Blazing a trail
Sweet Briar graduate helps women earn a degree she couldn’t get

by Carlos Santos

In the 1940s, when diminutive iconoclast Margaret “Peggy” Wyllie went to all-women Sweet Briar College, it didn’t offer engineering classes. Today, thanks in part to a $3 million gift from Wyllie, 86, and her late husband, Jesse, her alma mater turns out women engineers.

The donation created an endowment that pays for scholarships, equipment purchases and curriculum development in engineering at the private, liberal arts school in Amherst County.

Peggy Wyllie’s support for women engineers at Sweet Briar dovetails with a life spent testing limits and challenging traditions. While a lack of opportunities prevented her from following her father into engineering, she pursued other challenges, including sports car racing. “I did what I wanted to do,” says Wyllie, who has lived for almost 30 years on a cattle farm near Troy in Fluvanna County.

The alumna

Briar, which is noted for its Equine Studies program. “I was good at it. I was very competitive,” she says, adding that she didn’t quit riding until the age of 75.

She walks for exercise now on her estate where horses, as well as cattle, graze on the rolling green hills. Her sprawling 18th-century house — parts of which date back to 1720 — was once the home of Confederate cavalryman John Singleton Mosby.

Peggy Wyllie, who raised three children, is not one to brag on her accomplishments. She also is reluctant to expand on the reason for her gift to Sweet Briar. “I just thought giving money to Sweet Briar was a good idea in general and because they were doing engineering,” she says.

The college enrolled its first engineering degree candidates in 2005. It was the second women’s college in the country to create an engineering program. Sweet Briar offers bachelor’s degrees in engineering science and in engineering management. The Wyllies supported the program from the beginning, donating money for laboratory renovations, equipment and computers from 2005 to 2007.

The $3 million gift was made in 2009, just before her husband’s death. (She traveled to South Africa to scatter his ashes in the ocean off the coast of Cape Town, where he was born.) In recognition of the gift, Sweet Briar Engineering was renamed the Margaret Jones Wyllie ’45 Engineering Program.

Hank Yochum, the engineering program’s director, says the money is critical to its success. “I think it creates opportunity for women in the United States to take part in an engineering enterprise and do it in a small college-supportive environment,” he says. “The money will help us promote engineering so the program gets larger, which means more opportunity for high school girls across the country.”

There now are 20 students seeking engineering degrees at Sweet Briar. If Peggy Wyllie was a little younger, she would probably join them.