

# **Frances Flower Kessler**

## **Classroom Resource Packet**

1. Student Biography of Frances Flower Kessler
2. Vocabulary List
  - a. Vocabulary words are pulled from the student biography, the actors' scripts, and the Character Information portion of our Guide Script. Words are organized alphabetically.
3. Supplemental Resources (pulled from The Pantagraph)
  - a. "May Christian, forever her own woman" by Bill Kemp
    - i. May Christian was president of the Amateur Musical Club, of which Frances was a member.
  - b. "Beloved Withers librarian instilled lifelong love of reading, writing in Bloomington kids" by Candace Summers
    - i. Features Clara Louise Kessler, Frances's sister.

## Frances Flower Kessler (1887-1975)

Frances Kessler was born in the town of Warren, Illinois on June 17, 1887. Her father, Samuel, was a pharmacist his entire life, having learned the **trade** from his father. When Samuel was fifteen, he began to help his father in the store and learn the **pharmacy** trade. In 1881, Samuel purchased the store from his father and began operating it on his own. The family moved to Normal, Illinois around 1899. Her parents hoped they would obtain better educational facilities for their children since Normal was the home of Illinois State Normal University and the **Model Training School**.

Around 1903 the Kessler family moved to Bloomington. Frances finished her education by attending Bloomington High School, graduating in 1904.

Music played an important part in Kessler family life. Frances' father told his children stories about musical instruments he found that were stored in the attic of the Pennsylvania house he grew up in. Those instruments belonged to his uncles. Frances, her siblings, and parents formed their own family **orchestra** while she was growing up. Frances played the piano, her brother Lewis played first violin, her mother played second violin, her father played the flute (which was her grandfather's flute), and sister Louise played the cello.

Frances Kessler enrolled at ISNU in the fall of 1904 and studied to be a **primary school** teacher. Despite missing a term in the spring of 1906 for unknown reasons, she completed her course work and received her teaching certificate on June 6, 1907. To graduate, all students were required to write a **theme**, and her theme was entitled "Some things a primary teacher should know."

After graduation, Kessler moved to Tennessee in the fall of 1907 to begin her teaching career. She taught music at the University of Middle Tennessee (today known as Middle Tennessee State University) in Tullahoma, Tennessee. In addition to her music teaching duties, she was the principal of the primary department. However, after only two years, she returned to Bloomington.

After settling back in Bloomington, Kessler began teaching at Edwards School, located at 807 West Market Street, in the fall of 1910. She taught there for nine years before being moved to the high school to teach **music appreciation** in the fall of 1919. At this time, Mabelle Glenn was the supervisor of music for Bloomington Public Schools. Glenn brought with her knowledge about new trends in public school music education, including music appreciation. Music appreciation teaches people how to listen to music, to understand and enjoy music, and to appreciate the art of music. Those who acquired this knowledge at a young age would hopefully maintain a love of music for the rest of their lives. And the best place to acquire this was in the schools.

In 1911, the **Victor Talking Machine Company** made it one of their missions to promote music appreciation to students across the country. The company established an educational department and promoted the use of the **phonograph** for music appreciation lessons for students in kindergarten through college. The company also produced 500 records to support music education **curricula** in schools across the country. The goal was to "educate every student so that each would become, not a professional musician, but an intelligent listener and an appreciative lover of music."

According to Kessler, in addition to introducing phonographs to Bloomington Public School classrooms, Glenn went one step further. She convinced the Bloomington Board of Education "to hire a music teacher whose principal duty" was to give music appreciation lessons

“in the grade schools, and to teach Music History and Harmony in high school.” That teacher was Frances Kessler. According to Kessler, she was one of the first dedicated music appreciation teachers in the United States, because traditionally, music appreciation was taught by the supervisor of music. When she assumed the duties of the music appreciation teacher, Kessler recalled that her work “was as a **pioneer** in a new field. Since the subject was so new, very little information concerning it was to be found and much experimenting was necessary.” But gradually a course of study evolved, and Kessler helped thousands of students learn to appreciate music throughout her career.

As part of their curriculum, special series of “children’s concerts” were arranged so that students could further **hone** their music appreciation skills. In January 1921, Bloomington Public School students were treated to a series of concerts by the Millikin University **Glee Club** from Decatur, Illinois. Kessler visited all the schools in the district the week of January 24 “and told the children something about each song and read the words” to help them better understand the music they would hear.

On December 20, 1922, the **Amateur Musical Club** hosted the Detroit Symphony Orchestra for a pair of concerts held at the Coliseum in downtown Bloomington. Students from Bloomington schools were invited to attend the afternoon performance that day. Kessler had prepared her students for several weeks ahead of time by using phonograph records of songs they would hear during the concert, and by talking to her students about orchestras in general. Not only were the children **attentive** listeners and “paid the strictest attention,” the *Pantagraph* stated that their good behavior “could give their elders lessons in concert **etiquette**.” Concerts held specifically for students to exercise the skills they learned through music appreciation were a regular occurrence throughout Kessler’s time with Bloomington Public Schools.

In the spring of 1921, Kessler introduced music memory contests to the curriculum. Music memory contests were held in every school in Bloomington and were designed “to increase musical knowledge of the **pupils** and to stimulate their appreciation of good music by familiarizing them with standard **compositions**” of the United State and other countries. To prepare the students, twelve weeks prior to the contest the music department sent out a list of twelve records with a plan for their use. Teachers and students were to listen to a different record each week. The school who had the largest percentage of perfect papers was awarded first prize, which in this case was Franklin School.

According to Kessler, each school in Bloomington had a phonograph. The lessons she taught (with the help of the classroom teachers at each school) stressed listening instead of singing. With the guidance of teachers, “children listened to recordings of good music, and learned to understand and enjoy it.” Since this was a relatively new field, there were no textbooks to guide teachers, so they had to learn through experimentation.

Kessler also encouraged her students to use their imaginations as they listened to music. One exercise she did with her students was to play several pieces of music the students had never heard before on the phonograph. She then had each student choose one of the songs they heard and write a story about it.

Kessler did not limit her expertise in music appreciation to Bloomington schools. Her knowledge and teaching skills were utilized nationwide through her membership in **the Music Supervisors’ National Conference** (today known as the National Association for Music Education)

In the fall of 1928, Kessler was selected to serve on the Committee of Music Appreciation, made up of music appreciation teachers from throughout the United States. Those

on the committee were selected to serve as advisors for a new series of music educational concerts, the “**NBC Music Appreciation Hour**,” that would be aired starting beginning October 26 by the National Broadcast Company (NBC) and sponsored by the Radio Corporation of America (RCA).

As part of her membership in the Music Supervisors’ National Conference, Kessler was a member of a subcommittee in the Music Appreciation Department in 1929. She and the other two members of the committee focused on music appreciation methods for students in first through sixth grades. In December that same year, she published an article in the Association’s *Music Supervisors Journal* about how the field of music appreciation in Bloomington Public Schools began and evolved since it was introduced in 1919. Her article outlined the course of study, techniques she developed (how students would listen to and study songs before attending concerts) and partnerships that were developed all to ensure students would become listeners to and lovers of music.

After teaching music appreciation to students in Bloomington Public Schools for almost 13 years, the Bloomington Board of Education eliminated her position in 1932 due to financial hardships the district faced **exacerbated** by the **Great Depression**. Fortunately, Kessler was assigned to teach fourth grade at the Sarah Raymond School in Bloomington for the new school year that fall. By the 1934-1935 school year, Kessler was once again listed as a music teacher, but only at Sarah Raymond School. She continued to teach music there until 1941 when she was moved to Jefferson School (continuing to teach music there as well). By 1943, she was transferred to Washington School where she taught music until 1951. She spent her remaining time as the librarian for the school until her retirement in 1952.

The impact Kessler’s teaching had on her students was far-reaching. After participating in a performance given by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra on February 27, 1920, students at Bloomington Public schools wrote **compositions** about the experience and the music they heard. Edwards School eighth grade student, Paul Rhymer (who would go on to be one of the great writers of 1930s “script” radio shows with his popular “**Vic and Sade**”), expressed his **gratitude** to all involved who made it possible for the “symphony orchestra to come to Bloomington,” and added a special thanks to Frances Kessler, who, in his eyes, “deserved much praise for encouraging us to attend the orchestra and getting us interested in one.”

After Kessler’s death in 1975, several former students recalled the impact she had on them. Raymond Olson, who served as the organist for St. John’s Lutheran Church for several decades, stated that “he learned to appreciate music at an early age,” thanks to Kessler. Charles Ross wrote a letter to the editor of *The Pantagraph* stating that the impact of her teaching was profound on him: “for myself, nobody would get through to me on music. But she taught me to love classical music and appreciation of all good music by patiently explaining why it was written and by whom.” In Ross’s opinion, Kessler “did not for the money involved, but for love of teaching.”

At the age of 87, Frances Kessler passed away at Brokaw Hospital on February 2, 1975. Services were held at Metzler Memorial Home, with the Reverend Philip Queen officiating. She was buried next to her entire family (including her brother Lewis who passed away in 1924 from **tuberculosis** and diabetes) in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

## Vocabulary

**Accompany (verb):** to go with as an associate or companion; to perform an instrumental or vocal part designed to support or complement a melody.

**Adapt (verb):** to change one's nature, character, or design to a particular use, purpose, or situation.

**Amateur Music Club (noun):** a group for musicians to get together, play music for each other, host recitals, and give the public access to good music.

**American Conservatory of Music (noun):** a well-known school of music located in Chicago.

**Attentive (adjective):** mindful, observant, or paying attention.

**Beethoven (person):** Ludwig van Beethoven; a German composer alive from 1770 to 1827. Beethoven is one of the most famous composers of classical music, especially well known for his Symphony No. 5.

**Bronze (noun):** an alloy of copper and tin and sometimes other elements.

**Collaborative (adjective):** work done jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor.

**Composer (noun):** a person who writes music.

**Compositions (noun):** a creator's works, such as an author's books or a composer's music.

**Curricula (noun):** the courses offered by educational institutions and contents of those courses.

**Etching (verb):** the process of producing a pattern or design on hard material by eating into the material's surface.

**Eliminate (verb):** to put an end to or get rid of.

**Engrave (adjective):** to cut figures, letters, or designs by incision (as on wood or metal).

**Eon (noun):** an immeasurably long amount of time.

**Etiquette (noun):** the conduct or procedure expected by authority to be observed in one's social life; manners.

**Exacerbated (verb):** to make worse or more severe.

**Familiarize (verb):** to make known or familiar; to become well acquainted.

**Flourish (verb):** to thrive, achieve, or prosper.

**Glee Clubs (noun):** musical groups which sang short songs by trios or quartets. These were very popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and most schools had one.

**Granite (noun):** a very hard natural igneous rock formation used especially for building and for monuments.

**Gratitude (noun):** a feeling of thankfulness or appreciation.

**Great Depression (noun):** the period of severe worldwide economic decline that began in 1929 and lasted throughout the 1930s; marked by deflation and widespread unemployment.

**Hans Christian Andersen (person):** a Danish writer known for his plays, novels, poems, and fairy tales. He wrote such classics as Thumbelina, The Little Mermaid, The Princess and the Pea, and The Ugly Duckling.

**Hone (verb):** to make more effective or intense.

**Interment (noun):** the act or process of depositing (a dead body) in the earth or in a tomb.

**Intriguing (adjective):** interesting or fascinating.

**Mausoleum (noun):** a usually stone building with places for entombment of the dead above ground.

**Model Training School (noun):** today known as the Thomas Metcalf School; opened in affiliation with Illinois State University as a space for teachers to train in a sort of living laboratory.

**Music Appreciation (noun):** a portion of musical studies that focuses on students' ability to understand and describe music and the creative processes involved.

**Music Supervisors' National Conference (noun):** a way for music supervisors and educators to connect, interact, share ideas, and help each other. This group still exists as the National Association for Music Education.

**NBC Music Appreciation Hour (noun):** a show on the National Broadcasting Company radio that offered lectures on classical music and musicians. The target audience of this was children and students.

**Orchestra (noun):** a group of musicians including especially string players organized to perform ensemble music.

**Organists (noun):** a person who plays the organ.

**Pharmacy (noun):** the art, practice, or profession of preparing, preserving, compounding, and dispensing medical drugs; a place where medicines are dispensed.

**Phonograph (noun):** an instrument for reproducing sounds by means of the vibration of a stylus or needle following a spiral groove on a revolving disc or cylinder.

**Pioneer (noun):** a person or group that originates or helps open up a new line of thought or activity or a new method or technical development.

**Primary School (noun):** elementary school.

**Pupils (noun):** students.

**Scottish Rite Temple (noun):** buildings used by the Scottish Rite, a group associated with the Freemasons.

**Symphony Orchestra (noun):** a large orchestra of winds, strings, and percussion that plays symphonic works.

**Tchaikovsky (person):** Pytor Ilich Tchaikovsky; a Russian composer alive from 1840 to 1893. Tchaikovsky is perhaps best known for his composition Swan Lake, one of the most popular ballets of all time.

**Theme (noun):** a written exercise or paper.

**Trade (noun):** the business or work in which one engages regularly.

**Tuberculosis (noun):** a contagious disease that affects especially the lungs but may also spread to other areas like the kidney. This is characterized by fever, cough, fibrosis, and the formation of lumps under the skin called tubercles.

**Variations (noun):** different or distinct versions of something.

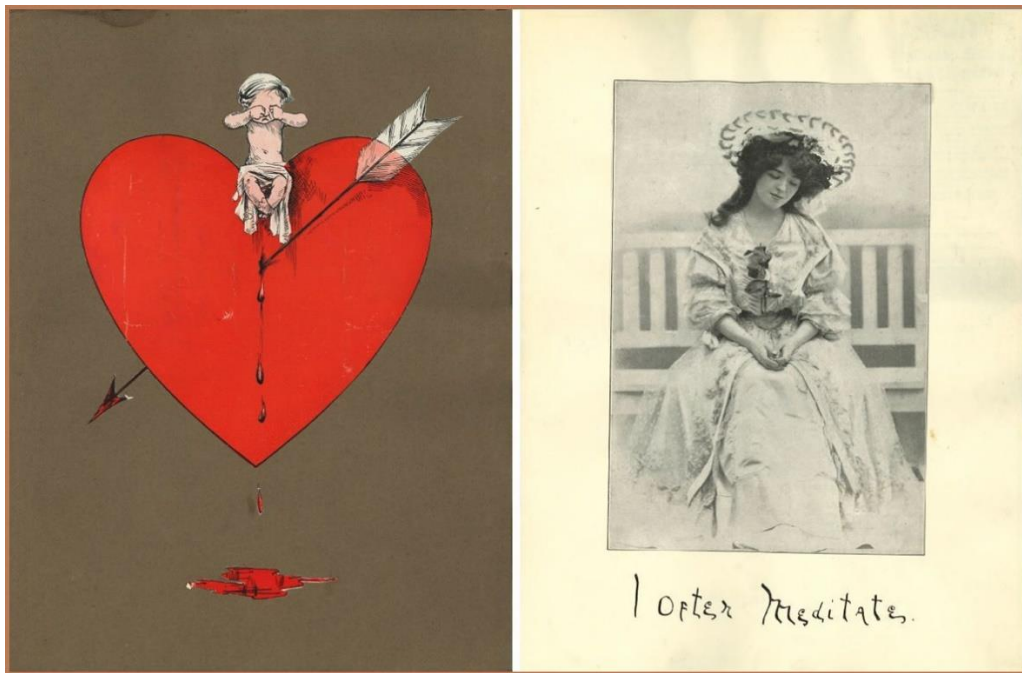
**Vic & Sade (noun):** a sketch radio show written by Paul Rhymer. This segment focused on a typical American family living in a town that closely resembled Bloomington, IL. This comedic show was very popular among listeners and was on the air for over a decade.

**Victor Phonograph Company (noun):** an American recording company that produced phonographs from 1901 to 1929.

**YWCA (noun):** the Young Women's Christian Association; a community organization that offers aid and opportunities to the women and girls it serves.

## May Christian, forever her own woman

Bill Kemp; October 6, 2019



Shown here are the cover and first page of Annie May Christian's scrapbook, circa 1903, held in the archives of the McLean County Museum of History. That is not Christian depicted in the photo, but rather an image clipped out of a publication of some sort. There are no known photos of Christian.

COURTESY, MCLEAN COUNTY MUSEUM OF HISTORY

“I was always too independent,” Bloomington resident Annie May Christian confided in a remarkable scrapbook she compiled around 1903.

Unabashedly independent yes, but Christian also knew the value of community, especially one alive to the fine arts. From 1910 to 1923, May Christian (she went by May, not Annie) headed the Amateur Musical Club, a dominant force in the city’s “aesthetic life” for much of the 20th century.

She led the club through a period of “outstanding growth in numbers and prestige,” observed *The Pantagraph* upon her death in 1941, “establishing a standard for musical appreciation and interest on a scale seldom attained in a community of this size.”



May was nine or ten years old when the Christian family came to Bloomington in 1876. Her father, Matthew, was a former Springfield dry goods merchant in poor health who would spend the next 25 years in Bloomington as an invalid.

May's mother, Elizabeth Mitchell Christian, was from McLean County pioneer stock. Elizabeth's father, Ebenezer Bridge Mitchell (who sometimes spelled Mitchel with one "L"), built one of the first log cabins in Stout's Grove, a forested area west of Danvers. It's said he moved the family to Bloomington to provide better educational opportunities for his children. Before the Civil War, the family built a home on the 500 block of East Front Street (yes, it's still there!). And sure enough, in 1860, Elizabeth graduated from Normal University (now ISU) as part of the first class in school history.

With Elizabeth's husband Matthew an invalid, the Christian family moved to Bloomington and into the old Mitchell house, with financial support likely coming from farmland on the Mitchell side.

May Christian, the subject at hand, was an 1883 graduate of Bloomington High School, this at a time when few children enjoyed public education beyond what we'd call junior high today. As such, Christian's graduating class was all of fourteen students, thirteen of those being girls. She continued her education by way of musical training, both in voice and piano, and by the age of 17 she was considered "among [Bloomington's] best instrumental talent."

Her long affiliation with the Amateur Musical Club began in the late 1890s, and soon she was doing things like delivering a paper to members titled "Grand Opera from 1800 to Wagner," and helping organize the annual Charity Day concert.

But it's as club president for more than a dozen years that Christian made her widest and deepest mark on the Twin Cities. Free Sunday concerts began during her tenure, and the club enjoyed great success bringing nationally known composers, conductors and performers to Bloomington. During her years as president, the club staged a Liszt centenary concert with American tenor Riccardo Martin and pianist and composer Rudolf Ganz; hosted performances by the Chicago Opera Quartet and the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra; and welcomed tenor Enrico Palmetto, violinist and composer Fritz Kreisler, pianist Josef Hofmann and others.

May Christian and the Amateur Musical Club were exemplars of a cultural scene dominated by the likes of music instruction, literary societies, piano recitals, poetry, afternoon teas and the reading of history papers. Bloomington-Normal, home to a solid representation of

the well-educated middle and upper-middle classes, had plenty of whip-smart women who felt constrained and burdened by a patriarchy and its pernicious social, political and economic barriers. Women such as May Christian found outlet in club activities where one could do things like organize fundraisers, study current events and tackle community-wide problems.

Christian, for instance, was a member of the influential History Club of Bloomington most of her adult life, serving as president for several terms. She was also one of the organizers of the Bloomington Women's Club, with its mission to "make it easier for the sentiments and convictions of the women to find expression." Churchgoing was also a major part of May Christian's self-identity, as she was long associated with First Presbyterian of Bloomington.

In mid-January 1911, she represented the Amateur Musical Club at the 18th annual "Congress of Clubs." This was a gathering of some 300 members of the "city's elite" representing more than a dozen local literary and musical associations, including the Longfellow Club, the Four O'clock History Club, Ein Dutzend Club, College Alumni Club, Margaret Fuller Club and the Clio Club. Happily, some of these clubs are still active today!

The collections of the McLean County Museum of History archives include a 17-page scrapbook compiled by May Christian around 1903 (see accompanying images). Each page of this brief autobiographical statement — really a manifesto of sorts — features a clipped illustration from a magazine advertisement or similar source, accompanied by a handwritten observation or declaration.

In this work, Christian, who at the time was in her late thirties, unflinchingly addresses her unmarried status. "Some women have men to work for them" is the caption on page five. "I have to work for myself," is her follow-up on the next page. Yet there is no self-pity, as Christian also expresses her disappointment in — even indifference to — men. Page eight offers a drawing of a man seated at a table and engrossed in a newspaper. "This is the way some men entertain their wives," she writes. The following page includes an amusing scene of a young man on his knees, in the midst of a proposal, but with the look of shock on his face. "I have had chances to marry," she notes, before adding on the next page, "But he might have been cross."

"I never would be spoony," she says a few pages later, "spoony" here meaning behaving unduly sentimental or acting foolishly in love. That page is followed by a well-dressed woman and the aforementioned declaration: "I was always too independent."

Two of the scrapbook's final pages feature a woman gesturing at an empty chair and the caption, "Still unoccupied," followed by a woman playing the piano with the observation, "I spend my evening alone." The last page is an illustration of a cat and the phrase, "My constant companion."

Christian is one of seven real-life local folks from the past showcased in this year's Evergreen Cemetery Walk. The event, now celebrating its 25th anniversary, is presented by the McLean County Museum of History and Illinois Voices Theatre-Echoes. It's being held today, Sunday, Oct. 6, and next weekend, Oct. 12-13.

Annie May Christian passed away on April 14, 1941, at the age of 74. "Such a life of service for others in the interest of artistic culture," eulogized The Pantagraph, "bequeaths to the city and all Central Illinois a name and a memory which shall last long and with undimmed fragrance."

# Beloved Withers librarian instilled lifelong love of reading, writing in Bloomington kids

By Candace Summers; August 2, 2020



Ruth and Robert McNabb, children of Bernie and Nellie McNabb, pick out their favorites from more than 100 new children's books on display during the children's room Spring Book Festival at w=Withers Public Library. Miss Louise Kessler points to a charming illustration.

COURTESY, MCLEAN COUNTY MUSEUM OF HISTORY

Some may assume that children only look forward to seeing their teachers when they return to school in the fall (whether in-person or online in this day and age). However, many students may be most excited to see their school's librarian again. One local librarian who was held in such high regard by children and adults alike was Clara Louise Kessler, the longtime children's librarian at Withers Public Library (predecessor of today's Bloomington Public Library).

Louise (as she was known to most) Kessler had a lifelong interest in books, songs and children. She was born in Warren, Illinois, in 1893. Her father moved the family to Normal in 1898 after a business trip to the area, which must have left an impression on him. Kessler recalled later in life that her parents thought that by moving the family to Normal, they would obtain better educational facilities for their children (Normal was the home to both Illinois State Normal University and the Model Training School).

After graduating from ISNU with her teaching degree in 1915, Kessler began working with children as a kindergarten teacher that fall at the Day Nursery and Settlement Association. Founded in 1908, this private day care and kindergarten provided a safe place for working mothers to leave their children during the day.

In 1919, after four years of teaching, Kessler embarked on a 33-year career as the head children's librarian at Withers. Her mission was not only to present the very best children's literature and encourage its enjoyment, but also to create an environment that would stimulate children's imaginations, inspire children to freely express themselves, and help children grow into adults who would help build a better Bloomington.

During the first 18 months of Kessler leading the children's department, it began to earn a reputation as a "mecca for little folk" that offered a wide variety of programs for children of all ages. Throughout her career, she wrote and directed plays for children, offered lectures for boys on Saturday evenings, held birdhouse contests in the spring, hosted a club in the winter for junior high girls, and offered instructive games.

Special exhibits for children were frequently created and displayed throughout the library, which stood at the corner of Washington and East streets in downtown Bloomington.

Game and story hours were held during the summer months. Picture shows (using an opaque projector) accompanied by the reading of a story were also presented for children in first through fourth grades. The diversity of the activities she created for children was a credit to the originality that she brought to her work as children's librarian.

Kessler is pictured with some of her young library patrons, Ruth and Robert McNabb, during the annual Spring Book Festival. Held in May, the Spring Book Festival annually attracted hundreds of children to Withers between 1940 and 1952. In 1944, Kessler anticipated a long line of children eager to check out the 100 new books that were to be released on the first day of the festival. Titles included "Timothy has Ideas," "Three Gay Tales from Grimm," "Giants and Witches and a Dragon or Two," and "Uncle Sam's Army and How It Fights." Kessler was always happy to help her young readers select titles to help nurture their minds and imaginations.

When Kessler came to Withers in 1919, 34,367 books were checked out by students in the community. By 1940, that number had increased exponentially to 126,859 books.

Kessler credits some of this growth to the work of publishers "re-editing the classics in beautifully illustrated volumes" and giving more attention to the publication of "worthwhile new books." She also stated that when children were given the freedom to choose their own books from the shelves, they seemed to "instinctively find the volumes that best appeal to them" and that made them want to read more.

According to The Pantagraph, a concerted effort had been made during those 20 years to "bring children and good literature together, and with the results shown, staff members now say that this 20-year dream has come true."

By 1944, nearly 3,000 children had library cards and of those children, Kessler stated that the majority of them were in the fifth and sixth grades. To her credit and despite her modesty, Kessler had much to do with this milestone achievement.

The McLean County Museum of History collects and preserves countless photos. Thanks to a second \$250,000 grant received from the Institute of Museum and Library Science (IMLS) last fall, the museum is in the process of digitizing another 50,000 negatives from the Pantagraph Negative Collection, which consists of well over 1 million negatives. The latest batch of

digitized images are primarily from the 1940s. This grant has allowed the museum to continue the labor-intensive project of digitizing, organizing, and researching this treasure trove of local history.

If not for this project, we may have never discovered images of Clara Louise Kessler doing what she did best — fostering a love of reading in the hearts and minds of the children in her community.