

Clara Louise Kessler (1893-1968)

Clara Louise Kessler was born in the town of Warren, Illinois on September 5, 1893. Louise (as she was known to most) was the second of three children born to Samuel and Martha (Flower) Kessler. She had an older sister, Frances, and a younger brother, Lewis.

Kessler's father, Samuel, was a pharmacist his entire life, having learned the trade from his father. According to Kessler, when her father Samuel was a young man, his father sent him to Bloomington to participate in a discussion about the formation of the State Board of Pharmacy. During his stay in Bloomington, Samuel took a site-seeing tour of Normal. What he saw and experienced during his visit must have left an impact on him because in 1898, Lewis sold his drug store in Warren and moved the family to the Town of Normal. Kessler recalled that her parents hoped that by moving the family to Normal, there would be better schools for their children (since Normal was the home of Illinois State Normal University and the Model Training School). Kessler's family lived in Normal for a few years and around 1903, the family settled at a house located at 1004 N. Main Street. Kessler finished her education by attending Franklin School and then graduated from Bloomington High School in 1912.

Kessler was very passionate about the creative arts, including music, writing, literature, and hand work like knitting and sewing. She said that music had always been an interest in her life and credited her family for that love and appreciation of music. Kessler, her siblings, and parents all played a musical instrument. Her sister Frances played the piano, her brother Lewis played the first violin, her mother played second violin, her father played the flute, and Louise played the cello. While Kessler did not pursue a career in music, she did not leave her musical heritage behind completely. She wrote lyrics for songs. Her lyrics appeared in several well-known schoolbook series and music anthologies of the day. She also wrote lyrics for *The Alice in Wonderland Suite* by Edgar Stillman Kelley.

After graduating from high school, Kessler attended Illinois State Normal University (today known as ISU) where she studied to be a kindergarten teacher. Later, she also took courses in Library Science at the University of Illinois in Urbana.

After graduating from ISNU in June 1915, she began teaching kindergarten at the Day Nursery and Settlement Association located at 1320 W. Mulberry Street in Bloomington when the new school year began in September. She quickly became the head of the kindergarten department.

The Day Nursery Association was a private day care and kindergarten, which opened in January 1908. The Day Nursery was a safe place for working mothers to leave their children who were not of school age, thus allowing older siblings to attend school regularly. For just five cents a day, "the children will be given dinner and cared for the same as at home." Even if they could not afford the daily fee, women could still leave their children at the school because of the generosity of local residents who donated funds for just such a need.

Kessler taught kindergarten there for four years until she was hired as the head children's librarian at Wither's Public Library in 1919. However, she did not leave the Day Nursery behind completely. She continued to plan and present activities for children at the Day Nursery while working as a librarian. In July 1925, Kessler, assisted by Miss Mattie Crump one of the playground directors of the Day Nursery, gave a party for 75 children at the nursery. Children in attendance performed dances and read stories aloud. A group of children from the Fell Avenue Playground also presented stunts and dances too. The party concluded with ice cream cones for all the children at the nursery.

During the first 18 months of Kessler being in charge of the children's department at the library, the department began earning a reputation as a "mecca for little folk." In addition to the plays and pageants Kessler wrote and directed for children, she began offering a wide variety of programs for children of all ages. These programs included lectures for boys on Saturday evenings, birdhouse contests in the spring, a girl's club for girls fifth grade and older in the winter, and instructive games. Special exhibits for children were created and displayed throughout the library frequently. Game and story hours were held during the summer months. Picture shows (using an opaque projector) with the reading of an accompanying story were also presented for children in first through fourth grades. The variety of the activities she created for children was a credit to the originality that she brought to her work as children's librarian.

One way that Kessler spread her love and passion for literature and writing beyond the library was through the pages of the local newspaper, *The Pantagraph*. Starting in the fall of 1922, *The Pantagraph* started a *Juvenile Page* for school age children. Here students from the various schools in Bloomington could submit stories about what was going on at their school. In September 1923, Kessler began serving as editor of the children's section of the newspaper.

The children's section included a junior crossword puzzle, short stories written by local students, the "Library Corner," and stories written by Kessler herself. Kessler's stories were often about children growing up and learning life lessons. In April 1925, one such story Kessler penned was called "The Magic Key." The story was about a young girl named Virginia who wished the other girls in her school would talk to her and ask her to play on the basketball team. Virginia's teacher Mrs. Hawley informed Virginia that her mannerisms were off putting to the other students and that she herself did not make an effort to talk to the other girls either. Mrs. Hawley gave Virginia a magic key that she said would open the door of friendship. The moral to this story was that you should "always remember what the other person's interested in and don't forget to meet him half way."

Kessler continued to edit *The Juvenile Page* until May 1926, when *The Pantagraph* announced that the section would undergo some changes—the biggest of which was that the children's section would be published year-round, instead of only during the school year. Even though Kessler was no longer the editor of the children's section, she remained a regular contributor of short stories, poems, and book puzzles until 1942, when *The Pantagraph* discontinued publication of it due to the outbreak of World War II.

Throughout the years, Kessler and her fellow librarians offered many different programs that appealed to children of any age. From puppet programs to art shows, show and tell programs to plays, poetry contests, and listening to stories and classical music on the children's department record player. Kessler and the other librarians under her charge always had interesting and exciting programs that encouraged the growth of creativity and encouraged the children in the community to read and write.

After a 33-year long career, Kessler retired from Withers Public Library in 1952. A couple of years before Kessler retired, Miss Nellie Parham, the head librarian who hired Kessler in 1919, stated that Kessler's background as a kindergarten teacher and her "training, her knowledge and love of children's literature, and her own skill in writing" were great assets to the children's room. "Her services to the children and parents of this community over the years cannot be estimated. She has never ceased in her efforts to present the very best in children's literature, and to encourage its enjoyment."

On May 13, 1968, after a lifetime interest in reading, books, songs, the creative arts, and children, Clara Louise Kessler quietly passed away at the home she shared with her sister Frances in the LaFayette Apartments (Apartment 407), at 410 E. Washington Street in Bloomington. Kessler never married or had children of her own, having devoted her life to her work at Withers Public Library and to children all throughout the region. She herself described her life-long hobby as “creative writing—especially in helping boys and girls do creative work.” Clara Louise Kessler was laid to rest at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.