

Biographical Sketch of Alma Swinton

Alma Williams Swinton was the granddaughter of William Uriah Benedict, pastor of the First Congregational Church of Vermontville, Michigan, succeeding the Reverend Sylvester Cochran, who came with the pioneers from Vermont. Born in Marshalltown, Iowa, January 28, 1879, Alma was the daughter of Dr. George and Sara Benedict Williams. When she was seven years old, she went with her mother to France. Not long after they arrived her father died suddenly, and she and her mother remained in Paris. While her mother studied art, Alma attended a private Catholic girls' school. There she had her first piano lessons and began a career which, she said, "paid big dividends in satisfaction, wider horizons, and valued friendships."

After four years in Paris, Alma and her mother returned to the United States to live in the village of Vermontville with Alma's Grandmother Benedict, and after the death of Mrs. Benedict they continued to live there in the old Benedict home. It was here in Vermontville that Alma experienced the escapades she tells of so vividly in Teen-Age Stories, and from her grandmother and mother heard again and again the tales of the pioneers that she relates in Tales My Mother Told.

At Olivet College, where Alma took two years preparatory work, she became engaged to Andrew Lester Swinton, a pre-medical student. They were married in 1900 after Alma had received her bachelor's degree from Wellesley College and "Lester" had finished medical school at the University of Michigan. In Teen-Age Stories Alma describes their wedding and departure for Ontonagon, a lumbering and copper-mining town in Upper Michigan where Dr. Swinton practiced medicine for eighteen years. Those years in a raw frontier region formed the basis of her book I Married a Doctor, published in 1965. Medicine was always to be an important part of her life. Her husband continued to practice in Marquette until he died at the age of 85; her elder son, Neil Williams Swinton, became a surgeon in Boston's Lahey Clinic, as did Neil's own son; her second son, Aubrey, who drowned in a canoeing accident in Lake Superior in 1932, planned to enter medical school that fall.

It was in Ontonagon that Alma gave her first piano lessons. She was the only accomplished pianist living in this frontier community. At the request of a neighbor who wanted her daughter to learn piano, Alma began her career as a dedicated music teacher that was to last over fifty years, in fact until a few weeks before her death.

At the close of World War I Alma and Lester moved to Marquette. There she began the lifelong pursuit of music education which made her a distinguished teacher. She acquired a certificate from the Bush Conservatory. As a young wife and mother she sought out the best teachers in the United States and later went to London, Paris, and Buenos Aires for more and more lessons. She never stopped learning. In Michigan she attended workshops at Ann Arbor and East Lansing, and she journeyed to Chicago for a workshop there. She completed a course in nineteenth century music at Northern Michigan University. At the age of eighty she won permanent certification as a teacher of piano after submitting a paper on the theory of teaching and appearing before a special board in Ann Arbor.