked. She talked about her life; she talked about doing what you want to do. She said she always wanted to be a writer and she was determined; nothing was going to stop her. She really was exceptionally vivacious that day. She looked so charming that I think people couldn't believe that she was eighty-two years old. She opened our lecture series. Later I was able to get Mother Teresa of Calcutta to speak, and other prominent people wanted to be invited. So KAP was a star that day and helped Notre Dame to attract other stars.

Then we asked her if we could bring our students down to visit her in College Park. Sister Maura and I were teaching a senior seminar. Could we bring four or five students down every year to finish off our seminar in her apartment? She said, yes, she would be delighted. We did that for some years—came down with a small group of students. We just sat around and talked with her. She was always great at speaking; she was never at a loss for words. That's why the end of her life was so difficult. She talked about her life and her writing and her husbands and being abroad. She just jumped from one reminis-

### Katherine Anne Porter Society Membership Application/Renewal

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Institutional affiliation \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone (work) \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone (home) \_\_\_\_\_

Fax \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_



cence to another. The students were absolutely thrilled: many of them wrote on Katherine Anne Porter for their final papers. For those four or five years, it was a wonderful way to have a special treat for our students at Notre Dame.

One year Sister Maura and I visited her the day before Ash Wednesday, and she made pancakes and poured champagne for us. We had these beautiful glasses of champagne and very thin French pancakes rolled up with honey on top of them. It was a festive dinner at her table, and she herself cooked for us. Then she declined in health, and we lost contact.

Paul Porter called us in 1977 and said that she had really gone down. She had had a stroke, and she would love to have a visit from us. So we went down to see her a few times. As Clark has described, she was in bed. I remember so well one time when I was with her and the nurse came in to do something for her, and I walked out into her study, which was next to her bedroom. I was just standing there staring at the bookcases as you do in a famous writer's study. I pulled out the *Confessions of Saint Augustine*. She had her name on the flyleaf. Written on the flyleaf in her handwriting was one sentence from the *Confessions*, which I've used many times as I lecture with our young people. The sentence she picked out of St. Augustine was, "It doth make a difference whence cometh a man's joy." I always thought about that in respect to her declining years, because her joy was really in herself, and in her work, and in her accomplishments. Even though she was suffering what Teilhard de Chardin calls "passive diminishment," at the close of her life, she never experienced any bitterness. She was definitely still her dear self. One time, she took her paralyzed right hand from under the cover, and she held it, saying, "My writing hand. It served me well. I still love it." A wonderful way to accept that kind of diminution.

When she died, we had the memorial service at the College of Notre Dame. My reminiscences of her are colored by the character of her that I saw to the end. I didn't see her in that last year in the nursing home, so I missed the very, very end. But lying in her beautiful bed in her beautiful apartment, being well taken care of, she talked with difficulty, but she talked. I thought "as we live so shall we die." She lived full of vivacity and full of courage and full of the kind of the joy of life that characterized her. Up to the time I saw her last, she kept that spirit. Even though she was incapacitated, she kept the spirit of joy. So I always think back on the fact that, because I made a phone call and because she was the warm hearted person she was, we reached each other at a time when it was very helpful for me at Notre Dame to have Katherine Anne Porter come and give a keynote lecture, and I was helpful to her near the end.

I did forget that we gave her an Honorary Degree about three years after her visits. She was unable to come to the ceremony as she was not travelling very much. So we took all the paraphernalia and a few people, and we performed the ceremony in her living room. We put the gown on her, put the hood on her, gave her the diploma. She was so pleased, pleased to be dressed up in the academic robes again, to have Notre Dame's

hood and diploma. I think that was one of the high points of her declining years. So we're very honored to have her as an alumna of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, and as one of our distinguished lecturers. I feel very honored to have known a magnificent woman toward the close of her life and know once again what I've always believed: that God does not desert us. He stayed with her to the very end. Thank you.

**CD:** Sister Kathleen mentioned food, and I have to tell you Katherine Anne was a marvelous cook. She was almost legendary, and other people have remarked on this throughout her life. She loved telling the story about going to the Cordon Bleu cooking school of Paris. She always described this large man with a very big nose, wearing a high toque and striped pants. She always remembered him towering over her, and she was so small. And he asked, "Does Madame wish to learn to cook pastries?" And she said, "No, madame wishes to learn to cook wild game." And then she would proceed to tell the story of her graduation piece; she had to buy it. So she went to the market and bought this huge ham that she saw in the window, it still had the hair attached and the legs sticking up, she said. And then she had to take it home on the bus. But it was a great story.

But the one of Katherine Anne's possessions that I always wanted to acquire, and I have not and I don't know where it is, was her personally annotated copy of the *Joy of Cooking*. I would love to have that, but I have many memories of Katherine Anne's cooking well in her eighties. She was still in the kitchen, and she would not serve meals in the traditional normal way. She would go to the market or have someone go to the market. If they saw something that was unusually fresh and really nice, like I remember once they found little baby carrots, well, you didn't have the carrots served with the rest of the meal, you had them served as a separate course. But she would do that very often when she was putting together a meal. That was just another memory that just touched off.

**KF:** I'll tell you about her cooking. She really did love to cook, French cooking. So we always had something nice every time we went, some little thing, but the pancakes were the best.

**Janis Stout:** One of my students just made Katherine Anne's recipe for sour cream pie and brought it to our seminar.

**Question:** For Sister Kathleen, did Porter wish to speak with you about religious issues when you visited with her?

**KF:** Yes, yes. Once she wanted me to bring a priest. I invited a priest, a friend of mine who was a literary man that I knew would connect with her. He went back several times to see her. She definitely, as many of us do, I think, reverted to her early childhood as she was growing older. She had a rosary always by her bed, and she liked to keep a rosary in her hands. We did talk about spiritual things; we talked about dying. She was just very open to all of that. I think down deep she was a very deeply spiritual person. I don't think you can write the kind of writing that

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## Remembering Katherine Anne Porter

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she did without depth of spirit. She had a depth of spirituality, but not what you would call religion as such. Her spirituality was very deep. I think she was very close to God. I know in the end that she liked to have me pray; every time I went, I prayed with her. I think she was going back to her roots.

**Question:** I was very struck with your touching upon that phrase from St. Augustine. . . . Why you think that phrase from St. Augustine's *Confessions* arresting?

**KF:** I was so moved by it because I read the *Confessions* years ago, and I didn't remember [that passage]. I wasn't ready to hear it, I guess. But I think it's such an important concept that the source of our joy makes a difference. If the source of our joy is money and we lose our money, then where are we? If it's health or if it's beauty. . . . It doth make a difference whence cometh our joy.

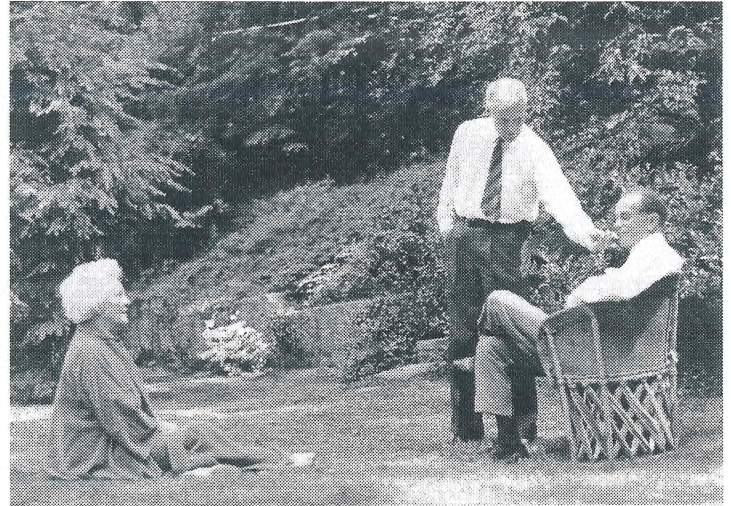
**Christine Hanks:** I always paraphrase that, it matters what you love. I think it speaks for its starting point. The idea that you settle on. . . .

**KF:** Well it goes again to the root, to the root of your joy. I often used it when speaking with our graduating seniors at the College of Notre Dame. They think they're big stuff. They're lovely, and they're young, and they're smart. And they think the world is going to just open up and embrace them. I used that as a motif to say: where is your joy coming from? If it's not coming from the deepest part of your spirit, then it's ephemeral. If it's because you're beautiful, you can wake up tomorrow and get acid thrown in your face. So basically I've always felt that was her gift to me: pulling out that sentence that I had passed by long ago and making me think a lot about it and realizing what was the secret of her happiness. She had a source of joy which was not tied up in being able to do what she wanted to do, because, in her old age, she couldn't do what she wanted to do. But she still had a joyful spirit.

I just found in my notes that sentence about the Paris cooking school. "A great learning experience was learning to cook wild boar. All I remember" this is quoting her, "is that you have to marinate wild boar in wine for four days. When the great meal was achieved, there was no one up to eating it. So the food had to be sent to a Paris orphan asylum."

**Question:** Why do you think she said that Glenway Wescott died?

**CD:** I didn't want to stretch out the stories, but they'd had a falling out over, I believe, some question of a gold medal being given by the National Academy. They had a ferocious argument about it and really never really spoke again after that. I would have to go and check. But it happened quite a few years before that, of course, but she had never really forgiven him for that. And she had killed him off.



KAP, Monroe Wheeler, and Glenway Wescott at KAP's home in Spring Valley, Washington, DC, May 15, 1965, *Papers of Katherine Anne Porter, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.*

**Question:** I just don't know the long story of that friendship. In the 1940s, she talked about "poor Monroe." I somehow thought that he died. . . . Do you know what that was?

**CD:** That should be fairly easily researched . . . actually Glenway certainly felt very friendly toward her. I have an inscription on one of Glenway's books referring to "Great Old Porter." And I've always loved that expression.

**KF:** I have one more little quote here. These notes were taken by Sister Maura, not by me. "Katherine Anne likes to think of herself as an old fashioned Catholic especially since her stroke. She likes to have her rosary beads twined through her fingers, the fingers of her left hand, and her little prayer book near her. Death is beautiful, she says, I long to die, I love God, I know he loves me."

**CD:** She spoke of death a lot actually, and it was always in that spirit.



## Porter Activities at the University of Maryland Libraries

By Beth Alvarez, University of Maryland

There continues to be a great deal of interest in and activities related to the Porter holdings at the University of Maryland Libraries. The most significant activity during the period between November 1997 and April 1998 was the progress made on the NEH-funded project to complete preservation microfilming of the most heavily used and valuable portions of the Papers of Katherine Anne Porter. On November 24, 1997, the University of Maryland awarded the bid to microfilm the papers to Preservation Resources of Bethlehem, PA, a firm that specializes in this work.

Prior to the awarding of the bid, Project Archivist Rachel Vagts began preparing the materials for microfilming. During this process, it became apparent that she and I would need to re-examine closely the arrangement of all forty-eight linear feet of the papers to be microfilmed. During the last six months, we have reviewed all of Series I, III, IV, and V. I expect to review Series II and Series VI by summer's end so that, at long last, the guide to the collection can be completed, perhaps by September. When complete, it will be mounted on the Libraries' home page.

On December 19, 1997, Libraries' Preservation staff, Yvonne Carignan and Elise Calvi, and Porter project staff, Patricia Rettig, Rachel Vagts, and I, travelled to Bethlehem, PA, to meet with Preservation Resources staff. The vendor's staff examined representative examples from the eight manuscript boxes of the Porter papers that the project staff had prepared and transported to their site. We agreed to film a test reel of materials in order to determine the final technical specifications to be used in completing the project. In January and March, Libraries' staff reviewed test reels of microfilm and finalized the technical specifications for the project.

By the end of April 1998, thirty-two manuscript boxes, comprising about sixteen linear feet, of the Porter Papers had been prepared for microfilming; twenty-one of these boxes have already been transported to the Bethlehem facility. These portions of the collection include the all of the first three subseries of Series I, Correspondence, and a portion of the fourth subseries. Subseries 1, Agents and Publishing Activities, includes correspondence dated 1918 to 1978 (Cyrilly Abels through Yale Review, Publishing Activities [Chronological], and Permissions). Derivative Works, Subseries 2, covers the period from 1952 to 1977 (Theodore Apstein through Douglas Watson). Subseries 3, Financial and Legal, 1930 to 1979, includes donation requests, financial correspondence, legal correspondence, and correspondence with E. Barrett Prettyman, Jr. The portion of Subseries 4, Personal, dating from 1918 to 1980, shipped in early May, includes Miss Porter's correspondence with William Abrahams through David Locher. As I complete this account in early May, I am pleased to report that our first shipment of ten reels of microfilm has arrived. Libraries' staff will inspect it for adherence to

the technical standards defined in our contract with Preservation Resources as well as for readability and completeness.

At this time, we have not completed our policy for loaning the microfilm to special collections at other research libraries nor can we predict when any of the film will be available for loan. However, I have conferred with counsel in the university's President's Legal Office and expect to complete the inter-library loan policy in the next few months. Announcement of the policies and availability of the microfilm will appear on the Libraries' Literary Manuscripts home page (<http://www.lib.umd.edu/UMCP/ARCV/litmss.html>), in various scholarly journals, and in this newsletter. Notification will also be mailed to those on the Libraries' Katherine Anne Porter mailing list. Anyone wishing to be added to that mailing list should contact me.

During this six-month period there were fewer on-site researchers, as six series of the Porter papers were closed. The four visitors who consulted our Porter holdings at College Park travelled from Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Telephone, mail, and e-mail inquiries have also been received from California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin, as well as from Norway. As usual, the bulk of these requests came from graduate students and scholars, but there was a flurry of requests for photographs and other materials generated by the forthcoming events planned for Texas Writers' Month. As Miss Porter is the featured writer this year, the traveling exhibit prepared in 1991 as part of the University of Maryland Libraries' "Katherine Anne Porter at One Hundred" activities will be displayed in Austin, Texas. A photograph of Miss Porter from the Porter collection will be featured on the Texas Writers' Month poster. In addition, several of the photographs from the Porter collection appeared in the documentary "Influenza 1918," which was broadcast as part of PBS's *American Experience* series on February 9, 1998.

Five of the seven women who previously served as docents in the Porter Room continued their tenure during this period: Freddy Baer, Shirley Bauer, Dorothy Galvin, Beverly Lewoc, and Betty Warner. In January, they were joined by Joan Phelan, a retired CIA analyst and friend of Shirley Bauer. Regretfully, Rose Ann Jackson and Esther Birdsall were unable to continue their service. A brief obituary for Dr. Birdsall appears elsewhere in the newsletter. During the six-month period covered by this report, the Porter Room was open to the public thirty-six afternoons, and there were 136 visitors.

Barbara Thompson Davis and E. Barrett Prettyman, Jr., made significant gifts of Porter materials in recent months. Mrs. Davis discovered more than eight linear feet of Isabel Bayley's records among the literary trustee's papers that had been transferred to her after Mrs. Bayley's death. This addition to the Bayley papers includes literary trustee correspondence and financial records, manuscripts relating to various projects including Mrs. Bayley's edition of Miss Porter's letters, her notes from conversations with

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## Porter Activities

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Miss Porter, and an unpublished memoir about her relationship with Miss Porter. Although this recent gift and the remainder of the Bayley papers remain unprocessed, there are preliminary inventories for the entire collection, and it is open to researchers.

Mr. Prettyman's recent gift, of approximately half a linear foot, includes his correspondence, dating between 1962 and 1984, related to Miss Porter. Some of this correspondence was exchanged between Mr. Prettyman and Miss Porter; some of it was between Mr. Prettyman and others relating to Miss Porter. Patricia Rettig, the graduate assistant who processed the Prettyman papers in May 1997, integrated this portion into the existing collection and revised the guide. Mr. Prettyman has placed some restrictions on this collection. During his lifetime, no one may quote from these papers unless authorized by him in writing. In addition, researchers may not consult the portion of the collection donated in December 1997 without Mr. Prettyman's written permission. This recent addition to the Prettyman papers is especially important because it documents the last years of Miss Porter's life.

Bill Wilkins continues to provide extraordinary support for our Porter holdings. His efforts in the last six months have focused on support for Rachel Vagts and myself in preparing the Porter Papers for microfilming. He completed his review of the arrangement of Miss Porter's clippings, has assisted in preparing portions of the collection for the microfilm vendor, and has dated some undated correspondence. His assistance remains invaluable.

Additional preservation initiatives have been undertaken on

parts of the Porter Papers since my last report. Archives and Manuscripts colleague Chuck Howell made progress on duplicating reel-to-reel audiotapes onto audio cassettes, making them more accessible to researchers and protecting the fragile originals. Color slides of 291 color photographic prints in the Porter collection were made as an interim preservation measure because some of the early prints had begun to fade.

Anyone who has questions concerning the Libraries' Porter holdings should not hesitate to contact me, Curator of Literary Manuscripts, Archives and Manuscripts, McKeldin Library, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20752, 301-405-9298, ra60@umail.umd.edu.



*KAP holding the key to the KAP Room, Maryland Room, McKeldin Library, May 15, 1968. Holding the box at KAP's left is University of Maryland President Wilson Elkins. Standing at right and behind her is her lawyer and friend, E. Barrett Prettyman, Jr. Photograph by Bill Clark, University of Maryland, University Relations Office. Papers of Katherine Anne Porter, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.*

## Katherine Anne Porter Session at American Literature Association Conference in Baltimore

Editor's Note: This article was inadvertently omitted from Volume 4, Number 2, of the newsletter.

Darlene Unrue, President of the Katherine Anne Porter Society, chaired the Society's session held in Baltimore on Friday, May 23, 1997. The session consisted of four papers. The first, "A Spiritual Sense of Gravity: Exile and Self-Identity in Katherine Anne Porter's Miranda Cycle," was read by Andrew R. Burke, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Georgia. Professor Mary Titus of St. Olaf College, presented "Fresh Make-Up: Gender Roles, Social Control, and Costume in Porter's 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider.'" "The Concept of Wonder in Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction" was the subject of the paper of Professor Christine Hanks Hait of Columbia College. Finally, Joseph Csicsila, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and an adjunct instructor at Eastern Michigan University, read "Katherine Anne Porter Anthologized."

## Porter House Preservation Update

Tom Grimes, Director of the MFA Program in Creative Writing at Southwest Texas State University, has reported that purchase of the Porter House in Kyle for restoration and use as a creative writing center has been completed. The house was purchased on March 9 by the Hays County Preservation Associates, a group of concerned local citizens who worked with Carroll Wiley of the SWT Support Foundation and with Grimes.

The group is now consulting architects about plans for restoration, using period photographs as a guide to its goals. Grimes, who is himself a Texas writer with three novels to his credit, says that when work is complete a portion of the house will be used for a writer-in-residence program in association with SWT. The living room and dining room of the house will continue to serve as a museum.

Funds are still needed to endow the maintenance of the house. Contributions should be made out to Friends of the Hays County Historical Commission—Preservation Associates, Inc. and designated to the Porter House Preservation Project. They can be mailed to 1717 N. Burleson Street, Kyle, TX 78640.



## **In Memoriam: Esther Birdsall**

Esther Birdsall, retired University of Maryland professor and Katherine Anne Porter Room docent, died on April 16, 1998. Dr. Birdsall, a Michigan native and graduate of Central Michigan College, received a master's degree in English from the University of Arizona and a doctorate in English from the University of Maryland. She taught at Hood College for about a year before joining the Maryland faculty, where she remained for thirty-two years, retiring in 1993. She served five semesters as a docent in the Katherine Anne Porter Room, from September 1995 through December 1997. She was also a volunteer with the university's Episcopal Campus Ministry. Survivors include her husband of fifty years, Lloyd Birdsall of Hyattsville, MD, two daughters, and four grandchildren.

Contributions can be sent to Friends of the Libraries, McKeldin Library, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; the Episcopal Campus Ministry, 2116 Memorial Chapel, University of Maryland; or to St. Michael's and All Angels Church, 8501 New Hampshire Avenue, Adelphi MD 29783.

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## **Porter Session in Charleston**

The 1998 conference of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature took place at the Lightsey Conference Center at the College of Charleston in Charleston, SC, April 16-18, 1998. Janis Stout, secretary of the KAP Society, chaired the session entitled "Katherine Anne Porter: The South and Beyond" on Friday, April 17. Beth Alvarez, University of Maryland, presented "The Subtle Politics of 'He': Katherine Anne Porter's Portrait of the Southern Proletariat." "The Old Order": A Crazy Quilt of the Past" was the subject of the paper of Leslie Butler, University of Kentucky. Robert K. Miller, University of St. Thomas, read "Cover Ups: Katherine Anne Porter and the Economics of Concealment." Finally, Professor Stout presented "The Imperial Eyes of Evelyn Scott and Katherine Anne Porter."

## **1999 ALA Conference in Baltimore**

The Katherine Anne Porter Session at the forthcoming American Literature Association conference will be chaired by Professor Thomas Austenfeld of Drury College. Anyone interested in submitting a proposal should contact Professor Austenfeld, Drury College, 900 Benton Avenue, Springfield, MO 65802. His e-mail address is [taustenfeld@lib.drury.edu](mailto:taustenfeld@lib.drury.edu).

The conference will be held in Baltimore, Maryland, May 20-23, 1999. Information about hotel reservations will appear in the November issue of the society newsletter. The homepage of the American Literature Association can be found at <http://english.byu.edu/cronin/ala.htm>.

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## **Presidential Election Returns Report of the Secretary**

As a result of the election held in January by mail, Beth Alvarez has been elected to the presidency of the KAP Society. Ballots were received from twenty-five of the forty-one members in good standing, and the vote was unanimous in favor of Alvarez. I am happy to certify her election.

—Janis Stout



## The Last Word?

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of morbidity whatever, we discussed her funeral arrangements on several occasions. She charged me with making sure that those arrangements were carried out, but this was not to be a simple task, since she changed her mind more than once. First she wished to be buried in the coffin with her body wrapped in a winding sheet, although in her case it wasn't a winding sheet, it was a large Belgian linen bed sheet, which she kept folded in the coffin at its foot along with a pair of little embroidered white silk slippers. Later, she decided that she wanted to be cremated and her ashes scattered on running water. I don't recall that any particular running water was specified, but it didn't matter because she changed her mind again. She decided that she wanted to be cremated and buried next to her mother in the Indian Creek Cemetery. She said nothing about wanting her ashes buried in

the coffin, which, once she fixed her mind on cremation, seemed little more than a prop to amuse friends and intrigue journalists. One day, in an attempt to determine conclusively her final wishes, I brought up the subject as tactfully as I could while she was talking about her death, as she did more and more often. It was a mistake. She flew into show-stopping hysterics and accused me of being cruel and heartless and wanting her to die. . . .

As for burying the two or three handfuls of her ashes in an absurdly outsized wooden coffin that would soon molder into dust and probably crater the soil that covered it, the idea never occurred to me and would have struck me as preposterous if it had. I agree with Clark Dobson that it was not terribly important whether she was buried in the coffin or not. I can't help thinking that Aunt Katherine, if she were somehow able to express an opinion, would say that it delights her to have the coffin just where it is today, in the Katherine Anne Porter Room, getting all this attention!