

Looking Back #17

Mary Feindt, Charlevoix's Legendary Surveyor

by David L. Miles, Curator
Museum at Harsha House
Charlevoix Historical Society

In observance of National Women's History Month, this edition of Looking Back will look back at the life and times of Mary Bastian Feindt, Charlevoix's legendary surveyor who fearlessly broke ground in what had always been a man's field to become the first registered woman surveyor in Michigan and a beacon of encouragement to scientifically-minded women nationwide. She did much work with and for Charlevoix's equally legendary figure Earl Young, a realtor who built our famed "mushroom" stone structures that have become known worldwide. Much of the following is from his (slightly edited) memoirs, in quotes, in which he devoted an entire chapter to his longtime friend. It is interspersed with nuggets of information gleaned from newspaper articles plus her obituary. Mary Feindt was truly an exemplar of the term "women's history," because she was an inspiring first of her kind who, in her way, wrote the book on how it could be done.



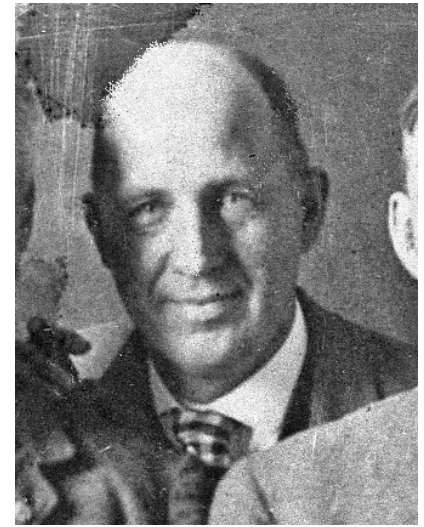
Mary Feindt, demonstrating what she did best on a winter's day near Round Lake. The photo was used for an article about her in the *Grand Rapids Herald*, February, 1947.



Robert Fielding Sloan



Archibald Buttars



Darwin "Dar" Meech

"One of the oldest businesses or professions on Bridge Street, the Charlevoix Abstract and Engineering Company, was formed by Robert Fielding Sloan, a civil engineer from Tennessee, local merchant and banker Archibald Buttars, and county official/public administrator Darwin Meech in 1916. It is most fortunate for Charlevoix, as county seat all down through the years, that the office has had a competent civil engineer and/or land surveyor. [Sloan arrived in Charlevoix in 1910.]

"Miss Mary Bastian came from the University of Michigan School of Engineering after graduating, and gained the required experience under a registered surveyor until she became permanently associated with Charlevoix Abstract and Engineering. She served a four-year apprenticeship as surveyor with Robert Sloan. Mary purchased the business, which today is recognized in the United States as outstanding, with a reputation that is second to none for professional surveying and abstract work. A visit to the office, with its unusual equipment, gives one confidence in such an important profession that is most valuable.

"Mary made good her invasion of the man's world by winning a series of battles. First, she had to convince her parents, then her professors and the world at large. It all began when she was a schoolgirl in her hometown of Albion, Michigan and had a fondness for mathematics. It was then she decided to be an engineer. In trying to end this nonsense, her father got her a job with a surveyor friend to convince her this was not a field for women, but it only encouraged her to go ahead with her plans. She went on to the University of Michigan to be the only girl to graduate in a class of over 200 engineers. Once the boys in the class realized she was there to work, they accepted this auburn-haired girl as a fellow student. By special permission, she attended the University's surveying camp at Jackson, Wyoming. Professors there also were skeptical, but one of them who did not approve of women in the engineering school got her first job for her after graduation. Mary's studies in college included geodesy, the science which takes into account, among other things, the curvature of the earth's surface in surveying. She graduated from the University of Michigan in 1938 with a degree of Bachelor of Science in Engineering, received her surveyor's license in 1942, and in 1944 received a Master's Degree in Civil Engineering.

"A big decision confronted her in April, 1942 when, on the day before she planned to marry Lawrence Feindt, a telegram arrived offering her a job with the Tennessee Valley Authority project, one of her pet dreams. She gave up TVA, however, without too great a struggle and she and her husband now operate the abstract office, which they bought in 1944 from Sloan. Lawrence, who originally was a marine engineer, is now a most competent part of the Charlevoix Abstract and Engineering organization. Born into this environment, their son Larry, growing up in an abstract and surveyor's office, could not but follow any other cause from boyhood. In the spring of 1972, he too graduated from the School of Engineering at the University of Michigan. Larry's bride [Faye] of a few months is also studying engineering.

"Mary's only womanly concession to the job is to allow her male helpers to cut the underbrush, but she carries the transit and levels all the time. For many years, she has served as Charlevoix County surveyor and has been re-appointed city surveyor continuously by Charlevoix mayors. Her membership certificates in a string of state and national engineering societies cover a major portion of a wall in the office. As a member of the American Society of Civil Engineers, Mary is one of twenty-six women in a total national membership of 21,089, the only woman registered surveyor in Michigan."



213 Bridge Street, taken by Earl Young in summer, 1934, before the Charlevoix Abstract & Engineering Company moved to this location from across the street at the Clinton Street corner. CA&E would remain here through its name change to Advanced Geomatics in 1995.

“Chief among the difficulties of surveying, Mary finds, is the rough terrain over which she and her assistants must run lines; crusty farmers who won't allow anyone on their land and nourish a particular dislike for surveyors; and the sometimes exasperating task of trying to find lines run in the 1870s by government engineers who first surveyed the uncharted wilderness of northern Michigan. Those old lines must be followed absolutely in making new surveys, and since the old markers were often trees which have vanished, stakes which have become covered with earth, or fences which have rotted away, the hardest job in a survey sometimes is to find the point of beginning and locate the corner markers. Early surveyors used the compass, which did not always produce accurate lines. Today all is done with angles. The effect of temperature and the curvature of the earth creates problems for accurate measurement of land. Today, it is only possible to have an error of about one foot in every 10,000 feet.

“Charlevoix County, the City of Charlevoix, and the real estate profession appreciate the services rendered by such a competent office. With the unusual past of the office and the bright prospects of the future, it is well for the survey and title future of Charlevoix to be in the hands of the Charlevoix Abstract and Engineering Company.” A few of Mary Feindt's accolades are listed on her lifetime achievement award, following page.



Facts, stories, and quotes from Mary Feindt's life:

- She was honored at a dinner at the White House
 - “When I was a child, I was taught two lessons, one was to have no fear. The other was that I could accomplish whatever I was striving for if I worked hard enough. Those lessons dad taught me always carried me through.”
 - She was one of nine commissioners representing the United States in the Federation of International Surveyors.
 - The modernized name change of the business in 1995, Advanced Geomatics, she said was a simple combination of “Geo-” for “earth” and “-matics” for “measuring.”
 - She guest lectured across the USA and overseas.
-
- “When I graduated from college, nobody wanted to hire me because I was a woman. The men just didn't know what to do with us. My college professor talked the Sloans into hiring me. I was the only woman surveyor in Michigan for thirty-five years.”
 - She was awarded an honorary Doctorate Degree in Science and Industry from Michigan's Ferris State University in 1999.
 - The city of Charlevoix declared “Mary Feindt Day” to commemorate fifty years of service in 1994, and Mary received the Outstanding Citizen Award from the Charlevoix Chamber of Commerce, twenty days before she died, on January 9, 2003.
 - “At the University of Michigan, she was the only woman in the dormitory studying civil engineering. To enable Mary to fit in with the guys, her father offered smoking instructions.”
 - Her granddaughter, Amy Zeitler, attended college, studying also to be a surveyor, on a scholarship named for her grandmother. She heard Mary's name spoken frequently.



MARY C. FEINDT, P.S.
License 3920
1916-2003

*First licensed as a Surveyor in 1942,
her career included being continuously elected
Charlevoix County Surveyor since 1944;
The first Chairman of the U.S. Forum for Women in Surveying;
her service as a member of the MSPS Board;
her selection as Vice Chairman of the
State Survey and Remonumentation Commission;
her active leadership in both the American and
Michigan Land Title Associations;
her honorary membership in ACSM;
her membership in the MSPS since 1948
and her distinction as the only woman
Licensed as a Professional Surveyor in Michigan
from 1942 until 1983.*

**BECAUSE OF THESE MANY ACCOMPLISHMENTS, THE
MICHIGAN SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL SURVEYORS
PROUDLY PRESENTS THIS
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD**

Michigan Society of Professional Surveyors
Lifetime Achievement Award