

## **ELIZABETH MILLER WATKINS' BIOGRAPHY**

A garden gate intentionally left ajar speaks volumes about the woman many in Lawrence referred to as Lady Bountiful. From the sun porch of the Outlook, her grand home atop Mount Oread, Elizabeth Miller Watkins watched KU students trudge up the hill to their classes. If they could cut through her yard, the older woman thought, their journey would be easier. Most students marching past the spacious white home and grounds probably thought little of its mistress, and most likely never realized that the open gate was her simple gesture of encouragement. For then as now, Mrs. Watkins was an anomaly and more than a little unconventional. If Lawrence citizens thought her an exceptional woman—and she certainly was—they also certainly saw her as a striking, sometimes scandalous exception to traditional womanhood.

In the late 1800s, Elizabeth was among the first of her generation to work outside the home in a white-collar job. She not only entered the workforce as a teenager, but she also pursued a business career and eventually managed assets worth millions.

At a time when respectable, unmarried women traveled only with chaperones, she traveled extensively either alone or with her employer—a man 16 years her senior. When middle-class women were expected to become wives and mothers, she remained single until the age of 47. Though she never earned a high school diploma, she believed deeply in education for women and devotedly supported the University of Kansas.

She may have earned only \$50 a month as a secretary, yet in her lifetime she gave away a fortune. Her name embellishes several buildings at KU and in Lawrence -- Watkins Hall, Miller Hall, Watkins Health Center, and Watkins Community Museum of History -- but few people today can tell you much about “Lizzie Jo” Miller.

Born in New Paris, Ohio, in 1861, she was 11 when her physician father moved his family to Lawrence. It is said the young Elizabeth looked up to University Hall—later known as Old Fraser—and dreamed of the day when she would attend classes on “the Hill.” By age 15, however, she left school to help support her family. The gate to her college career was closed.

Her first and only employer was the Watkins Land and Mortgage Co., located in Lawrence at the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> and Massachusetts streets. She started as a secretary around 1875; in 1909 she married the boss, Jabez Bunting Watkins, considered to be one of the richest men in the West.

Banking, railroads and real estate built J.B.’s empire; and when he died in 1921, his widow inherited an estate valued at \$2.4 million. Assets included five Louisiana corporations, 200 Kansas corporations, more than 200 Kansas farms, and about 100,000 acres in Texas and Louisiana. She was, without a doubt, a wealthy woman.

She also showed herself to be an astute business woman. When she died, almost 20 years after J.B., her estate had maintained its value. Neither the Great Depression nor years of generosity had diminished her inheritance. Her savvy and philanthropy, however, forever changed a university and the lives of hundreds of students.

J.B. and Elizabeth had privately supported students for years. They believed not in giving handouts, but in offering opportunity. In 1926, Elizabeth acted on her “hand up” philosophy when she devised a novel approach to helping young women students through college. Just up the street from the Outlook, she built Watkins Scholarship Hall. Believed to be the first such housing arrangement for women students in the nation, Watkins Hall enabled women to live cooperatively and thereby cut expenses. In 1936 she funded Miller Hall, which was tucked between the Outlook and Watkins Hall.

Some described her as tall, gracious and white-haired. Some Watkins Hall girls remembered her as dignified, kind, down-to-earth, but a bit austere. To most everyone, however, Elizabeth remains a mystery. Her generosity may reveal her heart, but those interested in Elizabeth the person have few clues to go on.

The local newspaper documents that she was a member of the Ingleside Book Club and a staunch Democrat who hosted Eleanor Roosevelt at the Outlook. She was chauffeured in a long 16-cylinder Cadillac sedan, driven by young men who were attending KU. Folklore says she often directed her driver to stop and pick up weary pedestrians. She is said to have loved almonds, and chocolate and vanilla ice cream. A few years before her death, an article in a Wellington, Kan., newspaper described her as both beloved and benign, a woman with “...a rare sense of humor which endears her to everyone...”

Elizabeth died in June 1939. Among her pallbearers were two of the town’s most influential men—Dolph Simon, newspaper publisher, and A.B. Weaver, department store entrepreneur. Newspaper comments attest to the respect she had earned in her community.

Her last will and testament affirms her ongoing altruism and her keen sense of investments and provides the most personal look at the people and causes that mattered most to her. The will lists more than 80 people—friends, family, employees or those she simply wished to help—who were to receive anywhere from \$10,000 to \$500 each. For some she established trusts so that they might enjoy a yearly income. Her costly personal items—ermine capes, diamonds, good jewelry, decorative art and fine furniture—were set aside for special people.

She remembered in her will such diverse not-for-profits as Lawrence Memorial Hospital, the First Presbyterian Church of Lawrence, the Presbyterian Tuberculosis Sanitarium in New Mexico, Father Flanagan’s Home for Homeless Boys in Nebraska, and Bethel College in Newton, Kan.

But the bulk of her estate went to KU. Her home, including some of its finer furnishings, she gave as a residence for KU’s chancellors. She set aside two trusts: \$250,000 for the perpetual upkeep of Watkins and Miller halls and \$175,000 for the continual improvement of Watkins Memorial Hospital, which served the students.

To the Kansas University Endowment Association she left her Kansas real estate holdings—25,000 acres. At the time, her gift was the largest ever given for the benefit of a state university, and it formed the basis of an unrestricted fund that continues to support KU and the Endowment Association. Over the years, income from that fund has put Elizabeth’s fingerprints all over KU.

When he guided the KU Endowment Association, Irvin E. Youngberg noted that KU had benefited from a variety of people. But, he said, “The benefactions of Mrs. Elizabeth M. Watkins probably have done

more to make the University of Kansas what it is now than the efforts or benefactions of any other one person.”

Land purchases funded by her bequest have doubled the campuses both in Lawrence and at the KU Medical Center in Kansas City, Kan. The Westminster chimes that ring out from the campanile, professorships and fellowships, research grants, and Danforth Chapel—the site of many KU weddings—resulted from her farsighted generosity. In 1953, a portion of the fund established Elizabeth M. Watkins Scholarships to encourage excellent academic performance for young Kansas women who, like the young Elizabeth Miller before them, dream of going to school on “the Hill.”

KU Chancellor E.H. Lindley called her the town’s “greatest benefactress,” and she certainly was. But she is far more than simply a great philanthropist. She was and still is a great role model for and an ongoing supporter of young women.

For Steve Jansen, former director of the Watkins Community Museum of History located in J.B.’s office building, the most striking testament to Elizabeth comes from a photo taken in the 1980s. It captures Watkins Hall alumnae as they celebrate the hall’s 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. They “are marching down the street with a placard saying ‘Thank you, Elizabeth Miller Watkins.’ “That” says Jansen, “really says it all for me about the effect she had on so many lives.”

One of Elizabeth’s scrapbooks holds a telling suggestion of the standards she set for herself. Pasted into the front page is an excerpt from a Methodist hymn, “My Creed.” Above the excerpt she wrote, “My Creed, Also,” for the ideals of the verse spoke to her:

I will be true for there are those who trust me.  
I will be pure for there are those who care.  
I will be strong for there is much to suffer.  
I will be brave for there is much to dare.  
I will be friend to all, the foe, the friendless.  
I will be giving and forget the gift.  
I will be humble, for I know my weakness.  
I will look up and love and laugh and lift.

Elizabeth Watkins most certainly did lift. She lifted the latch to the Outlook’s gate and with her generous heart she lifted up the lives of hundreds of young women who flourished in her scholarship halls. Today her gifts continue to grow not only a university, but also possibilities for deserving young women determined to walk up “the Hill,” through her gate of opportunity and into their futures.

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