

Clyde Griffen 1929-2015

Memorial Minute

Clyde Griffen joined the Vassar faculty as an instructor in 1957. He was at the time completing his Ph.D degree in American History from Columbia University, where he had also earned an M.A. Clyde certainly had no idea that the first year would turn into a career at Vassar, spanning decades. Born in 1929 in Sioux City Iowa, he was raised in the Hawkeye State and obtained his BA at the University of Iowa. Moving east, Clyde brought with him a style of openness and warmth that many associate with the great Midwest. He often spoke positively about the sense of community in his hometown. But he loved living on the east coast and he never thought about returning to his home region.

How lucky for Vassar that he decided to stay. Clyde made a difference to the life of this College in so many ways. In the mid-1960s, he served as Dean of Freshmen. A strong proponent of coeducation, Clyde was a member of the Vassar-Yale Study staff, and he co-authored the Report on the Education of Men at Vassar. Later, he served as Chair of the History Department and on FASC.

In 1975, Clyde was appointed the Lucy Maynard Salmon Professor in History, a fitting honor for a master teacher. He was devoted to Salmon's approach of engaging students with primary sources, and helping students see the connections between the subjects they were studying and the communities—local, national, and international—in which they lived. Clyde wrote in 1982 about the teaching traditions at Vassar: “See for yourselves’ could easily stand, in my view, as the most important message which all of the [great teachers] gave their students. The common dedication was to one aim of helping their students become active, independent, and resourceful learners.” Like Salmon, Clyde looked to other disciplines, whether in the humanities or social sciences, to help answer historical questions. No wonder then, that he was critical to the development of Vassar's American Culture Program as a true multidisciplinary enterprise. He was active in the Urban Studies Program and supported Women's Studies as well.

Clyde was also an innovative scholar. Sixty years after Salmon introduced students to social history, Clyde was among a group of nationally recognized historians

building a new field of social and urban history. In 1978 he and Sally Griffen published their study of occupational mobility in nineteenth century Poughkeepsie, *Natives and Newcomers*. Turning to other new fields, Clyde in 1990 co-edited a collection of important articles on the meanings of masculinity in nineteenth century America. Later, he returned to the study of Dutchess County, co-authoring a book with Vassar colleague Harvey Flad in 2010, *From Main Street to Main Frames*. Among his honors, Clyde received a Fulbright Fellowship, several NEH grants, and a National Science Foundation Grant.

Throughout his many years here, Clyde was always eager to learn from his younger colleagues, to read our manuscripts, and to share his work with us. Just as he supported new faculty while he was an active member of our department, so, too, he embraced the changes that came after he retired. Clyde was never that retired colleague-- or, dare I say it, that maturing faculty member-- who talked often about how much better things were in my day.” On the contrary. He often mentioned how glad he was to see a group of young scholars in Swift Hall, doing new kinds of history, a history department with a far more diverse faculty than ever before. He eagerly spent time with the new faculty, asking them about their work with the enthusiasm and intensity that we all knew so well.

Clyde, along with his beloved Sally, whom he married in 1959, raised their three children, John, Rob, and Sarah, on the Vassar campus, first as House Fellows and then on MacCracken Lane. They had a large group of friends and their circle widened as they reached out to newer colleagues and their families.

Clyde was warm, and generous, and direct—you knew where he stood—when he agreed with you and when he did not. When he went to bat for you, or for a cause that he cared about, it was 100 percent. He loved Vassar; he cared about faculty governance, about social justice on campus and off. During retirement, he and Sally, formerly Vassar’s Director of Field Work, remained an important presence at Vassar and in the wider Dutchess County community. They also traveled widely, and spent summers in their beautiful Adirondack home, where swimming, hiking, entertaining and volunteer work filled their days.

In 2007 the Griffens moved to the Collington Life Care Community near Washington DC, where, not surprisingly, they threw themselves into the life of that community, making many new friends. Sally's death in 2010 was very hard on Clyde. But he carried on with that vigorous spirit, visiting and traveling with his three children, his two daughters-in-law and his six grandchildren. He returned to Poughkeepsie, several times, to visit with his many friends until his failing health prevented him from traveling. Clyde Griffen died at his home in Collington on March 5, 2015. His vitality made him such a presence for so many years; we will always remember him.

Respectfully submitted,

Miriam Cohen

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