

In Memoriam



Erna Leonhardt Gibbs (Photograph was taken in 1941).

Erna Leonhardt Gibbs A Tribute

On July 23, 1987, Erna Leonhardt Gibbs died at the age of 83. She "passed on." Yet in several senses she had been passing on all her life. Her spirit was so generous that she gave without stint of herself, her knowledge, or her skills. She passed her wisdom and her skills on.

She ventured ahead of the rest of us—by far. With her quick mind, her nimble fingers, and her fearlessness, she was one of those rare persons who really could do the difficult at once; the impossible took a little longer.

In her accomplishments and her generosity she was a big person packed in a tiny frame, yet so unassuming, so without "side," that one could enjoy to the full her merry nature. She could make fun of herself and her mistakes, and laugh at events other people would find calamitous. Bubbling with enthusiasm, high humor, and quick wit—that is the way she will be remembered by the thousands whose lives she touched.

Erna Leonhardt came to the United States from Germany in 1928 and, with the serendipity that was hers all her life, found a job with Dr. William G. Lennox measuring blood constituents in patients with epilepsy and in normal controls. It was a happy match, since both worked with undivided devotion and treated people—be they colleagues, patients, or students—with unconditional kindness.

They were soon joined by Dr. Frederic A. Gibbs, who Erna married in 1930.

Brain waves were in the air. In 1931 Adrian and Buytendijk reported potential changes in the isolated goldfish brain, and in 1933 Hans Berger in Germany wrote on the electroencephalogram in human subjects. Fred and Erna Gibbs soon visited Berger and, once back, worked with the talented M.I.T. graduate Albert Grass to develop a machine to record the EEG for clinical use.

The team of the two Gibbsses and Lennox was an unusually prolific one—a happy combination of inspired technical innovation and clinical acumen. And Erna was never merely a passive team player, but an astute observer of EEG patterns and clinical correlates. She was a methodical keeper of EEG and clinical records, contributing generously to the Gibbs' three-volume *Atlas of Electroencephalography*, the classical source of EEG data.

In the early forties, the Gibbsses moved from Harvard to the University of Illinois in Chicago, where they established their own Laboratory of Electroencephalography, as well as satellite laboratories in Illinois. From the start they had many applicants for training in electroencephalography and epilepsy, and these commitments continued. In 1978 they established the Gibbs Laboratories in Wilmett.

Not only did they win fame in the fields of electroencephalography and epilepsy, they also won honors: In 1938 they received the Mead Johnson Award for their contributions to pediatrics, and in 1957 they won the Mary Lasker Award for their studies on epilepsy. In 1958 Erna was named "Woman of the Year" by the American Women's Association. The Gibbsses were awarded The Golden Brain Award in 1984. But the awards pale in significance beside the astute brain and warm heart of the person who was Erna Leonhardt Gibbs. She is survived by her husband Dr. Frederic A. Gibbs, her two sons, Frederic Jr. and Erich, by four grandchildren, and by her brother Rolf Leonhardt.

If there is a line of poetry that expresses Erna's person and life, it is "Hail to thee, blithe Spirit," for bright and blithe she was, a shining example of what a human can become at his or her best.

Margaret Lennox