

A History of Bessie May Allen, her Dolls, and Costumes



**Bessie May
Allen**

Bessie May Allen was born on May 3, 1882, in Postville, Iowa, the only child of an innkeeper and stagecoach agent. She received her Bachelor of Science and Master of Arts degrees at Columbia University in New York City and taught in a high school in Iowa, at a private girls' school in Ontario, Canada, and at the Illinois State Normal School before coming to Stevens Point Normal in 1913 to head the home economics department. She was dedicated to her job,

her department and the many organizations that she founded and in which she participated. In 1938 when the regents voted to curtail the home economics department, Allen defended the program. The decision was reversed the following year, mostly because of her efforts. Her influence and dedication to UWSP led to the naming of the Allen Residence Center in her honor in 1952.

Allen was innovative in her teaching style. Each student in one of her classes was given a doll to create a costume depicting an era that the student found appealing. Some students used fabric appropriate to the time period. Originally the dolls were designed so that their voluminous skirts, usually made of silk or some other translucent type of fabric, could be used as lampshades. The dolls were produced in Germany for a few years around 1924. After the university purchased the dolls, Allen altered them to suit her purpose. The wire devices that held the skirts away from the lamps were removed and the dolls were changed so they could sit on top of bottles. When Allen retired in 1952, the dolls also were retired.



Part of the Doll Collection
in the Founder's Room

They were stored in a trunk until a few years ago. Now some of the dolls can be seen on display in the Founders Room of Old Main.

In her will, Allen left to the university special costumes purchased by her during her travels. These costumes represent different cultures and periods from all over the world.



Bessie May Allen in front of Nelson Hall
1923