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Gifts & Grants

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Lengthening the Legacy

Farnham family matriarch puts it in writing

By Kevin Cool

When Margaret "Peg" Farnham '28 first came to Colby 75 Septembers ago from tiny Monson, Maine, she was 16 years old, nervous and broke. Her tuition bill was paid by a family friend, Dr. Shailer Mathews, Class of 1884, who apparently knew a good investment when he saw one.

Three of Farnham's five children attended Colby. Three of their children attended Colby. Chances are good Farnham's great-grandchildren will attend Colby, too. But if persuading three generations of family members to lengthen the family legacy at her alma mater weren't enough, Farnham this summer donated \$100,000 toward the Writers' Center, which Colby renamed in her honor.

That the Farnham name has been immortalized on campus seems particularly pleasing to the 91-year-old matriarch whose life has included both withering heartache and overwhelming joy.

She married Alden Sprague '29 in 1930. Seven months later, pregnant with her first child, Farnham watched her husband grow gravely ill and die from septic poisoning. Alden Jr. '53 was delivered six months later. "It was tragic, but we were able to get through it," Farnham said.

She taught Latin at North Anson Academy, the first of several teaching jobs in Maine high schools. She later taught for eight years at Husson College in Bangor. In 1938 she married Roderick Farnham '31, a Colby



Margaret "Peg" Farnham accepts the congratulations of President Bill Cotter at the Writers' Center dedication.

acquaintance of her first husband. They had four children, Patricia (Russell) '62, Ewen, Jane (Rabeni) '66 and Barbara (Briggs). Rod Farnham, who died in 1995, was proud of his Colby association, and her contribution to the Writers' Center was as much about him, Peg says, as about her.

Farnham and her family remain closely tied to the land of their ancestors in the rolling hill country around Monson. Still an avid canoeist, Farnham plies the waters of the lake near the camp where the family has summered for more than 50 years, and in winter she dons cross country skis. Only recently she gave up hunting. She also is an accomplished painter and often uses the native slate of Monson as a medium for her work. Her favorite painting is of a log cabin, destroyed by fire, that sat in a

nearby meadow overlooking the expansive forest. She was born there in 1907.

Farnham joked that a casual observer might look around her Monson camp, a 50-year-old rustic building whose age is beginning to show, and wonder whether she was wise to make a large gift to Colby. "They might think, 'Why don't you put some money into this place,'" she said, laughing.

Colby, she says, provided her first look at the wider world. "So many wonderful memories," she said recently as she sat rocking on the porch at the camp. "I remember how thrilling it was to participate in the march to City Hall for commencement. I enjoyed graduation weekend so much that I went back for the next couple of years and waited because, you know, it cost five dollars to

go to the [graduation] dinner."

Farnham's love for Colby runs deep. "Colby gave as much pleasure to Mom and Dad as anything. My sister Barbara always said that next to Colby, came us," said daughter Pat Russell. "We're happy she was able to make this gift to the College because it made her happy."

"I was so thrilled," on the day the Farnham Center was dedicated, Farnham said. "What meant so much to me was that my family was all there with me. I wondered whether anybody would show up, but they were all there, all but one."

The gift provides a "sense of permanence" for a program that for years fought the stigma of being a remedial center, says Writers' Center director Jean Sanborn. "The gift is an affirmation of the work we're doing," she said. "This is not a 'fix-it' shop. There is serious writing going on here."

The Farnham Writers' Center is one of the most popular sites on campus, annually attracting hundreds of students ranging from first-year hoping to solidify their skills to seniors who are completing application essays for prestigious fellowships. The 16 student tutors at the center often go on to careers in which good writing is crucial. One of those tutors, former assistant director Margaret Russell '94, is Farnham's granddaughter.

"I'm so happy that the family name is there [on a Colby building]," Farnham said. "It's the whole family, not just me." ♦

SCOTT DAVIS