

Jessie Ballard MacIntosh saw Library as a 4.5.79 "Working Place for the Mind"



JESSIE BALLARD

by Cindy Warren

Jessie Ballard must have been a joy to her mother. Even as a young girl, she was a filer. Everything had a place and there was a place for everything. It must have been no surprise to her family when they discovered her desire to become a librarian.

Jessie, a native Nebraskan, was born in 1888, so at the time she made her career choice, a librarian position was one of the few thought suitable for a lady. Teaching, secretarial, and nursing roles still smacked of home and mothering to Jessie.

Not one to use education merely to widen her field of husband choices, Jessie Ballard went onto college to pursue her interest in books. Her family had already resettled in Oregon with that purpose in mind; her father wanted his six daughters to take advantage of the education available at a land grant college.

With a whole group of Midwest families who had the same idea, the Ballards rented half a freight car and shed the possessions that belonged to their old life. In this mini-house on steel wheels, the family rode west in about 1890.

The six Ballard girls had already enrolled at the University of Washington. Rather than live in the standard dormitory, they took up residence in a house-boat while working their way through school while their parents remained in Oregon.

While Jessie Ballard prepared for her dreams of graduation, the City of Yakima, Washington, was realizing its own dream, that of maintaining a free public library.

With funds donated by Andrew Carnegie, Yakima was able to build beyond its cramped reading room and the circulating library association meeting in the Yakima Hotel. The new Carnegie Building, as the library was named, was erected in April, 1907, at the present site of the Yakima Valley Regional Library built in 1957.

About the time Ms. Ballard graduated from the UW in "Library Economics", Yakima was in need of a trained librarian to organize and run the book-lending system then operated by volunteers.

This member of the UW's first graduating class of 1908 became Yakima's first certified librarian. First, though, she had to find a place to live. In those days it wasn't just a matter of renting an apartment; a proper young unmarried lady didn't rent an apartment. A committee from the YWCA helped the young newcomer find a suitable boarding house.

It took all of her hard earned training to pursue the task at hand. The new librarian and her staff threw out thousands of books and then classified the new purchases under the Dewey Decimal system. Previously they had been shelved according to title, making finding a chosen book a task to put a crick in anyone's neck.

Even though an incessant reader herself and a lifelong subscriber to Saturday Review, Ms. Ballard did not project the stereotypical image of a staid and stuffy bun-haired librarian with a permanent "Shhhsh!" on her lips.

In Ms. Ballard's view, a library was a working place for minds, a place for minds to go and to grow, and one that deserved utmost support from the community. She wasn't going to sit back without any of that support and input from the people served by the library.

Ms. Ballard did not lose sight of these goals even after she became Mrs. Peter MacIntosh about five years into her career. After she married the veterinarian in 1917, Mrs. MacIntosh "retired" from her paid job, but returned to serve the library four years later on a volunteer basis.

For the next 30-plus years, Mrs. MacIntosh served on the library board, seeing it through its gradual metamorphosis to the Yakima Valley Regional Library we know today.

Mrs. MacIntosh was one of the ardent campaigners for a new system that would replace the wood-sided station wagons that were the mid-1930's version of a bookmobile. Her efforts helped in getting Mair and Sons of Union Gap to build a van on a truck body, as the first improvement in the mobile book delivery system.

Because the library was then part of the city, Mrs. MacIntosh waged a constant battle for funding, and concurrently learned the ins and outs of city government. The Yakima City Library, however, left many county readers without the printed word. Mrs. MacIntosh became one of a group who sold the idea of a city/county library to people up and down the Valley.

Rural and city areas consolidated, and the regional library was formed in February, 1951. The next step, in which Mrs. MacIntosh was also involved, was to tie the regional system to the state. Because of her efforts on the first State Library Commission, her name appears on a list in our state capitol's library.

This believer in books for everyone did not confine her enthusiasm to the library. In addition to her involvement with the Red Cross and her interest in golf, she was a charter member of the Woman's Century Club, and joined other women who were looking for an identity beyond that of chief cook and bottle washer. This club served as a transition between a woman's club and a business organization, giving fulfillment to the women whose energy and enthusiasm couldn't be contained in four walls and family.

Until her death in March of this year, Mrs. MacIntosh retained an interest in all things library. She felt no small disillusionment at the changes in society that have brought problems such as book theft to our libraries. This lack of responsibility for book and other media-lending systems that provide a constant source of education and entertainment did not sit well with Yakima's first certified librarian.

If she were here today, she would surely be doing something about it.