



- *Educator*
- *Scientist*

Sara Branham Matthews

1888–1962

Inducted 1992

Sara Branham was born in Oxford, Georgia, just outside Covington, in 1888. She was the child of a family ahead of its time in its belief in higher education for women. Her mother and grandmother were both graduates of Wesleyan College. Both of her grandfathers had taught at Wesleyan and spent most of their lives teaching at Emory at Oxford.

Young Sara Branham graduated from Wesleyan in 1907, but there was very little for her to do with a college diploma in those days except to go into public school teaching. For the next ten years, she taught science at girls' schools in Sparta, Decatur, and Atlanta. She developed a consuming interest in medical research, but she had the wisdom to realize how little she was prepared to make this her career.

Very few opportunities were open in the South or East for a woman with these interests, and she had no financial cushion to support her, so she turned to the West. Enrolling in the University of Colorado, she worked her way through as a lab assistant, earning a second Bachelor's degree in Chemistry and Biology. Little did anyone realize that the same university would be awarding her an honorary Doctorate of Science less than twenty years later.

With the pressure for manpower in World War I, she was enlisted to teach Bacteriology at the University of Colorado Medical School. This opened doors for her. A Ph.D. degree at the University of Chicago and a faculty position there; an important prize for bacteriological research; a faculty position at the University of Rochester, New York — these all followed quickly in the next ten years. Later she returned to Chicago to earn the MD degree. Then, when she was forty years old, came the appointment to the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. This appointment directed the rest of her life.

There, her greatest single accomplishment was to discover a successful treatment for the dreaded spinal meningitis. A new and untreatable form of this disease was sweeping eastward from the West coast. Sara

Branham was the first to isolate the meningococcus, the micro-organism that causes meningitis. She refined existing sera and, to supplement the serum, she turned to a newly discovered family of drugs, the sulfonamides. Sulfanilamide proved to be the answer, and later treatments of the illness still derive from her discovery. She found the cure for an "incurable" disease. Other accomplishments include anti-toxins for diphtheria, dysentery, and psittacosis, and the classification of all varieties of toxic micro-organisms.

"This was the war period, and most of the men went into the Army, the Navy, or the Air Force. ... I found myself teaching bacteriology in the medical school [University of Colorado]. When the war was over I was too deep in bacteriology to ever get out again."

– Sara Branham Matthews

The honors she received are too many to cite in full. She represented the United States at the first two international conferences on microbiology in the 1930's. Wesleyan College awarded her

its first Distinguished Service Award in 1950. Similar honors came from the University of Chicago and the University of Colorado. In 1959, she was named medical Woman of the Year by the American Women's medical Association. In all of this, she made frequent trips back to Georgia to encourage young people to pursue public health as a career.

Sara Branham kept her maiden name professionally, but in private life she was married to the late Philip S. Matthews. She died in 1962, and is buried at Covington. her life and work are a monument to the achievement of women in Medicine and Public Health.

Additional Resources

Willet Library
Wesleyan College
Macon, GA 31210
(800) 447-6610