

DONOR STORIES

EDNA, LAURA & IDA FLEMING*

“Fleming Sisters’ Fund”

Miss Edna M. Fleming born July 12, 1912, deceased January 19, 1991

Miss Laura M. Fleming born April 6, 1915, deceased October 31, 2005

Miss Ida E. Fleming born March 8, 1916, deceased June 3, 2007



LAURA AND IDA FLEMING

If you have lived in the Waterloo area for much of your life, chances are good that you will have known one of the Fleming sisters--your children or grandchildren may have attended one of the schools at which they taught, or you may have been lucky enough to have been a student in one of their classes. And if that is true, you would recognize the other two sisters in a heartbeat--no wonder students occasionally confused the sisters! Miss Edna, Miss Laura, and Miss Ida Fleming taught thousands of students in Waterloo and surrounding areas of Tama and

Benton Counties when education was Iowa's best product.



EDNA FLEMING

“We say ‘Enjoy, enjoy’ to all people who love life and care about time. Even when we were working hard we enjoyed what we were doing.”

~ Edna Fleming

The sisters and their three brothers were born to parents James T. and Annie Frey Fleming, formerly of the Dinsdale, Traer, and Dysart communities. The family farmed near Dinsdale, where the girls attended Dinsdale Consolidated High School; Edna graduated in 1929, Laura in 1932, and Ida in 1933. All three attended UNI

(formerly Iowa State Teachers' College), each graduating with a B. A. in elementary education. A love for travel and a belief in lifelong learning set the stage for their graduate studies at the University of Alaska, University of Hawaii, Central Missouri State College (now University) and UNI.

Collectively, Edna, Laura and Ida taught an astounding total of 123 years--99 of those years for the Waterloo Community Schools. In her 45 year teaching career, Edna, the first sister to teach, taught in five communities and seven different buildings. In Waterloo, she taught mainly social studies at Grant and Emerson Elementary schools, and Hoover Junior High. Edna was honored by the Waterloo Education Association as Teacher of the Year for 1974-75. She retired in 1976.

“People who care can make the difference.”

~ Laura Fleming

Laura, the next sister to enter teaching, began her 40 year career teaching first at rural schools in Benton County and then in LaPorte City. In 1944 she joined her sister Edna, teaching in the Waterloo Schools, which included positions at Longfellow and Irving Elementary schools where she also

taught social studies. Laura retired in 1978. She was a member of local, state and national education associations, a member of Gamma Theta Upsilon, and honorary geography organization and a life member of the Grout Museum.

After teaching briefly at rural schools in Benton County and Dysart Consolidated Schools, Ida joined her sisters as a social studies teacher in the Waterloo Schools in 1945 at Frances Grout Elementary, retiring in 1978.

“Each person has to pioneer and find out what is rewarding for them.”

~ Ida Fleming

As young women, their lives and lifestyles were influenced by the hardships of the economic depression in the ‘20’s and ‘30’s. Their struggles to get an education and earn degrees at I.S.T.C. lasted for a span of many years; Edna’s pursuit of a degree

lasted from 1929 to 1942 while she taught in rural schools during that time. To obtain her teaching certificate she worked for an uncle who resided south of Cedar Falls and she walked three miles each day for 24 weeks to college. Cost of her education then was \$96. “In the Depression adversity helped to make you strong, she explains, a thought which has guided her throughout her teaching career. “It was an economic necessity that I did not back out.” None of the sisters ever married; in the early days of teaching, the contracts were ‘void for wages if married.’ “We valued our independence,” according to Laura. “We were married to our jobs.”

“Our roots and ancestors were from Tama County where our great grandfather lay claim to land in 1854. Our extended family has produced many teachers from Tama County,” according to Edna. After her retirement, Edna pursued the discovery of her family’s genealogy and traveled frequently to the East Coast and then to England in search of more information about the family history. Just shortly before she died, Edna completed this huge project and copyrighted a 500 page book about the Fleming family from 1500-1987.

Extensive travel experiences were enjoyed by the three sisters and was reflected in the social studies classes the sisters taught for many years.

Ida retired in 1978, wishing to be available and helpful to her sisters. She and Edna shared a devotion to yard work, tidy flower beds, and nurturing the songbirds that visited their homes. The sisters have lived together since 1948, first at 830 Kimball Ave., then 413 Wilshire Ave., and most recently have moved to Friendship Village. Each home has been decorated with needlework lovingly crafted by the artistic Laura.

The Fleming sisters have been steadfast in their support of their church and more recently, for their community. “I tried to teach in a Christian-like way every day,” commented Edna to a Courier reporter. “The most momentous experiences in my life have been connected with religion.” If the job opportunities were open then, she believes she would have gone into religious work.

Ida and Laura are reflective about the different phases of their lives; their devotion as teachers was their commitment to humanity through the education of youth. Their love of nature and for extended travel buoyed their curiosity about their world and their roles in it. Pursuit of the family’s genealogy and handwork are additional interests that sustain the sisters in their retirement. A friend offered a description of the phase that now describes their lives: “yes, you can fly, but you have to shed your cocoon first.”

Philanthropy has been a principle and a practice that has guided each sister. Students in one of Miss Edna's social studies classes remember raising money to send surgical soap to Dr. Albert Schweitzer in Africa.

Ida and Laura arranged for a Fleming Sisters Fund within the Community Foundation to permanently benefit those causes about which they feel so strongly and have supported throughout their lives—education, religion, and the community they have loved will continue to be their priority. Now the memory and legacy of the Fleming Sisters will live on in this community forever!

**Historical vignette prepared by the Community Foundation of Northeast Iowa.*