

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 a 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.