

**MARY
CATHERINE
COLE**
1912-1991



**OKLAHOMA'S
FIRST
FEMALE
ARCHITECT**

Today women worry about the glass ceiling but that is nothing compared with the struggles of Mary Catherine Cole when she decided to become an architect. Faced with obstacles because of her gender, she was all about eliminating barriers.

Cole – known as Tot – was born in November 1912 in Tulsa. Her grandfather was president of Texas A&M and her father was one of Tulsa's richest citizens. Always a maverick, when Lee Elementary wouldn't permit girls on the soccer team, she and the school janitor played against them. She also attended the recently-opened girls' school Holland Hall, then located at 22nd and Main across from Harwelden.

When her father was chairman of the design committee at Boston Avenue Methodist Church, she saw first-hand the conflict between designer Tulsa artist Adah Robinson and the architectural firm of Rush Endicott, who resented being under the authority of a female artist with no architectural credentials, frequently calling her a "mere woman". Tot earned a degree in archeology in 1934 from Smith College in Massachusetts but her experience watching Robinson fueled her desire to become an architect.

Her father was totally supportive but her mother wanted her to be in the Junior League! He helped her secure a summer intern job with architect Donald McCormick. In the fall, she enrolled at Oklahoma A&M (now OSU) but the architecture professor refused to allow her to sit in the class until she got permission from the president, but the professor was still not pleased. He bluntly told her to keep her mouth shut. She soon got a full scholarship to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

During summers, she worked for Arthur M. Atkinson as a drafter and designer before starting there in 1938. While at Cornell, her boyfriend was killed in a plane crash. She never got over his death and never married. Cole graduated in 1941 with a bachelor's degree in architecture, the only girl in her graduating class. After graduation, she worked at McAlester's Ammunition Depot Plant and with Holway Engineering, who created the Grand Lake and Grand River Dam. After working in Kansas City, she became the chief designer for celebrated Tulsa architect Joseph Koberling. She became the first licensed female architect in Oklahoma, Arkansas and Missouri in 1945 and soon went into business for herself.

Her first office was a second-floor garage apartment at her parents' Maple Ridge home. She eventually bought a bungalow on 21st Street, where she added a great room around a large elm tree whose branches extended through the roof. Soon trees would become a signature Tot Cole design. She could position a house on a lot to save the native trees. To her, trees around a home were "like jewelry on a dress."

Cole specialized in barrier-free spaces for the handicapped, firehouses with unique features, and homes which she personalized based on the needs and wants of young families. Once she built a home for a man who liked it so well that he asked if she would consider building an industrial building for him. He didn't realize this was her specialty.

She also designed three Tulsa fire stations - #18 at 48th and Peoria has a drive-through feature, enabling trucks to enter without having to back in; #21 on 31st has masonry interior walls and floors so it can be washed out with a firehose; and the northside station, opened at Mohawk and Peoria in 1956, employed the city's first black firefighters.

Cole's trailblazing contributions paved the way for hundreds of Oklahoma women now licensed as architects. How much more could she have accomplished without the limitations of her gender? The "girl with moxie" died in July 1991 at age 78 but many of her Tulsa designs still remain.