

## Women and North Carolina's Libraries: Promoting the Library Idea

By James V. Carmichael Jr.

Carmichael, J.V., Jr. (1994, Spring) "Women and North Carolina Libraries: Promoting the Library Idea," *The Tar Heel Junior Historian* 33 (Spring, 1994): 28-31.

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Women have a very special place in the history of North Carolina's libraries, as well as libraries throughout the United States. Librarians were usually male until after 1876 when female library assistants became more numerous. In 1887 Melvil Dewey established the first library school at Columbia College in New York. He went against tradition at Columbia by letting women enter his first class. North Carolina's first professional librarian was Annie Petty. She became librarian at the State Normal College in Greensboro after she earned a library degree in Pennsylvania in 1899. For many years, librarianship was one of the few occupations, along with teaching and social work, that was considered suitable for educated women.

During the Civil War (1861–1865), many southern libraries and private collections were destroyed. Because the southern states were poor for years after the war, new libraries were considered luxuries. Women were greatly concerned about the education of children. They worked hard to establish public libraries in North Carolina's towns and small rural communities. Small collections of books were gathered by women's clubs and placed in churches, schools, colleges, or homes for the use of local citizens. In 1904 Annie Smith Ross, a Charlotte librarian, put together the North Carolina Library Association so that librarians across the state could share ideas for promoting libraries.

In 1905 philanthropist Andrew Carnegie gave money to the Carnegie Library in Atlanta, Georgia, to start a library school. Many of North Carolina's first female librarians were educated there. In 1927 North Carolina's first library school was established at the Woman's College of North Carolina in Greensboro, now known as the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Other library schools were established at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1931 and North Carolina College for Negroes, now called North Carolina Central University, in 1941.

Until the 1960s, African American readers had little access to libraries. Several North Carolina cities had special libraries for African Americans or made arrangements to distribute books to African American readers. The first of these was an independent library in Charlotte begun in 1903. Durham established a branch library for blacks in 1914, and African Americans in Greensboro formed a library in 1915. In 1934 Mollie Huston Lee of Shaw University in Raleigh decided to form a state association of African American librarians, the first of its kind in the United States. This group worked hard to improve library conditions for black citizens across the state. In spite of these progressive actions, many African Americans in the state had few books of any kind to read until after the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s.

Many rural citizens lived on farms in remote areas and could not easily get to libraries in town. The North Carolina Library Commission, founded in 1905, began sending out boxes of books, called traveling libraries, so that rural people would have books to read. Lillian Baker Griggs, a Durham librarian, established the first

bookmobile service in the state in 1923. The books were loaded onto a specially constructed truck and transported to stops across the county so that rural residents could check out books more easily.

As in most southern states, North Carolina librarians had to convince the state and local governments that reading books was important. Some communities still had no electricity, police departments, or fire departments in the early 1900s, and the mayors and city leaders had to be persuaded that reading, education, and an increased standard of living went hand in hand.

School libraries also grew through the efforts of women who had earned library degrees. In 1930 Mary Peacock Douglas became the first state school library adviser in North Carolina. She traveled extensively throughout the state to help teachers and school librarians build collections of books that would appeal to young people.

Another young woman, Jane Wilson, had a very good reason to want to become a librarian. Her uncle, Louis R. Wilson, was librarian at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He was one of the most important librarians in the United States in the 1930s. Wilson felt she could best use her library skills to reach young people in a new way. As a children's librarian at the public library in Raleigh, she began to promote storytelling in public libraries as a way of interesting young people in books. Although storytelling had been common in public libraries for many years, Jane Wilson first had the idea of using radio, and later television, to reach a wider audience. She did this long before regular children's television programs like *Sesame Street* had even started.

Libraries of all types in North Carolina grew in the 1950s when federal funds became available. Today, nearly every community has some form of library service. Public schools have media centers that contain computer programs, games, and films, as well as books, and most importantly, a media specialist.

Some 80 percent of library workers today are women, and there is almost no place in North Carolina where people are without books or newer forms of media like television, radio, and computers. North Carolina is indebted to the efforts of the early female library workers who worked hard to establish libraries throughout the state and to make reading and learning a habit as necessary as eating and sleeping.

#### SIDEBAR: Librarian with a Love for Young Readers

By James V. Carmichael Jr.

Nellie Rowe (1887–1960) was born in Greensboro. Her father was a prominent local dentist. At age eighteen, she began working as an assistant in the Greensboro Public Library. After she had worked there ten years, the librarian, Bettie Caldwell, suggested she continue her education by earning a library degree. Rowe entered the Library School of the Carnegie Library of Atlanta, Georgia, in 1914 and received her library degree in 1915. She succeeded Caldwell as Greensboro's librarian in 1920 and kept that position until she retired in 1949. Although her accomplishments at the library were many, her true love was young readers. She kept a book of the reference questions that young people asked at the desk, and she kept a list of the books they requested so that she could order them. Rowe wrote children's books, including *My Magic Storyland* (1929) and *The Crystal Locket* (1935). She also wrote *Discovering North Carolina* (1935), a history text for fifth-graders that was used in the schools for many years.

Rowe was active in the state and national library associations and served as president of the North Carolina Library Association from 1925 to 1927. In 1938 Rowe married the Reverend Cecil Jones. Together, they wrote several books for young people, including a collection of biographical sketches of North Carolina's female pioneers. Unfortunately, these later books were never published.

Some librarians considered the historical collection Nellie Rowe Jones established at Greensboro to be among the finest in the state, but young readers and their interests were always her first love.

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DEFINITIONS

A professional has special training in a certain area and makes a living working in that area.

A person who gives large amounts of money to a community or institution is called a philanthropist.

Progressive actions use new ideas and opportunities to improve existing situations.

Librarians answer reference questions about the use of the library and specific topics of interest.

Biographical sketches are brief stories that tell the important facts about people's lives and achievements.

One is indebted to another person if one owes something to that person.

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**MEET THE AUTHORS (from spring 1994 *Tar Heel Junior Historian*)**

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