

Frances Flower Kessler (1887-1975) had a passion for music and education. Music was always an interest for her, and she credited her family for that life-long love and appreciation. Each of her immediate family members played a musical instrument, with Kessler playing the piano. She worked for Bloomington Public Schools from 1910 until her retirement in 1952, serving primarily as a teacher of music appreciation for the district during her 42-year career there. When she began teaching, Bloomington reportedly was one of the few cities in the United States that had a special teacher of music appreciation. While most children who graduated from Bloomington Public Schools never became performers of music, they all became listeners and learned to love good music, thanks to the tireless efforts of Frances Kessler.¹ As one of her students recalled, “she did not for the money involved, but for the love of teaching.”²

Frances Kessler was born in Warren, Illinois on June 17, 1887. She was the oldest of three children born to Samuel and Martha (Flower) Kessler. She had a sister, Clara Louise, and a brother, Lewis.

Kessler’s father, Samuel, was a pharmacist his entire life, having learned the trade from his father. Samuel’s father, Lewis, moved the family from New Berlin, Pennsylvania to Warren, Illinois in 1867 after having spent a year in Tipton, Iowa and another year in Buchanan, Michigan. It was in Michigan that Lewis learned the pharmacy business.. Upon the family’s relocation to Warren, Lewis established a drug store on Main Street.³ When Samuel was fifteen, he began to help his father in the store and learn the trade. In 1881, Samuel purchased the store from his father and began operating it on his own.⁴

When Samuel Kessler was a young man, his father sent him to Bloomington, Illinois to participate in a discussion about the formation of the State Board of Pharmacy. During his stay in Bloomington, Samuel took a sightseeing tour of Normal, Illinois via the Bloomington-Normal Horse Railway. What he saw and experienced during his visit must have left an impact on him because in 1898, her father sold his drug store in Warren and moved the family to the Town of Normal. 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. Her father came to Normal first to find a job and a house for the family. He found a position working in the drugstore portion at McKinny and McKnight in Normal and a few months later; found a house to rent on Ash Street in Normal.⁵

Around 1903 the Kessler family moved to Bloomington. Samuel had taken a position at Fischbeck’s Drugstore, located at 121 South Center Street in downtown Bloomington.⁶ The family settled at a house located at 1004 North Main Street, next door to the old Benjamin Funk home.⁷ Frances graduated from Bloomington High School in 1904 as a Latin-Scientific student,

¹ “Visitors Hear Children Recite,” *The Pantagraph*, December 9, 1922

² “Teacher bequeaths music appreciation,” *The Pantagraph*, February 19, 1975

³ “Samuel Kessler,” *Portrait and Biographical Album of Jo Daviess County, Illinois: 1889*; Galena Historical Society and U.S. Grant Museum, <http://www.galenahistory.org/researching/portrait-and-biographical-album-of-jo-daviess-county-illinois-1889/>. Date Accessed April 13, 2016; 338-339

⁴ Kessler, Clara Louise. *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950 in five volumes*, Volume IV. (Bloomington: Self Published, 1952) 277

⁵ *Ibid*, 279-282

⁶ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory 1904*, 208

⁷ *Ibid*, 282; *Bloomington Normal City Directory, 1904*, 316.

meaning she had taken two or more years of Latin and had enough other work to make 32 credits.⁸

Samuel continued to work at a variety of drug stores throughout the rest of his life. He was considered a good prescription clerk who knew and made up the prescriptions of a good share of the Bloomington doctors for many years.⁹

Music played an important and lively part in Kessler family life. Frances' father told his children stories about musical instruments he found stored in the attic of the Pennsylvania house where he grew up. Those instruments belonged to his mother's brothers who fought in the United States Civil War. Frances's paternal grandfather also played the flute and used to lead singing in the New Berlin church. Her father continued that musical tradition by leading the Warren Church choir and played the horn in the village band. 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 had belonged to her grandfather, and sister Louise played the cello.¹⁰

While still attending school in Normal, Kessler performed music for several clubs at Illinois State Normal University (today known as Illinois State University). On February 9, 1901, she played an instrumental solo of "Only a Dream," for members of the Philadelphia Society (a literary society). The student newspaper, *The Vidette*, reported that her performance was given in a "sweet and simple manner that was very pleasing."¹¹ Later that year on September 14, Kessler, along with Marie Champion, Clara Erber Barker, and Adah Griggs performed instrumental solos to entertain the Wroughtonian Society (another literary society) at ISNU. The program was declared thoroughly enjoyable to all who attended.¹² Kessler also performed for the Wroughtonians again in January 1902.¹³ Because of her exposure to a variety of different musical experiences at an early age, Kessler developed a love and passion for music, one which she stived to instill in all her students.

Kessler enrolled at ISNU in the fall of 1904, and studied to be a primary school teacher.¹⁴ 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, 1907.¹⁵ To graduate, all students were required to write a theme, and her theme was entitled "Some things a primary teacher should know."¹⁶ At the graduation ceremony, Illinois Governor Charles Deneen presented diplomas to Kessler and her classmates.¹⁷ Her class was the largest class to go through ISNU, with 93 students graduating.¹⁸

⁸ "The Closing Days," *The Pantagraph*, June 2, 1904.

⁹ *Ibid*, 283

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 277 and 283

¹¹ "Society News Directory, Philadelphia," *The Vidette*, February 1901 (at this time, the newspaper was published on the last day of the month).

¹² "Wroughtonian Notes," *The Vidette*, September 1901.

¹³ "Wroughtonian Notes," *The Vidette*, January 1902.

¹⁴ University Enrollment Ledger for Illinois State Normal University, 1897-1912, Illinois State University Archives.

¹⁵ "The Attendance this Spring," *The Vidette*, April 1906.

¹⁶ "Graduates And Their Themes," *The Pantagraph*, June 5, 1907.

¹⁷ "Governor to Present Diplomas," *The Pantagraph*, June 6, 1907.

¹⁸ "Largest Normal Class Gets Diplomas," *The Pantagraph*, June 7, 1907.

Kessler continued to foster her love for music at ISNU. She performed on several different occasions, including on March 29, 1907 when she performed “Irish Music” for the Sapphonian Society’s Irish program.¹⁹ Later the spring, she again performed for the Sapphos, this time playing an instrumental solo written by French composer Gabriel Dupont, and she gave an “excellent” piano solo for a joint program with the Philadelphia and Wrightonian Societies.²⁰ She was also a member of the Sapphonian Society and served as the vice-president of the club during the winter term of 1906.²¹ The organization was founded in 1887 for female students who undertook the study of art, literature, travel, and music, “which was of a somewhat different character from that which can be obtained in required school work.” It was named for the Tenth Muse, Sappho, the Greek lyric poetess.²²

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 teaching duties, she was the principal of the primary department.²³ However, after only two years, she returned to Bloomington.²⁴

After settling back in Bloomington, Kessler began teaching at Edwards School, at 807 West Market Street, in the fall of 1910.²⁵ She taught there for nine years before being moved to the high school to teach music appreciation in the fall of 1919.²⁶ However, this was not her first contact with the music department for Bloomington Public Schools. According to a reminiscence Kessler wrote for *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950* (compiled by her sister Louise between 1950-1952), Kessler stated that during her senior year at Bloomington High School, the supervisor of music, Miss Irene Bassett, asked Kessler to accompany her to the grade schools to play for groups preparing for eighth grade commencement. Kessler remembered wondering why she was permitted to miss so many classes. “Surely my work suffered—in fact, not long before Commencement I was stunned by the casual inquiry of my Fourth Year Latin teacher as to whether I needed my credit in that subject for graduation, and the suggestion that if I did, to get to work! I graduated but my grades certainly dropped that last quarter,” she recalled.²⁷

While Kessler was teaching at Edwards, Miss Bassett retired, and the district hired Miss Mabelle Glenn to take over as supervisor of music in 1912. Glenn brought her knowledge about

¹⁹ “Sapphonian Society,” *The Vidette*, April 2, 1907.

²⁰ “Sapphonian,” *The Vidette*, May 14, 1907; “Society Notes,” *The Vidette*, March 5, 1907.

²¹ “Sapphonian Society,” *The Vidette*, December 1905

²² Summers, Candace. “Hartmann, Mary J.” McLean County Museum of History. 2007. Retrieved from <https://mchistory.org/research/biographies/hartmann-mary-j>, August 25, 2023; “Sappho,” *The Index*. (Normal: Illinois State Normal University, 1905) 72.

²³ “Alumni Register, Illinois State Normal University, 1860-1917,” *The Normal School Quarterly*, July 1917, Series 15, No. 64. (Normal: Illinois State Normal University, 1917) 101.

²⁴ “Class of 1907,” *The Vidette*, October 12, 1909.

²⁵ “Teachers Assigned to Public Schools,” *The Pantagraph*, August 27, 1910.

²⁶ “Alumni Register, Illinois State Normal University, 1860-1927,” *The Normal School Quarterly*, July 1927, Series 26, No. 104. (Normal: Illinois State Normal University, 1927) 110; “Several Changes in Lists of Teachers,” *The Pantagraph*, August 30, 1919.

²⁷ Kessler, Clara Louise. *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950 in five volumes, Volume I*. (Bloomington: Self Published, 1952), 243

new trends in public school music education, including music appreciation.²⁸ This concept emphasized teaching 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 begin this process was in the schools.²⁹

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.”³⁰

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.³¹ 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.³²

Kessler and Glenn traveled around the district teaching students about voice culture, musical instruments, how to be good listeners, and how to enjoy music in general. On the second day of the new school year in 1919, the two teachers were at Irving School testing voices to prepare to place students in part-singing classes.³³

As part of their curriculum, a 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. According to *The Pantagraph*, “if the next generation of Bloomington residents is not a music loving one, the fact will be remarkable for the children of the public

²⁸ Kessler, *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950 in five volumes, Volume I*, 243.

²⁹ “Children Show Their Ability,” *The Pantagraph*, February 21, 1923.

³⁰ Kauffman, Valerie. “Music Education: A mission of the Victor Talking Machine Company,” Delaware Historical & Cultural Affairs, <https://history.delaware.gov/2017/10/25/music-education-a-mission-of-the-victor-talking-machine-company/>, Accessed August 25, 2023.

³¹ Kessler, *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950 in five volumes, Volume I*, 243.

³² Kessler, Frances. “Music Appreciation in Bloomington,” *Music Supervisors Journal*, Volume 16, No. 2, December 1929, 43.

³³ “Children Patient in Hot School Rooms,” *The Pantagraph*, September 10, 1919.

schools are now receiving training which is unique and valuable” under the direction of Mabelle Glenn and Frances Kessler.³⁴

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 prepared her students for several weeks in advance by playing phonograph records of songs they would hear during the concert, and by talking about orchestras in general. The children were attentive listeners at the concert and “paid the strictest attention,” and the *Pantagraph* stated that their good behavior “could give their elders lessons in concert etiquette.”³⁵ Concerts to help students exercise the skills they learned through music appreciation were a regular occurrence throughout Kessler’s time with Bloomington Public Schools.³⁶

Kessler joined the Amateur Musical Club (AMC) in 1910 (the same year she began teaching at Edwards School). The AMC was one of the most significant cultural forces in Bloomington-Normal throughout its entire existence. What began as a gathering of a few friends interested in sharing music, became a club that at one point numbered over 1,800 members. The AMC put Bloomington-Normal on the musical map and brought the best of the musical world to the community.³⁷

The AMC was founded in 1893 by four women: pianists, Bernice Kidder Green and Mary Sidley Fleming; and singers, Charlotte Burr Harwood and Florence Eddy Davis. Active and student memberships were limited to women—though men could become associate members.³⁸ Kessler was listed as a “student member” from 1910 until 1920, and then a full “active member” until she resigned from the club in 1972. Membership in the club was exclusive until 1896 when the club was reorganized to increase opportunities for the citizens of Bloomington-Normal to experience music.³⁹ The club accomplished this primarily through cultivating local musical talent and hosting performances for local musicians. As the club grew, famous musicians and orchestras were booked to perform in Bloomington as another way to introduce residents to a variety of musical experiences.⁴⁰

Kessler was an active member of the club for over 60 years, and in club records she was listed as playing the organ for most of that time.⁴¹ She served on the membership committee from 1928 until 1934, on the orchestra committee from 1922-1923, and from 1921 until 1932 she

³⁴ “Children Enjoy Millikin Songs,” *The Pantagraph*, January 29, 1921.

³⁵ “Two Concerts By Orchestra,” *The Pantagraph*, December 21, 1922.

³⁶ “Philharmonic Concert Presented on Public School Music Course,” *The Pantagraph*, March 19, 1931.

³⁷ Torii Moré. “Historical Sketch of Amateur Musical Club Collection,” McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives, 2; Janicki, Logan. “Christian, Annie May.” McLean County Museum of History. 2019. Retrieved from <https://mchistory.org/research/biographies/christian-annie-may>.

³⁸ Emily Brandicon Snow, “Memories of Past Achievements of Amateur Musical Club,” in *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois, 1900-1950 in Five Volumes* vol. 5, compiled by Clara Louise Kessler (Bloomington: 1950), 1.

³⁹ Carol Straka, Researcher Summary on Amateur Musical Club.

⁴⁰ Snow, “Memories of Past Achievements of Amateur Musical Club.”

⁴¹ “Amateur Musical Club Collection Finding Aid,” Bound Year Books (Showing members, officers, committees, programs, and constitution) 1911-1917, 1919-1924, 1924-1934, 1935-1944, 1944-1954, 1954-1964, 1964-1974, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives.

served on the children's work in public schools committee, helping plan concerts and events to teach children music appreciation.⁴²

Frances' sister, Louise, was also a member of the AMC for a short time. Louise played the cello and wrote lyrics for songs. Fifty of her song lyrics appeared in the schoolbook series *The World of Music*, twenty-five more appeared in the song anthology *Music for Living*, and she wrote the lyrics for the *Alice in Wonderland Suite* by Edgar Stillman Kelley.⁴³ Frances and Louise collaborated on musical composition throughout their lives; Frances wrote the music and Louise wrote the lyrics. One song the sisters wrote, entitled "Music," was a popular song that was performed on multiple occasions throughout their lives. The first known instance of the song's performance was in November 1936 at a meeting of the Central Illinois branch of the National League of American Pen Women. Their song, "When Grandmother Danced the Minuet," was also performed at the same meeting.⁴⁴ "Music" was also performed by the girls' groups at Bloomington High School's annual spring concert in March 1954.⁴⁵ In April 1956, "Music" was performed by members of the Amateur Musical Club at their year-end recital.⁴⁶ In 1951, at the February meeting of the Central Illinois branch of the National League of American Pen Women, three more songs written by Frances and Louise were performed: "Song of Lincoln," "The Minuet," and "American Hymn."⁴⁷ Their song, "A Christmas Wish," was performed at the annual Christmas Doll Show at Withers Public Library (where Louise was the children's librarian) in 1952.⁴⁸ As members of Second Presbyterian Church in Bloomington, Frances and Louise also wrote songs for the choir.⁴⁹ Louise, like her sister, felt that "music has a language all its own that speaks to every human heart with perfect understanding."⁵⁰

In the spring of 1921, Kessler introduced music memory contests to the curriculum. These 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.⁵¹ 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. "At 11 o'clock each day one of these records was placed on the phonograph located in the upper hall," all the upper room doors were opened, and for two minutes, all students in the school sat quietly and listened to the music that filled the halls. After those two minutes, the doors were shut, and students returned to their regular work. Franklin School had the largest percentage of perfect papers and was awarded first prize. Many students had the names of all selections and all composers correct, including spelling the name "Tchaikovsky." It was reported that the students at Franklin School "became so well acquainted with the selections that it was not unusual to hear

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ "Retired Children's Librarian, Miss Clara Kessler, Dies," *The Pantagraph*, May 14, 1968

⁴⁴ "Local League of Pen Women to Present Public Play Group," *The Pantagraph*, November 22, 1936.

⁴⁵ "How Time Flies: 50 Years," *The Pantagraph*, March 17, 2004.

⁴⁶ "Chorus to Sing Their Song," *The Pantagraph*, April 29, 1956.

⁴⁷ "Next Luncheon of Pen Women in Pekin," *The Pantagraph*, February 14, 1951.

⁴⁸ "Doll Show Set at Library," *The Pantagraph*, January 4, 1952.

⁴⁹ Kessler, *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950, Volume IV*, 77.

⁵⁰ Quote from Clara Louise Kessler, "Amateur Musical Club Collection Finding Aid," Bound Year Books 1946-1947, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives.

⁵¹ Hilderbrant, Edith. "Music Memory Contests," *The School Review*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (April 1922), 304.

a group on the playground singing or whistling them to each other.” Washington and Lincoln schools tied for second place. The winning schools each received a supply of records donated by the five phonograph merchants in Bloomington.⁵² Music memory contests were a routine part of Kessler’s teaching methods throughout her career.

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 recalled that “we made many mistakes, but it was extremely interesting to watch the gradual but steady growth and development of interest and knowledge in this phase of music education.”⁵³

Beginning in the first grade, children became familiar with the world’s best music. In each grade, children would learn different types of music, about the various musical instruments, about composition, and how to be good, attentive listeners. Visitors to Kessler’s classrooms in December 1922 saw students actively engaged in music appreciation. First grade students began by listening to the music, then were told the words, and eventually sang softly with the phonograph playing the music. They also pretended to play the musical instruments they heard. Second grade students reviewed some selections they already knew, and imitated characters in the songs they heard, and sang along. Third graders learned folk dances, and fourth grade students listened to music and viewed pictures about Thanksgiving. The upper school grades studied the instruments used to play symphonic music so they could identify them by sight and sound. These older students also learned about composers and matched them to the songs they heard.⁵⁴ In just a few short years, it was noted that since the introduction of the music appreciation course, pupils were graduating from the grade and high schools “who are fitted to be intelligent listeners and whose capacity for the enjoyment of music has been increased one hundred-fold.”⁵⁵

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. In the spring of 1924, several of her students wrote stories about the song “Morning,” from the “Peer Gynt Suite” by Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg. Lillian Chambers, an eighth grader at Franklin School, wrote the song made her think about the early morning, with the sun just coming up, “the people are not awake, the birds are just awakening, the stream is trickling over the rocks, everything else is very still.” Irving School seventh grader, Marie Adams, stated the music made her think about a spring morning in May, “when all the spring flowers are blooming...and the butterflies are fluttering from flower to flower.”⁵⁶

Not only did Kessler lead lessons and activities in music appreciation, but she also organized and directed musical groups in the various schools, often serving as an accompanist to her students. In 1920, Kessler began organizing the grade school orchestras. That first year, the

⁵² “Franklin Wins Music Contest,” *The Pantagraph*, May 11, 1921.

⁵³ Kessler, *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950 in five volumes, Volume I*, 244.

⁵⁴ “Visitors Hear Children Recite,” *The Pantagraph*, December 9, 1922.]

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ “Children Tell Music’s Story,” *The Pantagraph*, April 19, 1924.

orchestra was made up of 29 students who attended the various ward schools in Bloomington. Kessler led rehearsals and helped the students make “excellent progress” throughout the spring semester. In addition to playing at several mothers’ club meetings that year, and as part of the grade school commencement in June, the grade school orchestra was seen as “practical experience for future high school orchestras which in turn will train musicians for the good of Bloomington as a whole.”⁵⁷ By the fall of 1921, grade school orchestras had been organized at Lincoln, Irving, and Franklin schools in Bloomington, all under Kessler’s direction. Prior to this there had only been a high school orchestra (which was formed around 1913).⁵⁸

Kessler’s grade school orchestras performed regularly in the community. At a meeting of the Emerson School PTA in November 1921, Kessler brought a group of her students to demonstrate the work that had been done in music appreciation.⁵⁹ In the spring of 1922, Kessler and her students performed at the annual junior day for the Amateur Musical Club. Along with her orchestra, dozens of other students performed as well, including 20 soloists on piano, harp, saxophone, and coronet (all performing without any sheet music), plus two grade school choruses. It was reported by the *Pantagraph* that all these musicians “revealed much promising talent among the younger generation of Bloomingtonians.”⁶⁰ On February 24, 1923, students in first through seventh grades gave another public performance with the Amateur Musical Club, this time at Bloomington High School. Through the performance, Kessler and her students demonstrated all that they had learned throughout the school year so far. The program featured a performance by the grade school orchestra, demonstrations of folk dances by third and fourth graders, a dramatization of the “Midsummer Night’s Dream” overture, and many more songs by students in first, second, fifth, and sixth grades.⁶¹

In January 1920, she accompanied the High School Girls Glee Club who performed for members of the Bloomington Rotary club at the Illinois Hotel.⁶² At a December 1926 meeting of the Sarah Raymond School Parent Teacher Association, Kessler’s primary room students sang Christmas carols and performed a few musical pieces.⁶³ At another meeting of the Sarah Raymond School PTA in 1932, Kessler and her students performed a minuet for those in attendance.⁶⁴ At the November 10, 1941 meeting of the Washington School PTA, Kessler’s girls’ glee club sang several songs as part of the evening’s agenda.⁶⁵ In February 1947, she directed the girls’ ensemble from Washington School in a performance for members of the Order of the Eastern Star at Bloomington’s Masonic Temple.⁶⁶ Kessler also led the Washington School “Harmonizers,” made up of seventh and eighth grade boys. They performed for various groups in the community, including the Exchange Club in December 1948, for Twin City and LeRoy Home Bureau units in March 1949, and accompanied the junior high chorus (made up of 240

⁵⁷ “Orchestra of Grade Pupils,” *The Pantagraph*, June 4, 1920.

⁵⁸ “Ward School Orchestra,” *The Pantagraph*, October 1, 1921; *The Aegis*, Bloomington High School Yearbook, 1913, p118.

⁵⁹ “Emerson Club Meets,” *The Pantagraph*, November 16, 1921.

⁶⁰ “Annual Junior Play,” *The Pantagraph*, April 17, 1922.

⁶¹ “Children Show Their Ability.”

⁶² “How Time Flies, 50 years,” *The Pantagraph*, January 30, 1970.

⁶³ “Raymond P.T.A.,” *The Pantagraph*, December 11, 1926.

⁶⁴ “Raymond P.T.A. Elects Officers,” *The Pantagraph*, March 13, 1932.

⁶⁵ “PTA Plans School Night for Parents,” *The Pantagraph*, November 9, 1941.

⁶⁶ “Family Night for OES 50 Announced,” *The Pantagraph*, February 2, 1947.

students) during their seven-part performance in honor of the centennial of Bloomington in June 1950.⁶⁷

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), and contributions to the Conference's publication, the *Music Supervisors' Journal*. Founded in 1907, the Music Supervisors' National Conference (MSNC) was dedicated to advancing and preserving music education as part of a core curriculum in schools across the United States.⁶⁸ Kessler appears to have been a member of the Conference since at least 1922.⁶⁹

In the fall of 1928, Kessler was selected to serve on the Committee of Music Appreciation with music appreciation teachers from throughout the United States. Those on the committee served as advisors for a new series of music educational concerts that would be aired beginning October 26 by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and sponsored by the Radio Corporation of America (RCA).⁷⁰ Called the "NBC Music Appreciation Hour," the goal "was to supplement rather than supplant local instruction in the appreciation of music, by presenting through the medium of broadcasting a type of program not otherwise available in the average school."⁷¹ The series was touted as "the first programs of their kind ever to be broadcast nationally and on an organized scale to the schools of the country." They aired on the radio each Friday for six weeks, and each series consisted of twelve half-hour programs. The age appropriate content (for students in third grade through high school and college) exposed students to the works "of the great masters," (mainly nineteenth-century European composers) and helped them "learn to recognize the various instruments to distinguish" them from each other, to learn about music as an expressive medium, to analyze musical forms, and to explore the lives of the great composers.⁷² The concerts were led by Dr. Walter Damrosch, a distinguished German American conductor, music educator, and composer. Damrosch was very interested in music education and utilized the medium of radio to further the cause of music appreciation. He began his radio work in 1923 with a series of lecture-recitals and three concerts from Carnegie Hall. In 1926, he appeared with the New York Symphony Orchestra during International Radio Week. And from 1928-1942, he hosted the NBC Music Appreciation Hour, which was heard by school children throughout the United States and Canada.⁷³ Undoubtedly, these series would have been heard on radios in classrooms throughout Bloomington. It is not clear how long Frances Kessler remained on the initial committee of advisors, but she was reappointed in 1937.⁷⁴

As part of her membership in the National Association of Music Supervisors, Kessler was a member of a subcommittee in the Music Appreciation Department in 1929. She and the other

⁶⁷ "Week-Long Celebration Planned for Centennial," *The Pantagraph*, June 8, 1950.

⁶⁸ "About NAFME," <https://nafme.org/about/nafme-history/>, Accessed August 29, 2023.

⁶⁹ "Dardens Entertain Guests," *The Pantagraph*, April 18, 1922.

⁷⁰ "Great Music School of Air Inaugurated," *Radio World*, October 20, 1928

⁷¹ "Howe, Sondra Wieland. "The NBC Music Appreciation Hour: Radio Broadcasts of Walter Damrosch 1928-1942," *Journal of Research in Music Education*, Vol. 51, No. 1, Spring 2003, 64-67.

⁷² "Damrosch to Resume Music Radio Courses," *Indianapolis Times*, September 27, 1928; Howe, "The NBC Music Appreciation Hour: Radio Broadcasts of Walter Damrosch 1928-1942), 67-68.

⁷³ Howe, "The NBC Music Appreciation Hour: Radio Broadcasts of Walter Damrosch 1928-1942), 64.

⁷⁴ "Raymond School," *The Pantagraph*, September 20, 1937.

two members of the committee focused on music appreciation methods for students in first through sixth grades.⁷⁵ In December that same year, she published an article in the Association's *Music Supervisors' Journal* about how the program of music appreciation in Bloomington Public Schools began and evolved since its introduction 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 helped ensure students would become listeners to and lovers of music. Kessler noted that the students she began teaching in 1919 (who were in first grade then) were now in high school, and that it was "her privilege to watch their progress from grade to grade, as their knowledge and interest in music increased." It was her hope that her students acquired "the foundation upon which they will continue to build an appreciation of good music and that they have had instilled the habit of concert going, which will bring real pleasure and beauty to them in their busy lives."⁷⁶

In 1930, Kessler served on a three-person Music Appreciation Committee and published a suggested course of study for students in first and fourth grades to be used nationwide. Kessler and her fellow music appreciation teachers on the committee (Leonora Coffin from Indianapolis and Edwin Barnes from Washington, D.C.) outlined in detail the skills students should learn in these two grades, the tools that should be utilized, and the overall goal of the curriculum. The hallmark of their course of study was that classrooms should have a phonograph with at least 15 recordings of music, with recommended musical selections ranging from Stephen Foster (Swanee River), Antonín Leopold Dvořák (Humoresque), Johannes Brahms (Cradle Song, Hungarian Dance No. 7), Edvard Grieg (Morning, In the Hall of the Mountain King), Ludvig von Beethoven (Turkish March), Johann Strauss (The Blue Danube Waltz) and many more. By listening to a variety of music, students would learn to appreciate it, be able to tell the difference between a waltz and a march, identify the types of musical instruments they heard, and identify composers and song titles as they listened to music.⁷⁷

Also in 1930, eighteen Bloomington High School students attended the Music Supervisors' National Conference, held March 23-28 in Chicago, Illinois. Several of the students participated in harmony demonstrations, while others were part of the larger national high school orchestra, which gave several performances during the conference. In addition to accompanying the students to the convention, Kessler (who was listed as chairman of Music Appreciation at Bloomington Public Schools at this time), was part of the 15-member national music appreciation committee that held special sessions during the convention.⁷⁸

In addition to her passion for furthering the education of her students, Kessler expanded her own studies in music appreciation and education. She attended Illinois Wesleyan University and obtained a bachelor's degree in Music Education in 1933.⁷⁹ While she worked toward obtaining her degree, she served as an instructor in Public School Music Appreciation Methods at IWU from 1930 to 1934.⁸⁰ During the summer months, she completed the requirements for a

⁷⁵ Keith, Alice. "Music Appreciation Department," *Music Supervisors' Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1, October 1929, 39.

⁷⁶ Kessler, "Music Appreciation in Bloomington," 43-44.

⁷⁷ Leonora Coffin, Edwin Barnes, and Frances Kessler. "Suggested Graded Course in Music Appreciation for First Six Years," *Music Supervisors' Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3, February 1930, 35-41, 77.

⁷⁸ "High School Pupils to Perform at Music Supervisors' National Conference," *The Pantagraph*, March 9, 1930.

⁷⁹ "Piano Recital to be Given by George Anson," *The Pantagraph*, July 16, 1933.

⁸⁰ *The Wesleyana*, IWU Yearbook, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934; *Illinois Wesleyan University Bulletin, Annual Catalogue*, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934.

Master of Music Education degree from the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago in 1937.⁸¹

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.⁸² Fortunately, Kessler was assigned to teach fourth grade at the Sarah Raymond School in Bloomington that fall.⁸³ This change did not stop her from teaching students about music and culture. In February 1934, Kessler directed an "Italian Project," featuring her fourth-grade students in a program for patrons of the school. Highlights included a conversational program first in English and then in Italian, a dramatization of "Pinocchio," an original song composed by the children about an Italian doll Miss Kessler brought them from the Chicago World's Fair.⁸⁴

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 1952.⁸⁵ Upon her retirement, the president of the Washington School PTA presented Kessler with a bowl of red roses for "her service in musicianship to Bloomington grade school children," and the junior high orchestra "saluted her with Tchaikovsky's "Russian Chorale."⁸⁶

Perhaps one of the highlights of her teaching career came in November 1947 when Kessler led a special music broadcast over the airwaves of local radio station WJBC, very much in the style that Dr. Walter Damrosch utilized in his NBC music appreciation broadcasts which ended five years prior.⁸⁷ From November 4-6, 1947, Kessler led music appreciation lessons via FM airwaves on WJBC to familiarize students with selected works that would be featured during the upcoming children's concert by the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra on November 17. Ownership of the radio station had recently been taken over by the Bloomington Broadcasting Corporation, and as part of that transition, the broadcast frequency was changed from AM to FM.⁸⁸ WJBC offered the special broadcast as a public service and local merchants loaned FM radio sets that were placed in all Bloomington Public Schools (Normal schools and Bloomington parochial schools were invited to participate, too). The project was arranged by Helen Rothgeb, supervisor of vocal music for Bloomington schools, Mabel Nafziger, music supervisor for Normal Public schools, and Helen Heck Patton, who was in charge of public school music education at Illinois Wesleyan University. For 30 minutes on those three afternoons, Kessler discussed works that would be performed by the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra on November

⁸¹ "Raymond School."

⁸² Kessler, Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950 in five volumes, Volume I, 245

⁸³ "Types of Material, Contractors Bonds Accepted by Board," *The Pantagraph*, June 25, 1932.

⁸⁴ "Pupils Study About Italy," *The Pantagraph*, February 4, 1934.

⁸⁵ "Safety Patrol, Miss Kessler Recognized," *The Pantagraph*, May 18, 1952; "Paul Allison Named to Education Board," *The Pantagraph*, February 1, 1952.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ "Radio to Familiarize Students with Concert," *The Pantagraph*, November 2, 1947.

⁸⁸ "New Ownership Reveals Plan to Improve WJBC," *The Pantagraph*, January 14, 1947.

17 at 3:00 p.m. She illustrated her remarks with chords at the piano, all transmitted over the FM airwaves.⁸⁹

The children's concert, held at the Scottish Rite Temple auditorium, was partially sponsored by the Amateur Musical Club, so each of the 1,534 children who attended were only charged a small fee.⁹⁰ Works that were featured during the concert included a military march from the "London Suite" by Eric Coates, "Prelude to the Meistersinger" by Richard Wagner, "Classical Symphony" by Sergei Prokofiev, "The Blue Danube" by Johann Strauss, and "Dance of the Hours" by Amilcare Ponchielli.⁹¹ Washington School eighth grade student Dick Coleman gave his critique of the performance the following day, offering a detailed account of all the songs and sharing the meanings behind some of them. He noted that the conductor, Dr. Rudolf Ringwall, introduced all the instruments featured during the performance and had each one played by a member of the orchestra after the first number. Despite the concert starting 25 minutes late (due to the late arrival of the musical instruments), Coleman noted that all in attendance thoroughly enjoyed the concert, and that his favorite piece of music from the performance was "The Blue Danube."⁹²

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.⁹³ Some 1,200 children "sat in silence for two hours" listening to classical music written by a variety of composers that included Gioachino Rossini ("William Tell Overture"), Giacomo Puccini ("La Boheme"), Josiah Savig ("Call to Arms"), and Charles Gounod ("Funeral March of a Marionette"). Several compositions written by student attendees were published in *The Pantagraph* for several months following the concert. Many of the students said that the "William Tell Overture" was their favorite piece, with a large number also mentioning "La Boheme" as a favorite. Charles Agle, Jr., an eighth grade student attending Washington School, stated that the whole performance impressed him very much and the concert was very enjoyable.⁹⁴ Edwards School eighth grade student, Paul Rhymer (who would go on to be a one of the great writers of 1930s "script" radio shows with his popular "Vic and Sade"), stated the piece that impressed him the most was "The Funeral March of the Marionette." He 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."⁹⁵

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. "She played different records describing things and taught us to appreciate music."⁹⁶ Charles Ross

⁸⁹ "Music Instruction in Modern Manner," *The Pantagraph*, November 7, 1947.

⁹⁰ "Radio to Familiarize Students with Concert," Advertisement, "Roland's...a store of Fashion," *The Pantagraph*, November 18, 1947.

⁹¹ "Young Critic Pleased by Afternoon Concert," *The Pantagraph*, November 18, 1947.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ "School Children Describe Music," *The Pantagraph*, March 23, 1920.

⁹⁴ "Children Write on Symphony Orchestra," *The Pantagraph*, May 27, 1920.

⁹⁵ "Symphony Orchestra," *The Pantagraph*, May 28, 1920.

⁹⁶ "Church organist spends spare time at his music," *The Pantagraph*, March 12, 1978.

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.”⁹⁷

Kessler did not limit herself to just educating children about music appreciation. She also led several adult courses in the subject which were held at Y.W.C.A. and at Illinois Wesleyan University. In March 1931, Kessler led the Bloomington Woman’s Club through an hour-long session studying the growth and present formation of a symphony orchestra at the Y.W.C.A. Using a series of 15 posters, Kessler taught club members about the instruments that made up an orchestra. She told participants to “learn to recognize the many voices of the many instruments. They are like the many voices of the relatives around a large family breakfast table.” At the close of the lecture, Kessler directed a group of student musicians from Illinois Wesleyan University (where she was both a student and an instructor) in a performance of several pieces to illustrate the various groups of instruments in the orchestra.⁹⁸

In the fall of 1949, Kessler, and several other alumni members of Sigma Alpha Iota (SAI) music fraternity for women at Wesleyan, conducted a ten-week music appreciation course. Topics included “Introduction to Music as a Language for Mankind,” “Making the Most of a Song Recital,” “Music Drama,” “Thrills of the Symphony Orchestra,” and “How to Build a Record Library.” The class began on September 27 and was held at Illinois Wesleyan University.⁹⁹ In 1954, Kessler led another adult music appreciation program at IWU. Working with fellow members of the Amateur Musical Club and SAI, Kessler and the other instructors offered a variety of classes that allowed students to try musical instruments (such as the large church organ at Wesley United Methodist Church). They also attended a rehearsal of the Bloomington-Normal Symphony and discussed modern music with records.¹⁰⁰ To Kessler, it was never too late for anyone, at any age, to learn music appreciation.

Kessler became an honorary member of SAI on November 6, 1926.¹⁰¹ This music fraternity for women was founded in 1903, with the goal of encouraging, nurturing, and supporting the art of music.¹⁰² It was especially fitting that Kessler was made an honorary member of the Sigma Alpha chapter at Illinois Wesleyan University for her work in music appreciation in Bloomington Public schools. According to *The Pantagraph*, “the widespread results of her work are now very evident in the splendid response of the children of the city to the worth-while music they hear over the radio and at the children’s concerts given by several of the symphony orchestras,” many of which Kessler had a hand in arranging. She was the first honorary member of the IWU chapter.¹⁰³

Kessler was also a member of the In and About McLean Music Club, founded by music teachers of McLean County. Beginning in 1943, the goal of the club was to “unify and promote

⁹⁷ “Teacher bequeaths music appreciation,” *The Pantagraph*, February 19, 1975.

⁹⁸ “Woman’s Club Studies Symphony Orchestra with Miss Kessler,” *The Pantagraph*, March 4, 1931.

⁹⁹ “Adult Course in Appreciation of Music Set,” *The Pantagraph*, September 16, 1949.

¹⁰⁰ “Adult Program Music Course to Open Tuesday,” *The Pantagraph*, October 3, 1954.

¹⁰¹ “Music Fraternity Holds Initiation for Miss Kessler,” *The Pantagraph*, November 6, 1926.

¹⁰² “About SAI,” Sigma Alpha Iota International Music Fraternity, <https://www.sai-national.org/about-sai.html>, Accessed September 1, 2023.

¹⁰³ “Music Fraternity Holds Initiation for Miss Kessler.”

music in the schools.”¹⁰⁴ Members of the club included grade school and high school music teachers, music teachers at the university level, and “persons interested in school music.”¹⁰⁵ Each year, the club took on a special project, which typically was sponsorship of the McLean County High School Music Festival (that was open to any student in McLean County).¹⁰⁶ Anywhere between 700 and 1,100 students participated in this annual event. Activities included performances by an all-county band and chorus made up of high school students, clinics for various band instruments prior to the public performances, and even a “juke box dance” for students during intermissions between rehearsals.¹⁰⁷ It appears that the club was among the sponsors of this event from 1944 to 1950.¹⁰⁸

Except for the two years that Kessler taught in Tennessee, she always lived at home with her family. Her family lived at several addresses in Bloomington over the years, including 204 North Allin Street, 110 West Locust Street, 303 West Market Street, 103 East Locust Street, 407 East Washington Street, and 703 ½ East Washington Street. By 1929, Frances, her mother and father, and sister Louise were all living at a house located at 1103 ½ East Jefferson Street. They lived there until 1949 when they all moved to a residence at 805 ½ East Front Street. After their father passed away in 1950 and mother in 1957, Frances and Louise lived at 1117 East Grove Street between 1957 and 1962.¹⁰⁹ From 1963 until Louise’s death in 1968, Frances and her sister shared an apartment at the Lafayette Apartments, located at 410 East Washington Street. Frances continued to live there for a few more years after Louise’s death until about 1974 when she spent her remaining years living at Heritage Manor, a senior care facility in Bloomington.¹¹⁰

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.¹¹¹

Kessler devoted her entire life to music appreciation and education. Because of her efforts, music became an integral part of the curriculum in Bloomington Public and created a strong tie that bound students and teachers together.¹¹²

By: Candace Summers, 2023

¹⁰⁴ “Music Teachers Organize New County Club,” *The Pantagraph*, October 26, 1943.

¹⁰⁵ “Music Teachers Organize New County Club,” *The Pantagraph*, October 27, 1943.

¹⁰⁶ “County Music Festival to Attract 16 Schools,” *The Pantagraph*, April 23, 1944.

¹⁰⁷ “County Music Fete at ISNU Friday,” *The Pantagraph*, April 19, 1951; “700 Will Sing in Music Show,” *The Pantagraph*, March 26, 1949.

¹⁰⁸ “1000 Students Take Part in Music Festival,” *The Pantagraph*, March 31, 1949; “1,100 Perform in Music Festival,” *The Pantagraph*, April 15, 1950.

¹⁰⁹ “Samuel F. Kessler,” *The Pantagraph*, March 16, 1950; Mrs. S. F. Kessler,” *The Pantagraph*, May 7, 1957; *Bloomington-Normal City Directories* for years 1909 through 1962, various pages.

¹¹⁰ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory* for years 1963 through 1975 various pages.

¹¹¹ “Miss Frances Kessler;” “Lewis Kessler Died Last Night,” *The Pantagraph*, March 19, 1924.

¹¹² “Better Homes and Better Health Week is to be Observed in Bloomington, with Many Big Events,” *The Pantagraph*, April 23, 1927.