

Leona Holbrook



Leona Holbrook was born April 7, 1909 in Lehi, Utah to Horace C. and Leona Garn Holbrook. She was the second of their eight children.

Holbrook received her bachelor's degree at the University of Utah, studying both athletics and art. Leona's sister described her "as first a philosopher and then an athlete". She was associate editor of the campus newspaper, *The Daily Utah Chronicle*, while there in the 1930s. After graduation, she taught PE at junior high and high schools. In 1937 she was hired to be the first Chair of the women's Physical Education Department at Brigham Young University.



Leona Holbrook in 1940s "Lesbian chic"

photo from Ernest L. Wilkinson's

Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years, vol. 3, p. 485

Earl B. Kofoed, an out Gay student at BYU from 1946-1948, immensely enjoyed his participation in a very large social group of fellow Gays and Lesbians on

campus. One of the Lesbians in this network of friends was Dr. Leona Holbrook and Kofoed particularly enjoyed their friendship. The women in the group came mainly from the Physical Education and Social Work Departments, while the men were mainly affiliated with the campus French Club.

In 1993, Kofoed published a brief account of his days at BYU, in which he stated:

So, we had quite a healthy gay community functioning on campus and around town. We had lots of good times together and some of us fell in and out of love. I suppose that the more "worldly" straights at school were aware of us, but I don't recall any confrontations. Certainly we weren't summoned by authorities to be grilled or excommunicated or given bad advice on how we could "change." The climate was much less hostile than it would be three decades later.

The Church's seeming "live and let live" policy is exemplified by the experience of two of my friends at the time [BYU students Kent Goodridge Taylor of Provo and Richard Snow of southern California]. They were in love and felt a need to get clarification concerning their "status." Accordingly, they went all the way to the top and got an appointment with Church President, George Albert Smith. They stated their case to him and acknowledged their love for each other. President Smith treated them with great kindness and told them, in effect, to live the best lives they could. They felt they had gambled and could have been excommunicated right then and there; instead they went away feeling loved and valued.

Snow and Taylor returned to Provo and told their group of Lesbian and Gay friends that they had been treated so lovingly by President Smith. This event gave Kofoed much needed strength and encouragement in later trials in his life brought on by the LDS Church. No doubt the news of the positive outcome of this meeting with President Smith was just as well received by Dr. Holbrook.

Dedicated to the development of physical education at all levels, Dr. Holbrook served as president of numerous organizations on the state, regional, and national level. In 1946 she was elected Vice President of the first College Women's Physical Education Association (covering the states of Utah, Wyoming, and Colorado) and the following year was elected its president. She also became president of the National Association for Physical Education of College Women. Holbrook also served as president of the American Association of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (AAHPER) in 1966-67. In 1967 she was honored with the BYU Alumni Distinguished Service Award, and in 1977 with the Karl G. Maeser Distinguished Teaching Award. Leona was also the recipient of the Luther Halsey Gulick Award - AAHPER's most prestigious honor. The very first woman on the Board of Directors of the U.S. Olympic Committee, she participated in the International Olympic Academy in Greece (where she lit the Olympic torch) and in the National Olympic Academy sessions in the U.S. and Taiwan before serving as director of the sessions held at BYU in 1978. She was

voted Woman of the Year three times by the BYU student body. Holbrook was also a “key player” in the planning of the Stephen L. Richard PE building on the BYU campus.

Although she retired in 1974, Dr. Holbrook remained active in many national and international organizations, and continued to teach part-time at BYU until her death from cancer on June 30, 1980. Just prior to her death the American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education honored her with their prestigious Clark W. Hetherington Award.

Dr. Holbrook’s contributions to athletics at the Y are still remembered on campus annually, when the Leona Holbrook Spirit of Sport Award is given to the senior female athlete whose participation best exemplifies the true spirit of sport in athletics and life.

“Life gives much. I can give something to life....Had I world enough and time enough there are a thousand things that I would do. In the meantime I do what I can.” – Leona Holbrook

Dr. Holbrook is the author of the following articles:

“A Teleological Concept of the Physical Qualities of Man”, *Quest*, Dec. 1963 (Winter)

“Modes et Temps” (in French), *Revue Olympique*, 1971, pp. 39-46

“Dancing as an Aspect of Early Mormon and Utah Culture”, *BYU Studies* 16, no. 1 (1975) pp. 1-20

Sources:

http://www.cougarclub.com/halloffame/holbrook_1.html

“A Lingering Influence: Top 10 BYU Professors”, Jeff McClellan, *BYU Magazine*, Winter 1999

They Gladly Taught, Vol. 1 (BYU Press, 1986), pp. 70-73

Leona Holbrook interview with Phyllis Jacobson, November 11, 1974 (transcript at BYU)

Earl Kofoed interview with Connell O’Donovan on September 8, 1989, notes in my possession

Earl Kofoed, “Memories of being gay at BYU”, *Affinity*, April 1993, pp. 5 and 9