

# Zaidee Elizabeth Creel Williams '24

## The Inspiration behind the Zaidee Creel Williams Lectureship

On December 30, 1894, Zaidee Elizabeth was born to Arabella McMullan and Benjamin F. Creel. The Creels lived on Strawberry Hill Farm in Advance Mill, Virginia, a little place north of Charlottesville. Benjamin was considerably older than Arabella—nearly twenty years—and provided for his family by scratching out a living as a farmer. In his younger days Benjamin had served in the Virginia Calvary during the Civil War.



The old Strawberry Hill homeplace in 1959, years after anyone had lived there.  
(photograph courtesy of Austin B. Creel)

Arabella and Benjamin had three older children: Mary Lee, Aubrey, and Benjamin Kemper. When Zaidee was 14, she moved with her parents and older brother (Mary Lee and Aubrey having already left home) to a different farm near Barboursville. The new place had a mill for grain and lumber, and it became known as the Mill Place.



Arabella M. and Benjamin F. Creel with two of their children, Benjamin Kemper and Zaidee, c. 1908.  
(photograph courtesy of Austin B. Creel)

In 1912 Zaidee moved to Lynchburg and entered the Preparatory Department at Virginia Christian College. (VCC was renamed Lynchburg College in 1919.) Secondary education was spotty at best in rural Virginia at this time, and many students wishing to attend college had to complete a preparatory program beforehand. In this way students who would otherwise be unprepared for college would have the necessary tools and skill to flourish in higher education. VCC's preparatory program took two years to complete, but after the first year Zaidee left Lynchburg and moved to Baltimore, where her older sister Mary Lee was living at the time.



Zaidee, Arabella McMullan, and Mary Lee Creel (seated, left to right) and Bertha Naff (standing) on a visit to the Fresh Air Farm in Baltimore in 1923. Like Zaidee, Bertha Naff would attend Lynchburg College. Later she would marry Zaidee and Mary Lee's brother, Benjamin Kemper Creel. Bertha and Benjamin would go on to have three children, including Austin B. Creel.

(photograph courtesy of Austin B. Creel)

Zaidee's reason for leaving has been lost in the passage of time, but in any case she returned in 1919, completed the preparatory program, and then entered the newly renamed Lynchburg College in 1920 as a member of the freshman class.

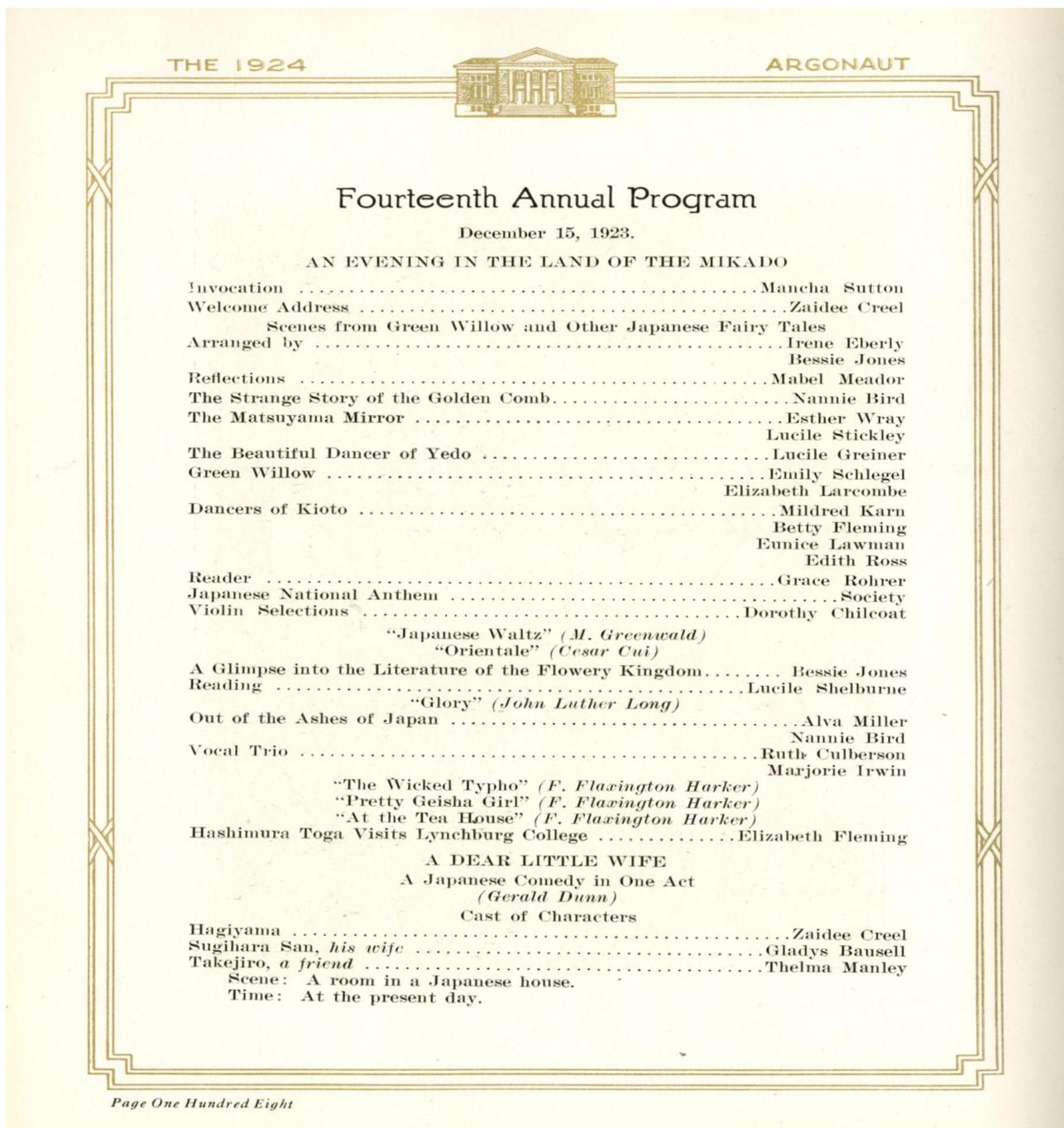


GIRLS' DORMITORY

Westover Hall was Zaidee's home during her time at Lynchburg College.

(photograph courtesy of the Lynchburg College Archives)

Today, social networking is in vogue; in the early 1920s, literary societies were the rage. There were several literary societies on campus. Everyone, it seemed, belonged to one of them. Zaidee belonged to the Urania Society. She was not only a member, but an officer—she served as president for two terms, as well as secretary and treasurer in other terms.



The Urania Society's 1923 program. Each literary society put together an annual production combining singing, recitation, and acting. As seen in the program, Zaidee offered the opening remarks and then returned later portraying one of the characters in a one-act play.

(photograph courtesy of the Lynchburg College Archives)

Zaidee was busy the entire time she was in college. She was involved in Student Government. In 1923 she was elected President of the YWCA Cabinet. Zaidee was a star on the varsity field hockey team—"the best all-round player on the team," in the words of the 1924 LC *Argonaut*. She also found time to work part time as the campus agent for Crutchfield Cleaners and Dyers before graduating in 1924 with an A.B. degree.



# Hockey

SEASON OF 1923

KATE ESTES .....*Captain*  
 IRENE K. EBERLY .....*Coach*  
 MILDRED HANKINS .....*Manager*

## The Team

Zaidee Creel .....Right Inside  
 Kate Estes .....Right Fullback  
 Elizabeth Fleming .....Center  
 Bessie Jones .....Left Halfback  
 Mildred Karn .....Left Inside  
 Renell Norton .....Left Wing

Nellie Summers ...Center Halfback  
 Myrtle Tuttle .....Left Fullback  
 Ruby Walton .....Goal  
 Louise Wells .....Right Wing  
 Lillian Williamson..Right Halfback



CAPTAIN ESTES

For three years this hard hitting back has been the surest tackler on the squad. Captain Estes, a fighting spirit that never acknowledges defeat.



CREEL

The best all-round player on the team. A fast dribbler, an accurate passer and one who has learned well the secret of teamwork.

Zaidee(on right) was a star on the hockey field. Kate Estes (on left) was Zaidee's cousin.  
 (photograph courtesy of the Lynchburg College Archives)



ZAIDEE ELIZABETH CREEL

Baltimore, Maryland

APPLICANT FOR A. B. DEGREE

*"Merit wins the soul."*

Most unfathomably quiet, splendid in scholarship, reserved in disposition, Zaidee has done almost everything in college from directing the Y. W. C. A. and Volunteer band, to serving as one of the brighter lights on the Varsity Hockey squad. Her aims and ideals are high as the stars, and her place of prominence in State and National Volunteer circles has sent her as delegate to both state and national conventions. After all, it will not be quite so bad to be heathen if all missionaries are of her type.

ACTIVITIES

National Council of Student Volunteers; President Y. M. C. A.; President, critic, public program four years, Urania Society; Executive Staff Virginia Volunteer Union, 1923; Leader Volunteer Group, '22; Honor Council, '23; Student Government Board, '21; Varsity Hockey Squad, two years.

Zaidee's senior yearbook portrait. Her interest in possibly serving as a missionary was well known to her classmates: "it would not be quite so bad to be a heathen if all missionaries are of her type."

(photograph courtesy of the Lynchburg College Archives)



Zaidee (left) with classmate Bessie Jones after graduation from Lynchburg College, May 1924. Like Zaidee, Bessie was a member of the Urania Society.  
(photograph courtesy of Austin B. Creel)



Zaidee's older sister Mary Lee (left) with their mother, Arabella McMullan Creel, on the campus of Lynchburg College, May 1924.  
(photograph courtesy of Austin B. Creel)

After graduation, Zaidee began teaching high school history, Latin, and algebra at War, West Virginia. But that wasn't all she was doing. At some point during this time she met and fell in love with Daniel C. Williams, a produce salesman from nearby Bluefield. He proposed, and in 1929 the two married. In 1932, less than three years after their wedding day, Daniel died in a car accident. A tire blew out on a narrow mountain road, hurling his vehicle down into a valley. They had no children. Zaidee, a widow at age 38, never remarried.



Zaidee and Daniel C. Williams, 1929  
(photographs courtesy of Austin B. Creel)

Zaidee had decided not to teach after her marriage, but with Daniel's death everything changed. The world had changed, too. "Let's Misbehave" had given way to "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" The Great Depression rolled over the United States, making 1932 an especially hard year to be a widow looking for work. But Zaidee persevered. In 1937 she found another teaching position. She taught all ages: elementary, middle school, and high school students. She also moved into administration, serving as a principal for four years.



Zaidee (standing) and Mary Lee share a roadside picnic in New England around 1940.  
(photograph courtesy Austin B. Creel)

In 1945 she moved to a different school, Rockfish Valley High School, where she taught history and political science. Ten years later she transferred to Nelson County High School. Along the way Zaidee became involved in theatre, and directed a number of plays (shades of the old Urania days!). She also coached basketball.



A portrait of Zaidee taken in the early 1950s.  
(photograph courtesy of Austin B. Creel)



Zaidee's garden behind the house on Alabama Avenue.  
(photograph courtesy of Austin B. Creel)



Zaidee (left) and Mary Lee on the front porch of the house on Alabama Avenue, September 1970.  
(photograph courtesy Austin B. Creel)

In 1960 Zaidee retired. Two years later she returned to Lynchburg, where she lived with her elder sister, Mary Lee, on Alabama Avenue. There Zaidee tended her cats and flower gardens. She resumed involvement with her alma mater, becoming active in the Pioneer Club, an alumni association. In 1982, several years after Mary Lee's death, Zaidee moved to Gainesville, Florida, to live with her nephew Austin Creel and his wife. Zaidee Creel Williams died on February 20, 1987. She was 92.

Austin Creel and his aunt had always been close. Austin remembers his Aunt Zaidee reading to him and his sister Ellen when they were small children. In response to the line, "Old Miss Muffett sat on a tuffet," she turned to Ellen and said, "You are Miss Muffett." To Austin she said, "And you can be tuffett." One of the children then replied, "You can be Puffett!" Thereafter Zaidee was known as "Puff" to Austin and as "Aunt Puff" to his children.

Austin's wife, like Zaidee, was a teacher. Both women shared many interests. The first time the two met was when Austin took his then fiancée to Charlottesville to meet Puff. They had lunch in town, then drove out to the Mill Place, the old Creel home place that was now owned by Zaidee. Later, Austin and his wife would come north in the summer and camp at the Mill Place. Puff would frequently join them, staying with a nearby cousin or at a local motel. In later years she would stay in the cottage that Austin built at the Mill Place, the old home place having fallen into ruin years earlier.



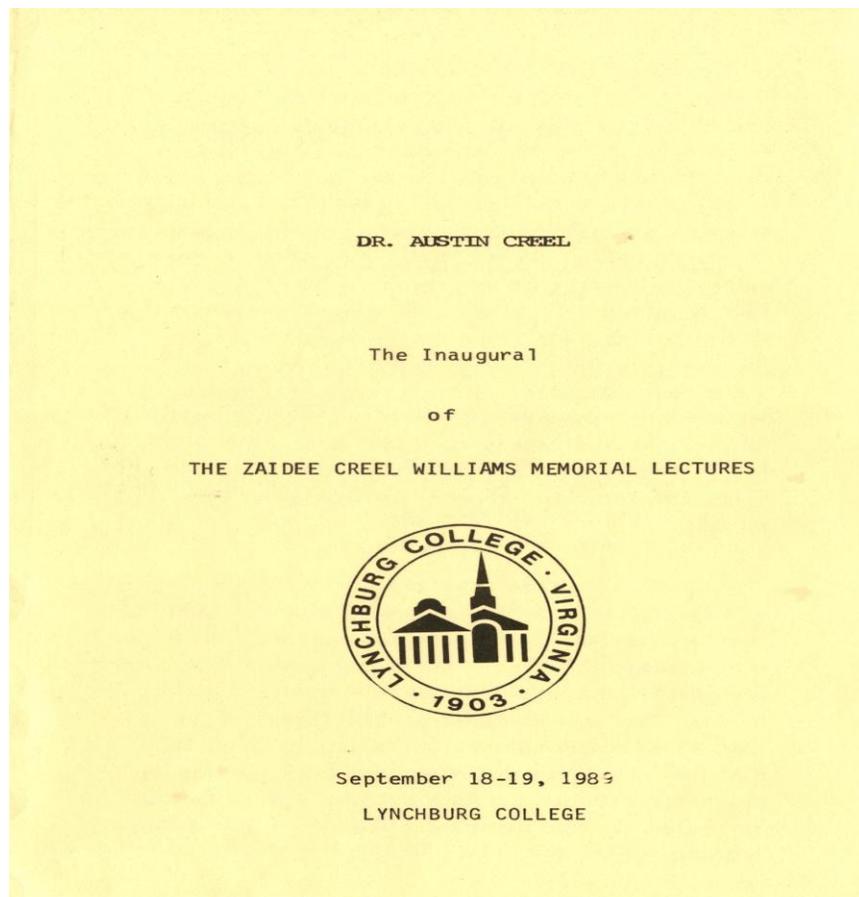
The cottage at the Mill Place, which Austin built in 1979.  
(photograph courtesy of Austin B. Creel)

After her death, Austin started to think of a suitable memorial to Puff. Religion was a common interest the two of them shared. Zaidee's grandfather, Benjamin K. Creel, was known as Parson Creel. He was originally a Baptist minister, but owing to an ecumenical moment (in 1859 he offered communion to two itinerant Disciples of Christ preachers), he was promptly expelled from Baptist ranks. Thus Zaidee was raised in the Disciples tradition. She took her religious faith seriously enough to consider becoming a missionary. While she chose ultimately not to follow that path, she retained a lifelong interest in all things relating to India.

India also figured into Austin's career plans. He wrote his dissertation in the area of Hindu ethics, and went on to have a long and distinguished career at the University of Florida. Among his many accomplishments, Austin founded the Asian Studies program at UF, sat on the board of the American Institute of Indian Studies, and served as chair of the Religion Department for thirteen years.

Austin had an interest in secondary education as well. In the 1980s he designed a series of summer institutes for secondary school teachers in Florida to provide academic background in religious studies for teaching courses on religion in public schools.

A fitting memorial to Zaidee Creel Williams, Lynchburg College alumna and lifelong educator, would be a lecture series focused on religious studies but aimed at the educated public. Thus in 1987 Austin and other members of the Creel family endowed the Zaidee Creel Williams lectureship, which from its inception has featured renowned scholars from all parts of the religious studies archipelago. Indeed, the inaugural Zaidee Creel Williams lecture was delivered by Austin himself in 1989.



Program cover for the Inaugural Zaidee Creel Williams Lecture, 1989  
(photograph courtesy of the Lynchburg College Archives)

The Zaidee Creel Williams lectureship continues to bring outstanding scholars and speakers to Lynchburg College and burnish the memory of an honorable alumna.

*Stephen Dawson*

Those interested in making a donation to the Zaidee Creel Williams Lectureship should contact Gene Frantz, Vice President for Planned Giving, in the Lynchburg College Office of Advancement. He can be reached at 434-544-8294 or [frantz@lynchburg.edu](mailto:frantz@lynchburg.edu).

I would like to offer special thanks to Austin Creel for sharing his memories of Zaidee Creel Williams as well as family photographs from his personal collection. I would also like to thank Ariel Myers for help and assistance in using the Lynchburg College archives, and Kathryn Creel Suarez for converting the Creel family photographs to electronic format. Inquiries about the Zaidee Creel Williams Lectureship can be directed to me at [dawson.s@lynchburg.edu](mailto:dawson.s@lynchburg.edu).