

Living history: a chat with College historian Daniels

Matthew Vassar
BEST FOUNDER EVER

Elizabeth "Betty" Daniels '41 has been the Vassar College historian since 1985. Her job runs the gamut from fielding inquiries from people who want to learn more about family members that attended the College, to compiling information about Vassar's academic and athletic departments, and everything in between. In addition, Daniels dedicates much of her time towards the development of the Vassar College Encyclopedia, an online work in progress that aims to preserve the College's history by presenting articles of varying length on diverse topics.

Born in Westport, Conn., Daniels moved to New York City halfway through her sophomore year in high school and enrolled in St. Agatha's, a private high school in Brooklyn.

While in high school, Daniels discovered a passion for English. One of her English teachers guided her towards choosing Vassar, and in 1937, Daniels arrived at the College. She recalls having attended a convocation lecture by then-Professor of English Helen Drusilla Lockwood, Class of 1912, who would become, according to Daniels, "one of the great women of the Vassar English Department." Daniels later enrolled in a class taught by Lockwood, and fondly remembers taking a seat in the front row and listening to the start of the day's discussion: "What is man?" In that class, Daniels recalled reading a series of poems by American poet Archibald MacLeish, articles in *The New York Times* and novels by Virginia Woolf. She continued to develop her interest in English, and still maintains her firm belief in the importance of writing and said, "At the time, I could see myself progressing." She ultimately declared an English major, and in 1941, graduated from Vassar and moved on to graduate studies at the University of Michigan, where she received a master's in American Literature.

In 1948, Daniels returned with her husband to Poughkeepsie, where the Vassar English Department offered her a job as a professor. For the next 38 years, she remained involved at Vassar in many ways; she was dean of freshman from 1954 to 1957, acted as dean of studies in 1965 and continued to teach in the English Department throughout. In 1985, under the presidency of Virginia Smith, Daniels applied for the position of Vassar College historian.

Daniels remembers widespread anxiety at Vassar during the turbulent period of the 1960s, specifically referring to the debate on whether to merge with Yale University. In November of 1967, then-President Alan Simpson announced the Board of Trustees' refusal

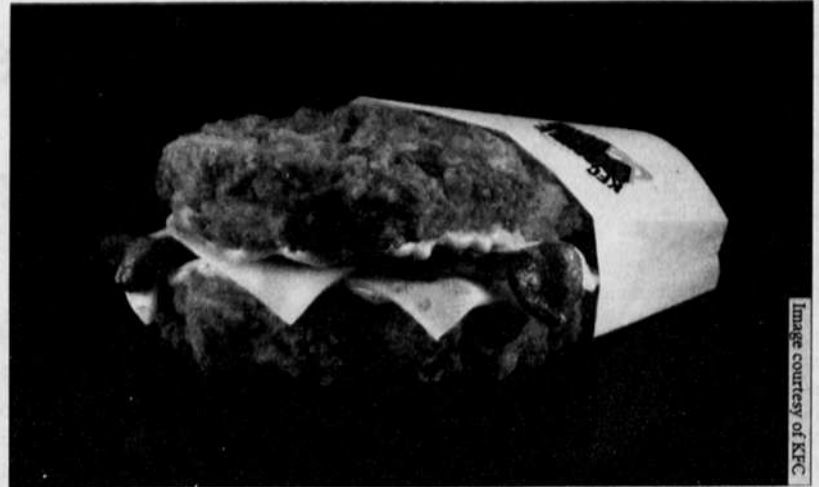
to merge with Yale. A year after Vassar's refusal, the Committee on New Dimensions, established in response to the Yale-Vassar collaboration and discussion of the previous year, formed a subcommittee—which Daniels chaired—to analyze the entire scope of Vassar's education. Says Daniels, "It was a time of great change. In fact, the present curriculum that the College has today is derived from that discussion." Finally, in 1969, the College began admitting, as Daniels described it, "handfuls of men," and became the first of the Seven Sisters colleges to become co-educational.

But one of the most interesting things about Daniels is her involvement with the Vassar College Encyclopedia. The inspiration for such an undertaking began when Daniels was dean of studies. Directly beneath the Dean of Studies Office, in the basement of Main Building, Daniels discovered what she describes as "boxes in various states of being, piled on top of one another, which contained student records dating back to the late 1860s and onwards, a copy of all the records of students that had ever applied for admission to Vassar."

Daniels had a great desire to preserve these records, which captured the vast history of the College and, with the help of student interns, began a process of cleaning out the basement. Daniels said, "I devoted a great deal of time during the next seven or eight years to getting these records out of the basement. I was digging for archival material." With Daniels's initiative, the College soon transferred half of the records to acid-free boxes in the Thompson Memorial Library and the other half onto microfilm.

Thus began the creation of the Vassar College Encyclopedia, which Daniels and Editor Colton Johnson, along with several student interns, have developed online as they continue to delve into campus history. The Encyclopedia has received support from Presidents Frances Daly Fergusson and Catharine Bond Hill and works in collaboration with the Special Collections Library and the College Relations Office. With the help of student interns, who, according to Daniels, "are what made the Encyclopedia possible," the Vassar Encyclopedia, although still in development, contains a range of material organized into general categories, comprised of texts like poems and novels by various authors that have graduated from Vassar, illustrations and many other forms of media.

Daniels has dedicated much of her life to Vassar, not only contributing to its development as an institution, but, more importantly, preserving that history for the future generations to come.



KFC's new sandwich, the KFC Double Down, skips the bread in favor of two pieces of chicken. Between these fried pieces are squeezed a couple pieces of cheese, a few strips of bacon and the "Colonel's Sauce."

No, this is why you're fat: KFC Double Down

Dan Combs
ASSISTANT FEATURES EDITOR

I'm sure you've heard of it by now; it's the greasy sensation that's sweeping the nation. I'm referring, of course, to the one, the only, the KFC Double Down. The sandwich, if you can even legitimately call it that, consists of two pieces of fried chicken between which are squeezed a couple pieces of Monterey and pepper jack cheese, a few strips of bacon and what KFC refers to as "The Colonel's Sauce," all of which together create a mountain of wet, sliding glacial pieces of animal. You are then given the charge to somehow miraculously eat this with your hands. People are rightfully appalled by the fact that any company could actually try to market and sell this product across America. "Who on the chain of command approved this as an actual meal?" is something I've heard more than once.

But besides the appalling nutritional statistics associated with this kind of meal (540 calories, 32 grams of fat and 1380mg of sodium according to KFC's website) and the equally frightening experience of actually eating this construction (zingy, microwaved bacon; an appallingly corrosive sauce that is equal parts salty, tangy and sweet; the inescapable bursting bubble of wetness that unavoidably accompanies the first bite; and—maybe the scariest bit of knowledge—that you're kind of actually enjoying eating it), KFC's Double Down sandwich successfully represents the pinnacle of three thoroughly American trends. The sandwich is a testament to the disgusting status of the food industry in our country, our subsequent fetishization and intellectualization of "things we know are terrible for us" and the absolutely incomparable power of good marketing.

KFC buys its chicken from a variety of industrial food giants, among them Purdue and Tyson, two notoriously unethical companies. This means that the two deep-fried breasts that you're holding not only didn't come from the same chicken, they probably didn't even come from the same state. The birds most likely spent their entire life in a giant unlit barn alongside tens of thousands of other chickens, living in their own feces, barely able to walk more than a few steps due to atrophied leg muscles and genetically engineered ballooning breasts, watching their comrades drop dead all around them only to be periodically picked up every couple hours in a roving backhoe, being fed on a diet of equal parts petroleum-grown cornmeal and antibiotics. That's what you're holding in your hands, between which you have cheese from a cow that has never moved more than a few feet and who sleeps in her own shit, bacon from a bag, which probably has more chemicals in it than it does rubbery skin, and fat from the poor pig that it originally belonged to: a pig that most likely spent its life blind from disease, with its snout perennially pressed in between the buttocks of its 100 or so neighbors. And then we have the colonel's sauce, maybe the most diabolical

aspect of the entire experience. Supposed to be a tangy mayonnaise, you may think that all you need are egg yolks, oil, a little vinegar, and maybe some adobo sauce and garlic. Little would you know, until you consult text message-based miscellaneous inquiry-fielding service ChaCha, that there are actual parts of dehydrated chicken in the sauce that is on your chicken. That's after they mix together propylene glycol alginate, MSG, autolyzed yeast extract and a slew of corn-based (i.e. petroleum-based) extractions meant to persuade your tongue that it is tasting sweet and salty things, satisfying your instinct for energy dense foods and releasing all the right endorphins to make you think you're enjoying your meal.

But what really makes the masticatory experience unavoidably enjoyable is probably a little scarier than chemical-induced happiness. It's hard not to get a kick out of lavishing yourself with something that you know is this horrible. There is a certain element of black humor that necessarily accompanies this kind of gastronomic adventure and the intellectualization of these gratuitous pursuits. We know we're killing ourselves through food, we know we are prostrating ourselves before an industry with pervasive detriment to the environment, our society and our economy, and somehow we have turned this knowledge into a form of sarcasm. Is eating this kind of food a sarcastic act? Is fast food the new medium for an ironic backlash against healthy America? The popularity of websites like *ThisIsWhyYoureFat.com*, a photo sharing site for proselytizing nutritional abominations, and of recipes for such eccentricities as brownie and peep pizza, says something about our ability to hold things such as "deliciousness" and "absurdity" as more important than mere nutrition. The government doesn't give you a percent daily value for these necessary human experiences, but maybe they should, because people are buying the Double Down. And KFC has marketed itself amazingly well.

By exploiting this ironic sub-attitude towards health, the chicken giants have carved out a niche for their little sandwich. With advertisements promoting the Double Down as "...so meaty there's no room for a bun" and a wildly successful viral campaign, KFC managed to secure a place for their sandwich as the apex of the mountain of culinary absurdity. Dining forums across the Web have been talking about the pending arrival of the sandwich since it was "leaked" in December. It seems absurd to think of *The New York Times'* dining critic reviewing a fast food restaurant, but last Monday, there was Sam Sifton, waiting in line to eat and write about the new sandwich sensation (with foodie paparazzi taking stalker picture from the bushes to boot). Somehow the Double Down is flying off the shelves even though everyone knows it's basically the culinary equivalent of Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano. What's wrong with us? I don't know, but I've eaten it three times already.

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