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Jim Scheppke
Oregon State Library

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Reasonably Affordable for Everyone

by **Jim Scheppke**
Oregon State Librarian

In 2007, Oregon has a total of 132 public libraries. But if the State Library had had its way, there would be only 36.

It's not that the State Library does not want every Oregonian and every Oregon community of any size to have a public library. That was the mission we were given at our founding in 1905, and that's still our mission today. It's not that we want fewer library facilities, bookmobiles, and other service outlets. What we want is fewer administrative entities providing public library service, and that has been our firmly-held desire for over a century.

in 1902 when it began. The Multnomah County Library could have easily been the Portland Public Library, a city-operated library, the prevailing governance model of the time. But Isom rejected the notion that reading was only for city folk, and that if you were a farming family in the country, you had no need of books.

Isom insisted that this was not the case. She personally lobbied the Legislature in 1903 to amend the public library law, passed in 1901, that only allowed for city-operated libraries. Isom wanted the law to also allow for county libraries. Unfortunately, in the con-



Cornelia Marvyn Pierce
courtesy Oregon State Library

Since 1905, the State Library has been a champion for county libraries. When you look at our history, it is easy to see how this came to be. The “founding mothers” of the Oregon State Library were Mary Frances Isom and Cornelia Marvyn. Isom was the first director of the Multnomah County Library, the first public library in Oregon and only the fourth county library in the U.S.



Mary Frances Isom
courtesy Multnomah County Library

servative way that legislatures often operate, they chose to amend the law so that the 1903 amendment only applied to Multnomah County. The other 35 counties in Oregon would have to make do with the 1901 law that only provided for city-operated libraries.



Isom was not done with her legislative activism. In the next session, in 1905, she was back again, this time with a bill she drafted to create the Oregon Library Commission (renamed the Oregon State Library in 1913). The year before, she had made the long rail journey to Wisconsin to study the Wisconsin Free Library Commission, which would be the model for the Oregon Library Commission. There she met a young and dynamic librarian named Cornelia Marvin. Isom, who must have had a good eye for talent, saw in Marvin a kindred spirit and someone who shared her beliefs about public library service for everyone. A correspondence ensued, and about a year later Marvin had come to Oregon to lead the new Commission.

Cornelia Marvin was described by a contemporary as “a human dynamo with a mind that works like harnessed lightning.” (Brisley, 1968) Today, we might say she was “in your face.” She didn’t mince words. Here is how she expressed the philosophy she shared with Isom that public library service was not just for city folk, but for everyone:

The librarian must assume that every person, not actually in a state of coma or idiocy, has some interest or need which requires the intelligent use of books. (Marvin, 1921)

Marvin also had the strong belief that not only was public library service for everyone, but that experience had shown that it was almost impossible for a small town to devote the resources necessary to having a really good public library. Yet another reason to organize a library on a larger scale with a main library and branch libraries.

I can’t resist quoting Marvin again on the short-comings of small town libraries:

The small library has poor service, few books, requires a large rate of tax levy and accumulates a dead stock which duplicates the dead stock on the shelves of all the neighboring towns.

(Marvin, 1919)

Sadly, Marvin and Isom would never achieve their vision of county libraries for all of Oregon. The cause of this was the 1901 state law that only allowed for city libraries, with the exception (in 1903) of Multnomah County. Under that law, in the first decade of the 20th century, city libraries began to spring up everywhere in Oregon. Fueling this development were women’s clubs in many communities that made library development their top priority, and Andrew Carnegie, then at the height of his philanthropy, who would eventually fund the construction of 33 public libraries in Oregon. By 1911 there were 23 city libraries established in Oregon, along with the one county library in Multnomah County. The 23 city libraries were established in 17 Oregon counties: Baker, Clackamas, Clatsop, Coos, Deschutes, Jackson, Lake, Lane, Linn, Marion, Polk, Tillamook, Wasco, Washington, Umatilla, Union, and Yamhill.

In 1911, the Legislature was finally persuaded to amend the public library law once again to enable any Oregon county to establish a county library, but by then it was too late. Nearly half of Oregon’s counties already had seen at least one city library established, and, as a practical matter, all it took was one city library to diminish or remove the possibility of establishing a county library.

To their credit, some of the 17 counties that had seen the establishment of city libraries in the first decade of public library development in Oregon did even-



tually form county libraries, usually with great effort. ‘Consolidation’ can be a bad word, but consolidation did eventually occur in Baker, Deschutes, Jackson, Lake, and Tillamook Counties.

One hundred and two years after the founding of the State Library, Oregon has 85 city libraries, still the predominant form of public library governance. Some, like the Eugene Public Library and the Lake Oswego Public Library, rank among the best libraries in the state. But many of our city libraries are too small to ever hope to be able to deliver top quality public library services.


To look on the bright side, Oregon does have 16 consolidated county libraries serving an entire county population, and among them are perhaps the three best public libraries in Oregon: Multnomah County Library, Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, and Deschutes Public Library. And efforts to form more county libraries in Oregon are continuing. In 2008 we hope to see elections in Linn County and in Union County to form county library districts.

There is an interesting footnote to this story of county libraries in Oregon. The tragic closure of the Jackson County Library and the efforts to reestablish service there has reconfirmed the assertion made by Cornelia Marvin decades ago that a small city library requires “a large rate of tax levy” as compared to a county library.

Interim library director Ted Stark determined that for six of the smallest towns in Jackson County to restore their branch library services all by themselves would require a city tax levy of well over \$1 per

\$1,000 of assessed valuation. Compare that to the \$0.66 per \$1,000 that would have preserved quality service county-wide that Jackson County voters have now rejected twice. The startling difference made a believer out of the editorial writer of the Medford *Mail Tribune*, who wrote about Stark’s analysis:

For those who wondered why we had a countywide library system, there is the answer. Spreading the cost over the entire county makes libraries reasonably affordable for everyone. (Mail Tribune, July 5, 2007)

Cornelia would concur. 

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In 1929, after her retirement from the State Library, Cornelia Marvin married and became Cornelia Marvin Pierce.

