

University of Georgia horticulturist's life was rooted in faith

For a time Thomas H. McHatton was as rare a specimen as any exotic plant he studied during his long (1908-1950) tenure as teacher and head of the Horticulture Department at the University of Georgia. One of the first Catholic professors at the Athens school and the first head of its Horticulture Department, McHatton insisted on being baptized Catholic at the ripe old age of eight.



Rita H. DeLorme

Because his Protestant parents, Henry and Elizabeth Hubbard McHatton, did not object, he was conditionally baptized by a Jesuit priest in the private chapel of a Catholic friend of the family. Both of his parents eventually converted to Catholicism.

Born in 1883 in Brooklyn, New York, Thomas McHatton received his elementary education at Mount de Sales Academy in Macon and continued his studies at Saint Stanislaus College, Macon, where his father was school physician. He subsequently entered the Jesuit Spring Hill College in Mobile and graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree in 1903. McHatton later received a doctorate in science from Spring Hill for research work completed over a four-year period at Michigan State College of Agriculture in Lansing, Michigan. Reflecting his ties to the Society of Jesus, the title of McHatton's doctoral thesis was: "A Jesuit Education as Preparation for Further Scientific Study."

Further studies

The year, 1907, saw McHatton studying at Cornell University and specializing in Entomology and Botany. He began teaching at the University of Georgia in 1908 and, in 1910, matriculated at the post-graduate school of Agriculture at the University of Iowa. He was awarded the Master of Horticulture Degree by Michigan State in 1921. En route to these academic destinations, McHatton remained a full professor in the School of Agriculture at the University of Georgia. His personal life was also



Dr. Thomas H. McHatton

Photo from the Web site of the UGA Horticulture Endowment Fund. Used with permission.

on the upswing. On June 14, 1911, McHatton married Marie Lustrat, daughter of Professor Joseph Lustrat, head of the Romance Language Department at the University, in a ceremony performed by Bishop Benjamin J. Keiley of Savannah. Thomas and Marie McHatton had two daughters, one of whom, Eleanore, died in 1917 of complications following an attack of the measles. During World War I, McHatton served in the United States Army as captain of aircraft production in the U.S. Signal Corps.

Involvement in Church and community

Despite his busy life, Dr. McHatton found time for active involvement in the Catholic Church. A member of Saint Joseph's Parish, Athens, he joined the Catholic Laymen's Association at its inception, acted as President of the Athens area branch, and served on the state Executive Committee. Catholic charities also claimed some of his time. He was chairman of the board of directors of Saint Mary's Hospital and was for many years on the Board of Directors of Saint Joseph's Home for Boys. A member of several patriotic organizations, McHatton served as commander of the local post of the American Legion in Athens.

"Colonel" McHatton

Called back into active service in the Chemical Corps when World War II began, McHatton rose to the rank of colonel and, according to the University of Georgia's Horticulture Department Website, was thereafter addressed affectionately as "Colonel" by many of his students.

Impressed with the Catholic professor, Father Francis X. Clougherty, OSB, director of the Catholic Student Center at Georgia, sent a list of

Doctor McHatton's achievements to Auxiliary Bishop Francis E. Hyland. In an undated letter accompanying the professor's résumé, Father Clougherty wrote that he felt Dr. McHatton, an outstanding Catholic, deserved Church recognition. (Whether or not an award was forthcoming is undocumented.)

A December 23, 1950, article in *The Bulletin of the Catholic Laymen's Association* describes a dinner given earlier that month for Dr. McHatton on the occasion of his retirement. Speaking at this event, Donald W. Hastings, an Atlanta seed company executive and former student of McHatton delivered an address entitled "The Most Unforgettable Character I've ever met." Hastings noted in his speech that Dr. McHatton was one of "the small group of men who really made the College of Agriculture at the University of Georgia." Terming McHatton's lectures "unusual," Hastings said: "He encouraged us on every occasion. This teacher awakened our creative instincts."

In the face of prejudice

Dr. McHatton's surviving daughter, Marie McHatton Hanson-Miller, spoke of her father in a recent telephone interview, saying: "He was handsome and dashing," and adding that "Things were sometimes difficult for my parents in Athens because there was a certain amount of prejudice against Catholics." Mrs. Hanson-Miller says that as a student at Athen's Lucy Cobb Institute she was embarrassed by another girl's asking their history teacher: "Are Catholics Christians?" Laughing, Marie Hanson-Miller says, "Miss Suzie, our teacher, became furious. She was, literally, 'spitting mad' that this girl was so ignorant."

Dr. McHatton's daughter recalls that her father's office at the university was situated so that he could see the Oconee Hill Cemetery where his daughter, Eleanore, was buried. "My father was sentimental," Mrs. Hanson-Miller says. "When he died in 1956, he was buried there, too, in the Lustrat-McHatton lot."

The T.H. McHatton Horticulture Department Endowment Fund website (<http://www.uga.edu/hort/endowments/THMcHatton.htm>) currently lists many of Dr. McHatton's achievements, including the fact that "he was elected and served as President of the American Society for Horticultural Science (1930-31), the only Georgian to be so honored." Described by the same source as "an outstanding teacher, research scientist, horticulturalist and gentleman," Thomas McHatton, a convert at eight years of age, brought a new view of Catholics to the University of Georgia.

RITA H. DELORME is a volunteer in the Diocesan Archives.



TV Mass Schedule

Augusta Sundays, 10:00 a.m.	WAGT-TV
Macon Sundays, 5:30 p.m.	WGNN-TV
Savannah Saturdays, 6:00 p.m. Sundays, 6:00 a.m.	Cable 7 WTOC-TV

