

Elsie Frost McMurry

April 1, 1908 – July 25, 2007

Professor Emerita Elsie Frost McMurry died July 25, 2007 at age 99 in East Lansing, Michigan.

She was a graduate of Michigan State College (now Michigan State University) in 1931 with a minor in Fine Arts. She received a Master's degree from Columbia University in Related Arts with minor degrees in Fine Arts and Education in 1932.

After teaching sewing and art in the public schools of Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1938 she began teaching at Russell Sage College in Troy, New York while she continued her studies at Parsons School of Fine and Applied Arts, New York.

In 1942, she began her career at Cornell University, where she taught apparel design and history of costume, as well as directing graduate studies. She was also Curator of the Cornell Costume and Textile Collection from 1950 until her retirement in 1972. In this role, she became particularly interested in the historical development and cultural significance of apparel, and incorporated the collection in her teaching. She also organized two major exhibitions of historic dress at Cornell, one of which included a catalog.

Following her retirement, she undertook to organize the textile and costume collection at the DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County. This work included dating the objects closely enough to classify them by decade. This responsibility was ongoing through long-term membership on the Collections Committee and a six-year tenure on the Board of Trustees of the DeWitt Historical Society.

In 1982, with the support of a National Endowment for the Arts grant, she undertook a chronological photographic documentation of 30 nineteenth century women's dresses from the Cornell Costume and Textile Collection. This initial project eventually led to a more extensive study of dresses from this period, the focus of which was to develop a reference guide for collection curators and scholars that would assist in the more accurate dating of garments in collections, based on the physical dimensions of documented garments. This eventually led to a major publication, [American Dresses 1780-1900: Identification and Significance of 148 Extant Dresses](#). This large reference work was published in CD format in 2001, when Professor McMurry was 93 years

of age. The book has been cited as a valuable contribution to the study of the history of women's clothing because of its detailed comparative analysis of actual garments. It was unique in that instead of classification based on photographs or drawings of garments, it is based on physical examination of actual garments. Through a meticulous set of measurements and analysis of construction features, the researcher is given guidance in the examination of actual garments in order to fit them into a broader classification system. Cornell's Department of Fiber Science and Apparel Design intends to continue to make this important reference work available.

In 2002, Professor McMurry moved from Ithaca to East Lansing, Michigan to be near her niece. Her husband, Dr. Donald LeCrone McMurry, a scholar whose field was American Labor History, preceded her in death. Nieces, nephews and other members of her extended family survive her.

Charlotte Jirousek, Chairperson; Nancy Breen, Ann T. Lemley