

VIRGINIA BLACKWELL DOCKING:

A MOST VERSATILE FIRST LADY

by

Rita Pratt

A glass case in the lobby of the Kansas Historical Museum displays a collection of elegantly garbed dolls, all depicting the first ladies of Kansas. The miniature mannequins are dressed and coiffed in the manner of the inaugural finery of each woman represented. I look for, and locate, Virginia Blackwell Docking, 1957-1961, wearing white satin and net. The black hair is swept back from the pale forehead revealing a tiny widow's peak. Further down the case is Meredith Docking 1967-1975, blonde, also wearing white satin, with seed pearls. Both dolls wear long, white mittens. Meredith's eyes are open. Virginia's are downcast.

Nearly twenty years from the date of her husband, George's, first inauguration (he was the first democrat in the history of Kansas to win reelection as governor) I am about to meet Virginia Docking. I am nervous and feel vaguely apologetic to no one in particular as I approach the front door of her home in Topeka. A crisp November wind picks up the yellow leaves and swirls them across the brick walkway and around my ankles. I press the button beside the large, white door that almost sparkles in the bright fall sunshine and listen to the chimes echo dimly inside the house. Will a liveried butler answer the door? I wonder as I wait.

A petite, dark-haired woman opens the door. She is dressed in rose-colored slacks and a white silk blouse.

"Mrs. Docking?" I inquire.

"Yes. Do come in." She smiles as she opens the door wider, stepping backwards into the foyer as she speaks.

I introduce myself as I enter and grasp her extended hand. She leads the way into a glass-fronted room. The mid-morning sun streams in through the wall of glass warming the room and illuminating the rich tones of an enormous, oriental carpet. Against one wall is a chest with a bronze bust of her son, Robert, himself a four-term Kansas governor.

She was born in Columbus, Mississippi but grew up in Morehouse, Missouri where her father, Thomas Blackwell, was a merchant and mayor. Her mother, Annie Strong Duncan Blackwell, died when Virginia was only twelve and Virginia, herself yet a child, assumed the duties of caring for her seven-year old brother, William, and play-

ing hostess for her father, the mayor. One cannot help but speculate whether this early training in the traditional woman's role was responsible in creating the adult Virginia Docking.

"I don't remember too much about my mother," she says, "She spoke very southern. In fact, some people couldn't understand her. Here," as she hands me a sepia-toned picture, "Here is a picture of my mother and I. She sure did dress me up, don't you think?"

The dark areas in the picture have faded and the light areas have become yellowed with age. An elaborately dressed little girl stands beside a serious faced woman who is seated. I examine the small face haloed by the large brimmed bonnet.

"Can you tell me anything about your childhood, Mrs. Docking?" I ask as I hand back the picture.

"Well," she begins carefully, pursing her lips and pulling her eyebrows together in concentration,

"I liked school a lot... I guess, I liked school. I wanted to be a teacher. I went to Cape Girardeau Teachers' College for one winter and then went to Wichita University-- I guess it was called Fairmount in those days--for two winters. The reason I completed so early was that I went to summer school, too. I loved school. I just loved school... I had so much fun.

Then, I transferred to K.U. because I knew if I wanted to teach I would need a degree. So, I got my degree in education with a major in math."

Virginia Blackwell returned to Wichita to teach mathematics at Roosevelt Junior High for one semester before marrying George Docking.

I meet Mrs. Docking again early in January. During the intervening weeks I wondered how I wanted to present this biographical information. More than anything, I wanted to avoid a sterile listing of data-- information that could have been collected from newspapers, magazines and so on but that would no more convey to the reader the warmth and strength of the woman than if I said she is about 5'3" tall and her hair is black. After some experimenting, I decided to try using a block of dialogue interspersed with a block of description or documentation. I hoped that the result would be a lively, written montage of memorable events in her life presented from a subjective viewpoint.

It is a cold, gloomy day when my husband and I walk up to the large, white door. Virginia answers the doorbell. She is wearing a light blue pantsuit and is friendly and disarming in her apology that her hands are covered with dough and therefore is unable to shake hands. I introduce Ray, my husband, and we establish a time when he should return to pick me up after he has taken care of his research in the Historical Museum. Virginia invites me to join her in the kitchen where she is anxious to finish kneading the dough for rolls for a luncheon she is hostessing the next day. I follow her through the dining room where the table is already set in preparation for the following day. The dull patina of the silver goblets at each place contrasts with the icy refractions from the spreading chandelier above. I sit at the breakfast table while she finishes with the dough.

"My daughter-in-law made these rolls at Christmas and I've been dying to try out the recipe. I'll be through here in just a minute. Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

"Thank you, no. We had breakfast only a little while ago."

"All right, then," she says washing her hands and drying them on a small towel. "Let's go in the other room..." she starts to lead the way then turns to me, "You know, you should put down there," she says, indicating my notebook, "That I love to cook." She leans forward confidentially, "People tell me that they love to come to my house because I serve such good food." She chuckles.

We move to the glassed-in sun room but the sun is not shining today. The denuded branches of the trees outside dip and sway in the wind that sighs around the edges of the house.

"How did you meet your husband, Mrs. Docking?" I ask.

Her eyes sparkle. She looks past my shoulder as if she is watching an enactment visible only to herself. Perhaps she sees herself as she was fifty years ago. Young. Eager. Full of life. She speaks softly, her eyes still focused past me at the bleak wintery scene outside.

"I met him the first Sunday I was at K.U. I had been invited to the fraternity house by the president of the chapter for Sunday dinner... and that's how we met. Here... a friend of mine put these pictures together in a frame with our wedding invitation."

I take the gold frame she hands me. It has three separate windows containing a silver-printed wedding invitation, a snapshot of a young woman, and one of a young man.

"My husband was very, very handsome don't you think?"

Indeed! I am almost startled by the movie-star handsomeness

of the young George Docking: dark, wavy hair, serious eyes, strong chiseled features.

"My hair was marcelled then," she explains, "It was the style."

It frames her face in deep waves. I look intently at the calm young face that stares back at me through the glass. The lacy sleeves of her dress cling to smooth shoulders and rounded arms.

The Dockings were married in January of 1925. Their first son, Robert, was born in neighboring Kansas City, Missouri and five years later their second son, Dick, was born in Topeka.

Robert Docking, former governor of Kansas, in the tradition of his father and grandfather, is a banker in Arkansas City, Kansas. I interviewed him in the gracious, old bank building, Union National Bank, with the bevelled glass doors and copper-domed roof. Robert described his mother as attentive, interested: "she was there."

In response to my question about parental discipline and what values were stressed in the home. He responded that there was no "generation gap." While there were no curfews imposed, "She and Dad did kind of pitch it to you." Both parents were very strong in the work ethic.

Virginia describes herself as being religious and that religion is a very important part of her life. Robert says that religion was not imposed but that his parents believed that religion was based on love and compassion, not on fear. And, always, they were taught tolerance of religious differences.

When Robert was little he suffered from pyloric stenosis and had to drink goat's milk so the family kept a goat that was known by the highly original name of Nanny Goat. Nanny was kept at the fair grounds and was brought to the house to be milked. Once when Virginia was taking Nanny back in the car, along with the two boys, and a large English bull dog, called Lady, she ran into the back of another car and was mortified because of the goat.

And when the family moved from Topeka to Lawrence, until other quarters could be found for Nanny, she had to be tied in the front yard. "The neighbors must have wondered about us," chuckled Robert. "Toys, kids, goat..." To make matters even worse Lady scared a team of horses and chased them over into John Stutz' (a neighbor) yard where they trampled newly planted Japanese cherry trees.

She was already a grandmother when Virginia Docking became first lady of Kansas.

"Had your husband been active in politics before he ran for governor, Mrs. Docking?"

"No, not at all. This was his first elective office," she replies.

"Who contacted him?"

"About running, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Well," she answers, "The Democratic party... a delegation came to see him... but he didn't want to do it. He said that he couldn't leave the bank."

"How did you feel about it?"

"Well, I thought he'd make a good governor... he knew so much about government... and I just thought he was so smart, anyway..." she laughs softly, self-consciously.

Robert Docking confirmed that his father had been reluctant to run for office and that it was his mother and he who convinced his father to run. He said that his father believed strongly in soundness in government and that his father was probably one of the very few members from the banking establishment to come out in support of Roosevelt in 1932.

"Was the transition from private citizen to the governor's wife difficult... threatening... exciting...?"

"We were established in Lawrence. It was our home. But, even there we were very active. It was different, yes, but not bad. And, I want to say something important," she leans forward, speaking earnestly, "When we campaigned we never criticized the opposition. I could never belittle anyone."

Robert Docking said that his mother took to politics like a duck to water. "My mother," he said, "is the most socially graceful person I've ever met." He described her as having the capacity to adapt to any situation, and further, to enjoy it.

When she was campaigning for her husband Virginia would take one side of the street and George the other and they would work their way down, shaking hands, greeting people on the sidewalks. As a campaigner both for her husband and her son, Virginia was a force to be reckoned with, indeed. She criss-crossed the state many times over. She has been described as a catalyst within the Democratic Party, and has been credited with helping to hold the two-party system together in the state.¹

While discussing politics, Virginia becomes very animated. Her face glows. She pushes her chair back from the table and stands. "Come with me," she says, "I want you to see some things."

I follow her into a bedroom where one of the twin beds is spread with photographs and manila envelopes.

"They are planning to honor me at a dinner in March, so I'm having to pull all this stuff together. "But", she pushes her hair back revealing the celebrated widow's peak, "I'll have to clear all this off before tomorrow so people will have a place to put their coats," referring to her planned luncheon for the following day.

One wall of the room is lined with bookshelves. The opposite wall, the one that backs the twin beds, is covered with framed photographs of her sons, their wives and children. Only one of the Docking grandchildren is a girl.

She shows me a poignant photograph of the family at breakfast in the dining room at the governor's mansion. Red velvet drapes the tall French doors. The Docking sons with their wives and children are seated around the banquet-sized table under an ornate chandelier. Eggs rest in egg cups at each place. A portable high chair is strapped to one of the formal gold, brocade dining chairs and the governor is leaning forward attempting to feed the baby. Docking's mouth is puckered, unconsciously, into the shape he wishes his grandchild would assume.

Thinking that the governor's mansion properly belongs to the citizens of Kansas, with her customary friendliness and enthusiasm, Virginia opened it to the public. Not only was the mansion made available to groups for tours, or as a place to hold meetings, but everyone was invited to the inauguration as well. After standing hours in the reception line while thousands of her fellow Kansans filed by, Virginia stepped out of her shoes to rest her weary feet. Unbeknownst to her, Lt. Governor Hinkle spotted her shoes and kicked them out of reach. So, when she searched behind her with a furtive toe, the shoes were gone. She was teased, naturally, but enjoyed the joke as much as anyone.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen a small crisis had developed as the people continued to file through the mansion and, along about evening, a butler brought Mrs. Docking a note on a silver platter. Not having her glasses she asked the butler to read the note. He read: "We have only one gallon of punch left," Since the festivities were winding down by then they decided that the one gallon would be sufficient.

Virginia picks up several manila envelopes and a large white album from one of the twin beds spread with all the memorabilia and

we head back to the glassed-in room. We sit and I face the bleak scene outside. The bony branches of the trees claw ineffectually at the wind.

She opens the envelopes and shows me the contents. They are copies of personal letters to her husband and herself from President and Mrs. Kennedy. The originals are stored in a bank vault.

When JFK was campaigning in 1960 he and Ted Sorenson spent the night with the Dockings and apparently enjoyed the evening so much they all stayed up till 2 A.M. The next morning Virginia received a frantic call from Sorenson saying that Jack had left his tuxedo in the closet at the mansion, and would she "be good enough to put it on the next plane to Denver" where he would be needing it for an engagement at six o'clock that evening. There was a letter from JFK thanking the Dockings for their hospitality and a special thanks to Mrs. Docking for sending on his suit.

There was, also, a long, very informal, hand-written letter from Mrs. Kennedy who thanked Mrs. Docking for the unusual button bracelet she had made for Jackie saying "...it is seldom off my wrist... I don't have another piece of jewelry that goes with absolutely everything...I love it and treasure it... I will die if anything happened to it."

Later, Virginia shows me some of the bracelets. She crochets an elastic cuff to which she affixes buttons of all shapes. Some of the buttons are antiques that people send to her from around the country. When she visits someone she creates a bracelet for her hostess as a personal and very special "thank you."

She puts on her glasses and reads to me from Jackie's letter "...your husband has the look of the eagle in his eyes..." When I read that to George he said, "What is the look of the eagle, anyway? And, you know, I found out later that it is a real compliment. It's a French term."

She considered the Kennedys close friends. After her husband's second term as governor, he was appointed by Kennedy as a director of the Export-Import Bank in Washington D. C., where they lived from 1961 to 1964.

"Was it hard to adjust to being a private citizen again after being the first family of Kansas?"

"Well, we went to Washington...and...I missed my friends in Kansas but after two weeks I fell in love with Washington."

In the social whirl of Washington sometimes the Dockings received as many as five invitations for an evening.

"Naturally, we couldn't eat five times so we'd pick one to eat dinner and drop in on the others. We were invited several times to the White House," she continues, "Jackie and I related particularly well. She had been a journalist before she married Jack and when George was Governor I wrote that column, you know?"

"Yes, I know."

During her husband's two gubernatorial terms, Virginia Docking wrote a column that was carried by about one hundred newspapers throughout the state. It was a chatty, informal piece entitled, "From Our Home to Your Home." In it, she told anecdotes of life in the governor's mansion from finally having to replace a wornout, many-times-patched water heater to President Truman playing the piano after breakfast.

"When I started to write the column," she explains, "I said that I would try to keep politics out of it and when Mr. Truman ate with us I didn't want to make it a partisan thing and yet it was important enough to tell about. So, I researched in the library about how many Chief Executives had eaten at the mansion and got it that way."

A sample item reads:

"One gloomy afternoon, the electricity was off here in Topeka for about 40 minutes. A group of Brownies, who had come from Johnson County by train and been delivered at the mansion in four taxicabs, was finishing a tour. When we tried to get taxis to take them back to their train, we were told that the company was unable to contact its drivers because the power was off.

There were 20 children and adults and the time was getting short so we loaded them into the Governor's car, in our personal car and the cook's car and just managed to get them to the train on time.

Another group of Brownies from Topeka was overdue and we were wondering about it when we heard footsteps on the north porch. The children had been ringing the front door bell which, of course, did not ring. The mansion was without lights and they, too, were wondering."²

Referring back to the Trumans, she comments, "We were good friends of the Trumans. I corresponded with Bess for many years. She has one of my button bracelets. You know when you go to a ball game with someone and share a box you can't help but

become friendly."

She starts turning the pages of the large white album with little side comments:

"...this was with Mrs. Roosevelt...and here's one with Dean Acheson.... This was Dave Garroway from the old Today Show. He interviewed me as a representative of the governors' wives from the National Conference. This was taken at the mansion... it's an awful picture... this one I like. Oh, here's George being presented to Queen Elizabeth. Only forty couples were presented, among them were the Daleys..."

"It simply boggles my mind," I exclaim, "It's like a political 'Who's Who'."

"Oh, I hope you don't think I'm name dropping," she says earnestly, leaning forward to look into my face, "I know lots of people who are just plain folks."

Mrs. Docking belongs to several organizations. Some of them are: The National Federation of Press Women, American Pen Women, Daughters of the American Revolution, Daughters of 1812, Daughters of American Colonists, Kansas Authors' Club, P.E.O. She is also listed in Who's Who. In 1964 she was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention and has always been keenly interested in politics.

On March 11, 1978 my husband and I attended the Shawnee County Democratic Central Committee's testimonial dinner honoring Virginia Docking. The theme of the evening was, "Virginia: A Gift to Kansas" was shown highlighting the many and, oftentimes, spectacular happenings in her life.

Virginia, in a turquoise gown and wearing one of her famous button bracelets, was escorted to the head table by her sons, Robert and Dick. Introducing his mother, former Governor Robert Docking said,

"During my life I have been privileged to introduce several outstanding people--President Carter, Vice Presidents Mondale and Humphrey, Senators Bob and Ted Kennedy, outstanding Washington Day speakers and my father. There has never been an introduction I cherish more than the introduction I am privileged to make tonight..."³

Cables were read from Muriel Humphrey, Ted Kennedy and

President Carter, "As First Lady of Kansas you won the affection, respect and enduring friendship of your fellow citizens. . . . I want you to know that I, too, am proud not just of your achievements, but of your special closeness to the Carters. . . ." ⁴ read the President's message. All the state Democratic luminaries were present: Congresswoman Martha Keyes, Dr. Bill Roy and Attorney General Curt Schneider, among them.

Ray and I joined the line of some 450 well wishers waiting to greet Virginia personally. . . . I watched as she greeted each guest by name, pressing their hands and I began to understand the reason for her unprecedented popularity. She is warm, natural, unaffected by the pomp. As we approach she says to Robert, "Here's Rita."

"And this is Ray," she introduces Ray to her son, remembering his name after meeting him only once several months before. She is pleased and excited and thanks us both for coming.

As we leave I recall the last time I spoke with her on the telephone and she said, "You and I will always be friends now." I feel I am a friend. She has shared parts of her life with me.

George Docking died on January 20, 1964. He underwent abdominal surgery and apparently was making satisfactory progress until lung congestion set in. He died shortly after.

The caption under a newspaper photograph that appeared in The Wichita Eagle, January 23, 1964 reads, "Docking Family Returns." Virginia, dressed in black, is being escorted by the Kansas Adjutant General and her son, Dick, as the coffin bearing her husband is being carried up the front steps of the Kansas State House where he would lie in state in the rotunda for the remainder of the day.

Another captioned photograph, also from The Wichita Eagle, January 24, 1964 reads ". . . Trumans talk to Mrs. Docking after graveside services. . . ." The picture shows Virginia flanked by the former President and his wife.

Accompanied by her sons, Robert and Dick, Virginia flew back to Washington to close up the apartment where she and her husband had spent three years and she returned to Topeka to live. That the move to Topeka was a turning point in Kansas politics, as it contributed to the unprecedented four gubernatorial terms of Robert, is an opinion that was shared by many of the guests at the testimonial dinner.

"How did you cope with your widowhood, Mrs. Docking?"

"I kept busy. I joined everything I was invited to join. . . . I just kept busy. . . ." her voice trails, and she looks down as her fingers play with her glasses, crossing and uncrossing the bows.

Robert said that after his father died his mother could not sleep at night. She had been accustomed to sleeping with her head cradled on his arm and she just could not sleep alone.

"Mrs. Docking, tell me about the dolls in the Historical Museum. Were the dresses copies from the actual inaugural gowns?"

She seems surprised, pleased, that I have seen the dolls.

"Yes. Yes, they are," she replies, "Have you been up to the fourth floor?"

"No."

"Well, if you go there again, do go up," she urges, "My gown is on display there...just mine and Mrs. Carison's...we were measured for our foot size and so forth. They took our measurements to make the mannequins."

The next time I was in Topeka I visited the Historical Museum again and took the elevator to the fourth floor. I stood in front of the glass case and stared at the inanimate facsimile of the live, vibrant Virginia Docking that wears the white inaugural gown. The rows of sequins gleamed softly in the muted light. A small plaque reads: Virginia Blackwell Docking 1957-1961.

I was filled with a strange sadness. I turned quickly to leave and mumbled, "Excuse me," to a man in a grey suit who crossed my path.

NOTES

¹Clay Stauffer, "Kansans Honor Mrs. Docking's Work for State," The Topeka Capital-Journal, Topeka, Kansas, March 12, 1978, 1-2.

²Virginia Docking, "From Our Home to Your Home," Fredonia Daily Herald, Fredonia, Wilson County, Kansas, March 30, 1960, 5.

³Robert Docking, Introduction of Virginia Docking, Shawnee County Central Committee dinner, Topeka, Kansas, March 11, 1978.

⁴Jimmy Carter, Cable to Virginia Docking, Topeka, Kansas, The White House, Washington D.C., March 7, 1978.