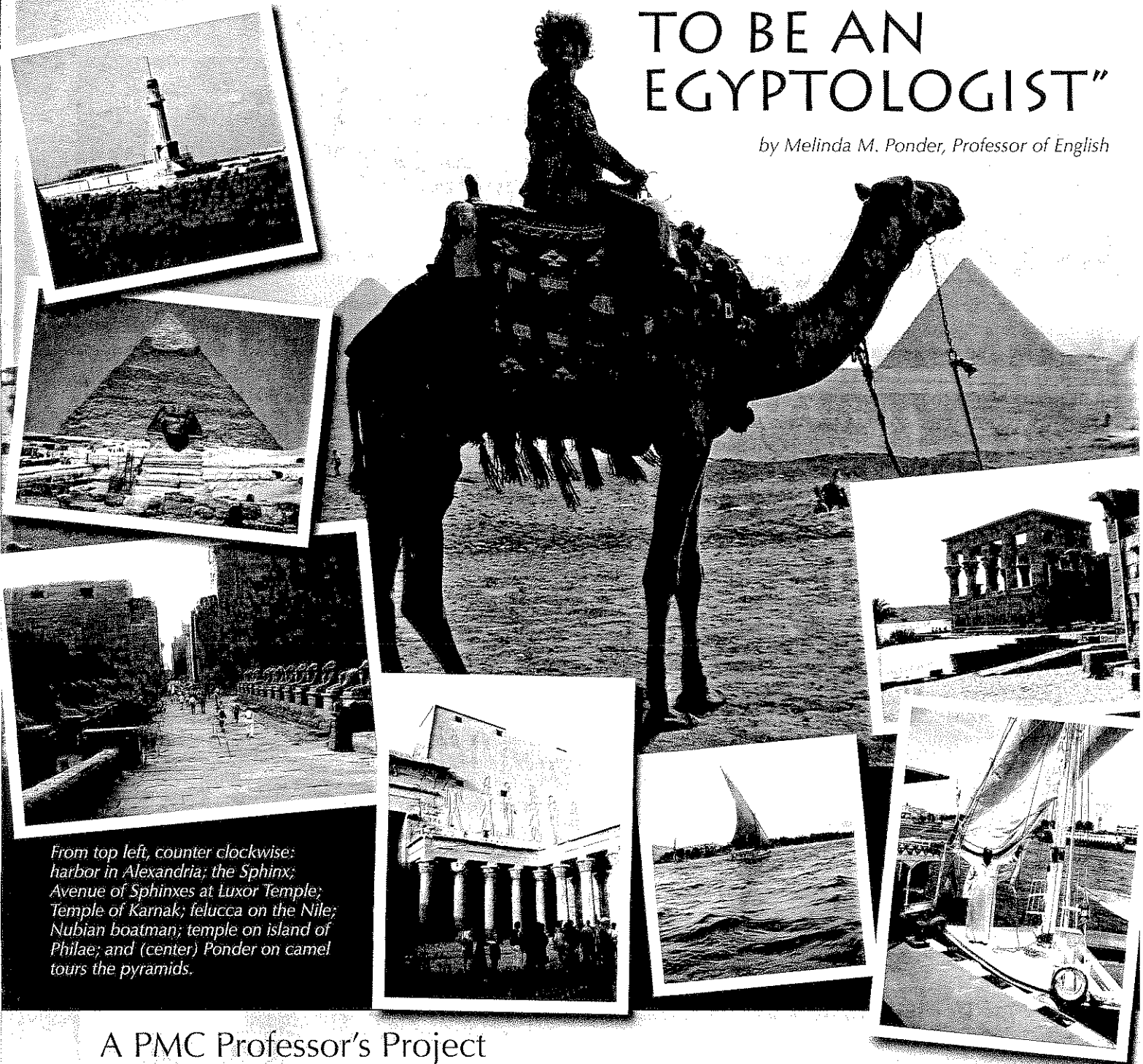


ON SABBATICAL IN EGYPT: "I LONG TO BE AN EGYPTOLOGIST"

by Melinda M. Ponder, Professor of English



From top left, counter clockwise: harbor in Alexandria; the Sphinx; Avenue of Sphinxes at Luxor Temple; Temple of Karnak; felucca on the Nile; Nubian boatman; temple on island of Philae; and (center) Ponder on camel tours the pyramids.

A PMC Professor's Project

by Stefanie Joan Ramirez '08

Professors as well as students at Pine Manor College get to work on significant academic projects that make a difference and of which they can be proud.

English Program Coordinator and Professor Melinda Ponder is writing her first literary biography, *Katharine Lee Bates: From Sea to Shining Sea*. As a professor at a women's college, Ponder sees this undertaking as having special significance. Bates, like Ponder, graduated from a nearby women's college, Wellesley, and was also an English professor.

Ponder's biography explores the story of Katharine Lee Bates,

the writer most famous for penning the song "America the Beautiful." Ponder documents Bates's development as a writer, including the political issues that influenced her work.

In discussing her work, Ponder explains, "I pay attention to how other authors keep their stories going. My goal is to tell her story as a narrative, while still making sure to explain everything."

This project came about as Ponder did research on author Nathaniel Hawthorne. As part of a panel examining how artwork on Hawthorne's novels generated sales, she found herself

In spring 2006, as I researched the final chapters of my biography on Katharine Lee Bates, thanks to my Wean Fellowship sabbatical semester, I followed the tracks she made to Egypt on her sabbatical leave journey one hundred years ago.

Like her, I felt the thrill of entering an exotic world of ancient beauty and cultures in a landscape so unlike New England. She arrived by ship in Alexandria, across "...a sea bespent/ With boats....The Orient!" Out beyond Cairo, "A jewel city clad in/Color and sheen!" were the Giza pyramids that I saw on the night of my arrival, hardly believing the view from the balcony of my hotel room: "Beyond the plains,/The silver outlines of a pyramid."

On my first morning in Egypt, I understood Katharine's affection for camels, as I sat swaying from side to side on my camel below the pyramids: "...the camels hold/ Their noiseless way over dunes of gold,/ Windblown waves of the desert." We both marveled at the lion-shaped Sphinx with its human-looking head: "Thou Watcher of the East six thousand years...." And we both smuggled home a little Egyptian sand.

Then it was on to Luxor, home of the Temples of Luxor and Karnak with their avenues of the Sphinxes. I walked through the same huge pylons standing sentry to the temples' acres of hieroglyphic-covered walls, columns carved like papyrus and lotus plants, and obelisks decorated with scenes of religious rituals and royal cartouches. To Katharine, Luxor was "Amen and Mut and Khonsu, faintly flushed/On wall and pillar.../Their beautiful brown colonnades... hushed...."

We both loved traveling south by boat, floating by fishermen and ancient feluccas, on the Nile, "...the blended stream/ That flows through memory with a hidden sound/ Of ancient music, a perpetual dream." In Aswan, I spent a most wonderful afternoon with Thomas, a Nubian boatman, who sailed me in a brisk wind around Elephantine Island, whose black rocks looked to Katharine like all sorts of black, shiny, huddled water-creatures.

For both of us, the island of Philae, "the pearl of Egypt," was a special place. For centuries, women had made

reading Bates's introductions in Hawthorne's books for their "wonderful style."

Her interest sparked, Ponder conducted additional research on Bates. Since the source materials, such as diaries and letters, are available at the Wellesley College Archives, the newly-inspired biographer gained access to a wealth of information on Bates. Ponder's fascination with Bates, along with the accessibility of information on her subject's life, prompted her to write this biography.

Ponder believes this project is a learning experience both for herself and her students. The writing process has involved extensive research, and Ponder has recruited Pine Manor stu-

pilgrimages to the temples of Isis, the goddess of love, fertility, and healing. While Katharine had to gaze at the "...solemn beauty of its pylons, the graceful columns of the kiosk, [and] the colonnades...perhaps the love-liest and...the most sacred of Egyptian temples..." under water from the first Aswan Dam, I was able to zip across the breezy bay on a little canopied jitney to Philae's new island home with its lush palm and acacia trees framing the ancient temples now far above the water.

Like Katharine, I crammed my suitcase with Egyptian treasures that I bargained for in the bazaars to bring home—a galibeah dress, beads, an embroidered purse, and little Egyptian statues. But Katharine had a new house to fill and so brought home a trunk full of such Egyptian wonders as a Nubian girl's garment decorated with strips of antelope skin and snail shells for her dining room wall, a beaded mummy cloth, an alabaster urn, and an ancient carved wing of Isis from the doors of a tomb. Somewhere she put her camel bridle, "...that necessity of Wellesley life..." also bargained for.

My trip showed me that it was Egypt, a country where one stands in the midst of people of many cultures, races, and religions, that enabled Katharine to feel reborn as a global thinker and resident, just as I had been. She even named her new house "The Scarab...an emblem of immortality because it is forever climbing."

After my sabbatical, I can join her in confessing, "The winter weather makes me dream of Egypt." ♦

All italicized quotations are from Katharine Lee Bates' poems in *America the Beautiful and Other Poems*, her letters, diary, or house inventory in the Wellesley College Archives.

Photo of KLB circa 1900, courtesy of Wellesley College Archives and photo by Longfellow Gallery. Other photos by the author and David Herder.



Shopping for Egyptian treasures.



dents to help her. Researching the life of a powerful female writer like Bates has become the perfect scholarly project for someone teaching at a women's college. To enrich her investigations, Ponder has traveled to locations that were important in Bates's life, such as Spain (see story in *PMC Bulletin*, Summer 2004) and Egypt. "I encourage students to incorporate travel into whatever they do in life," she notes.

Although *Katharine Lee Bates: From Sea to Shining Sea* has yet to be published, Ponder has great expectations for her project. "I hope that readers will learn something from reading the book, and I want to write something that will be true to Katharine Lee Bates," she said. ♦