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Oregon State Library: 1905; A Clear Field and a Large Opportunity

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Cornelia Marvin, Oregon State Librarian 1905–1928.

The first Oregon State Librarian, Cornelia Marvin Pierce, exemplified our OLA President's theme of thriving on change and embracing possibility. It was to embrace possibility that Cornelia left a good job with the Wisconsin Free Library Commission in 1905 to come to Oregon. In 1905, the Wisconsin Free Library Commission had been in existence for 20 years. Cornelia had worked there for six years. To come to Oregon, she would have to accept a \$600 reduction in her \$1,800 annual salary. She jumped at the opportunity.

In 1905, Wisconsin was decades ahead of Oregon in developing public library services. Many public libraries were already well established throughout the state, but in Oregon there was only one tax-supported public library, in Multnomah County. The mission of the new Oregon Library Commission was to establish public and school library services throughout the state. The barriers to having this happen were significant. Oregon was still some-



Cornelia Marvin's first organizing trip.



thing of a frontier state in 1905. It was an agricultural state, with a very rural and widely dispersed population. The distances were enormous and the transportation system was crude. But Cornelia was undaunted. In her “resignation message” in 1928, here is how she described her frame of mind upon coming to Oregon: “May I remind you that it was on August 1, 1905, that I began my library service in Oregon, with a clear field, large opportunity, and two thousand dollars a year to be devoted to the cause of library development ...”

In order to establish library services throughout the state, Cornelia had to travel over bad roads on horse-drawn stages. She managed a voluminous correspondence with women’s clubs and other citizens interested in establishing libraries. She was tireless in giving advice and assistance to all who needed it. She also quickly instituted a system of “traveling libraries” —boxes of books that were sent to rural communities without libraries to stimulate interest in books and reading.

The “traveling libraries” went to stores and post offices and other community gathering places. In later years, the traveling library system was supplemented by direct loan of specific books requested from the State Library’s own collection in Salem. This was an innovation at the time, and very popular throughout the state.

Cornelia’s strategy of “priming the pump” with traveling libraries and direct loan of books from the State Library, coupled with intensive field work and assistance to local communities, was tremendously successful. By the time Cornelia retired in 1928 there were 82 public libraries established in every corner of the state. The only goal that Cornelia did not accomplish, one that she desperately sought, was a new home for the State Library. In her biennial reports to the Legislature she would constantly complain about the inadequate facilities that the library shared in the Supreme Court Building. The library was squeezed into the basement and into the top floor, and as the collection and



Oregon State Library’s “traveling libraries” prepare to ship out.



staff grew, the situation became intolerable. The opportunity for a new State Library Building would not come until the old State Capitol was gutted by a fire in 1935. This dramatic event created a fervor to rebuild, not only the Capitol, but a new Capitol mall with state office buildings extending north from the new Capitol. It was the third State Librarian, Harriet Long, who saw to it that the first new building on the Capitol mall would be the new State Library. The availability of federal public works funding during the Depression helped to make Cornelia's dream a reality in 1939.

When the new State Library was dedicated in 1939, Cornelia Marvin Pierce could not attend, because in 1928 she had once again embraced a new challenge. She married former Governor Walter Pierce who, in 1932, successfully ran for Congress. Cornelia moved with him to Washington, DC to be his chief of staff through five terms of office. Up until the very end of her long life in 1957, she maintained a passionate interest in public policy issues and politics. She was the first woman ever to be appointed to the Oregon State Board of Higher Education. She was even touted as a candidate for Congress, before her husband was first elected. Her record of accomplishment as Oregon State Librarian will never be equaled. Cornelia Marvin Pierce never stopped looking for new and challenging opportunities to apply her considerable intelligence and energy. 🌿

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Cornelia Marvin Pierce with her husband, Governor Walter Pierce.



Oregon State Library, 1939.

