



Recipe for Success: Field Geologist Katharine Fowler-Billings (1902-1997)

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Katharine Fowler-Billings became a practicing field geologist in the 1920s, long before this was a commonplace career for a woman. She earned her B.A. at Bryn Mawr College (1925), M.A. at the University of Wisconsin (1926), and PhD at Columbia University (1930). Her contributions include fundamental geologic descriptions of large areas in Wyoming, Sierra Leone, and New Hampshire and a record of environmental activism in New England. It is, as Kay wrote, “a full life, spanning the century and circling the globe.” How did she accomplish so much? I suggest it is the result, at least in part, of three things: Kay’s independent spirit, which manifested itself at a young age and never abated; the deaths of her parents before she completed her education, which provided financial independence and freed her from the expectations of Boston society regarding proper behavior, and a keen mind and intellectual curiosity that enabled her to pursue and attain her goals. My presentation will focus on her early life and geologic education in the Rocky Mountains of the United States, which amply illustrate the development of these character traits. Although some of the challenges she faced have eased for subsequent generations, others are enduring: adapting to the isolation and discomforts of fieldwork, reconciling marriage and career, and making the best of the choices available. Kay Fowler-Billings relished challenges of all kinds throughout her life, and her example remains inspirational today.