



Newsletter

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ELSIE GRAY MARSH, FIRST LIBRARIAN 1887 - 1966

For many years, one of the most widely known and loved persons in town was Miss Elsie Marsh, the first librarian of the Mansfield Library.

Elsie was born in Mansfield in 1887, the daughter of Dr. Elliot H. Marsh and Eunice Anthony Marsh. From her early childhood she loved books and had learned to read long before she went to school. She was a very serious student and excelled in her studies at Windham High School from which she graduated in the Class of 1904. In her youth, Elsie was not beautiful, but was graceful and sweet-looking, and was well-liked by the young people of Mansfield Center who considered her "brainy." Photographs, preserved in the Historical Society archives, show her participating in their social activities.

After high school, she took some courses at Columbia University School of Library Service, but never earned a degree, a fact which would cause her career disappointment in later life. Dr. Marsh had many patients in the area and Elsie often went with him on calls, driving the horse and buggy, and sometimes taking little puddings to the patients. Her offerings were not always appreciated because the Marshes were Seventh Day Adventists and used no seasonings and condiments in food, but people loved Elsie and, not to hurt her feelings, accepted her tasteless dishes.

The origins of the Mansfield Library go back to 1907, when several local families and summer residents organized a small subscription library. The books were kept in two large wooden cases in the ladies' parlor of the First Church of Christ, and Grace Wyman Homer has written elsewhere of how her mother and other women took turns opening the library two evenings a week and helping Elsie who was the unofficial and unpaid "librarian."

In 1909, the books were moved across Brown's Road to the upper floor of the old brick school and Elsie, at age 22, was appointed officially. The Library was open Tuesday afternoon and evening, and in the winter a fire had to be built in the wood stove early in the day to warm up the room. Kerosene lamps gave light for the readers, and odds and ends of furniture were donated.

Elsie's microscopic stipend, new books and supplies, janitor services and fuel were supported by private donations and the proceeds from a yearly Fourth of July entertainment. There would be a parade, pageants on the tennis court (now the lawn of the present parsonage), and food prepared by the Church ladies. One year, the pageant was a re-enactment of the Landing of the Pilgrims, staged on the river by the Willimantic Water Works—but that is another story. Mrs. Carrie Perry who lived next to the Library in "Idyl Manse" (now owned by the Holts), subsidized the pageants by ordering elaborate costumes from

New York, and Mrs. George Jenner and other ladies were key figures in the productions. All money from tickets and food sales went to benefit the Library, which became indispensable to its users.

Elsie's dream, encouraged by the Connecticut Public Library Committee, was to extend the Library's service and introduce more people to the joy of reading. She began by preparing boxes of books each month to be sent to the 13 schools—later 8, as consolidation took place. Then she began to include a few adult books in each school box for the children to take home to their parents. This met with such success that in 1916 she began to establish "branch units" or "extension stations" in the villages of Mansfield. These were in private homes, a general store, and a church, with one person, coached by Elsie, in charge. If that person could not get to the Library to pick up the books, the



grocer—the mailman—the doctor—the school supervisor—the bus driver—*anyone* going in that direction, would transport the books. One hard winter, when an outlying village was completely isolated by snow, the baskets of books got there by sled. Sturdy market baskets were the book containers. The villages of Spring Hill, Eagleville, Mansfield Hollow, Wormwood Hill, and Mansfield Four Corners regularly had extension stations, others sporadically. Elsie kept records of the reading tastes and preferences of each village and selected books accordingly.

Another extension service was the radio when few people had them. One of the neighbors near the Library did have an early radio, and an extension speaker was installed in the Library and the public was invited for special programs. Elsie so loved books and the privilege of reading that she would go out of her way for a fellow book-lover. If someone couldn't get to the Library

during open hours, she would leave the desired book in the unlocked vestibule; often she came over from her home to unlock the Library for someone's special need.

In the 1920's, the need for better facilities was pressing. Mr. Gilbert W. Chapin of Hartford maintained his wife's old family home in the Center and, after her death, retained a deep interest in the town. He donated a major portion of the funds for a new building on the site of the old school/library. The Marshes and Chapins had been close friends since Elsie's infancy, and there is no doubt that Mr. Chapin's affection for Elsie played a part in his decision to give money for the new Library which was built in 1926.

Elsie loved children and was important to the children who used the Library. Pupils who came looking for information for their school assignments were willingly and patiently taught how to use encyclopedias, dictionaries and atlases. She initiated Story Hours for young children, believing that early introduction to the library was important. She had a soft, expressive voice and read well, but she also recruited teachers and faculty wives to be story-tellers. (She also exercised the right of censorship. If she thought your mother wouldn't approve of your reading a certain book, she wouldn't let you take it out!)

Elsie had a very broad range of knowledge and a prodigious memory. To the casual observer she seemed vaguely disorganized, but she had a mind like a computer and a talent for digging out obscure information.

As the use of the Library grew, people wanted more access. Elsie, being an Adventist, went to church in Willimantic on Saturdays, so she often had the Library open on Sunday mornings for the convenience of the church-goers across the road. They could attend the service and pick up a week's supply of reading in one trip. She trained several women as assistants, among them Mrs. Jenner, her daughter Alice (Atkins), Sadie Franklin, and Ruth Oden. There were others whom I can't remember, but I don't think anyone was paid that much, if at all. Having greater access to the Library was a big step in the cultural life of the community, and people were glad to help.

In the late 20's or early 30's. Elsie was hired as a reference librarian at the College (now UConn). She and the legendary Edwina Whitney, the head librarian, were very close friends. Together they attended many librarians' conventions and meetings, and were both supporters of the Yale University Summer School for Librarians which was sponsored by the Connecticut Public Library Committee. Among these colleagues and associates, Elsie was recognized and respected for her work even though her skills were largely self-taught. Her lack of a degree and the fact that she could never advance to a higher level in the College Library was a bitter disappointment to her.

In 1933, Elsie wrote, under the aegis of the Department of Sociology of the College, a Sociological Report (Vol. VI, No.1) entitled "A Case-study of the Librarian in a Rural New England Town". It is well-written and professional, and contains a wealth of information which is significant to Mansfield history and the history of our Library. It is preserved in the archives of the Mansfield Historical Society.

Elsie's personal life was not what many people would choose. After her father died in 1923, she dutifully took care of her mother, who had some sort of disability and spent most of her time confined to her chair. Mrs. Marsh was also almost totally deaf and had a black tin ear trumpet which wasn't very effective. Elsie had a very soft voice and it was extremely difficult for

her to speak loudly, so for years she communicated with her mother only by writing. My mother, who was good friends with Elsie from childhood, said that she had once cared deeply for a young man but the feeling was not reciprocated. Elsie was timid and self-effacing and the young man may not have been aware of her feeling.

As Elsie aged, she faded and became more thin and fragile. One friend especially remembers her frail, blue-veined hands; I remember her as a quiet shadowy figure slipping in and out of College book-stacks. Her mother died in 1942 and Elsie's books and work became her whole life.

She had learned to drive a car (after a fashion!), but even those who loved her most shuddered when she got behind the wheel. When her eyesight failed and she could no longer drive, she had to retire from the College Library, but she continued her association with the Mansfield Library until she had to give that up, too, because of increasing deterioration of her vision and mental acuity. A sad end for one who loved reading and knowledge.

She died December 9, 1966, in the Natchaug Hospital at age 79. "Inanition" and "senility" were listed as contributing to her death. She had no immediate survivors. Distant cousins inherited her tiny estate, but her true legacy was to the people of Mansfield who still benefit from Elsie's part in the early years and development of the Mansfield Library. She would rejoice to see it today.

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Jane Ann Bobbitt
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