“Making the library be alive”:
Portland’s librarian, Mary Frances Isom

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We have learned that vision and imagination are priceless qualities for librarians to possess, vision to look into the future and picture the possibilities, imagination to determine the essentials...Most librarians hampered by small funds, swamped with trifling details, burdened by petty economies, are too timid. We have not been accustomed to meet life in the large, we hesitate to stray from the neat footpath into the open field. Have we not learned to plunge a little, to take a chance or two, to bank on the future? Only he who dares wears the laurel, only he who spends acquires.1

Written only months before her death in 1920 at age 55, Mary Frances Isom’s words underscore her emphatic rejection of the staid librarian stereotype. As the 11th (and first female) head librarian of the Library Association of Portland, Isom took little more than ten years to transform an insular organization into a major community asset with an enviable national reputation. She was equally influential at the state level, drafting changes to Oregon law that furthered the free library movement in an era when, as a woman, she could not even vote. Described by one of her employees as “the most electric personality I ever knew,”2 she continues to inspire librarians and others a full century after her heyday.

First and foremost, Isom was a working woman who combined top-notch professional training with her own unique talents in the service of developing an exceptional library. She so identified with the mission of the institution she led that, as one library board member wrote, “the story of one would be incomprehensible without consideration of the other.”3 Yet, insistent that the library “shall hold an essential part in the life of the community,” she extended her institution’s reach far beyond book-filled walls.4

Mary Frances Isom was born on February 27, 1865 in Nashville, Tennessee, where her father was stationed as a surgeon in the Union Army. When the war ended, her socially prominent parents returned to their home in Cleveland, Ohio, where they raised their only child in a comfortable and cultured home. Educated in the public schools and by private tutors, Mary Frances (as she was called throughout her life) was the apple of her father’s eye. She entered Wellesley College in 1883, but returned home after a year due to poor health, later taking on the role of family hostess after her mother’s death. Given her close relationship with her father, his death in 1899 must have been a great blow. However, his passing also gave her two great gifts: an inheritance that granted her financial independence for the rest of her life, and the opportunity to channel her considerable energies into a much larger arena than her family’s domestic sphere. Although she did not need to work, she chose to do so. Having reached her mid-thirties, when marriage may no longer have
seemed either a desirable or likely option, Mary Frances Isom was poised to enter the growing ranks of professional women during the Progressive Era.

In selecting a career, Isom was guided by the example of a childhood friend, Josephine Rathbone. For Rathbone, fulfillment lay in the rapidly developing field of librarianship, which she described as providing a unique opportunity “for the exercise of all a woman’s powers—executive ability, knowledge of books, social sympathies, knowledge of human nature.” After graduating in 1893 from the U.S.’s first professional library school (the New York State Library School, founded by Melvil Dewey in 1887), Rathbone had joined the faculty of the second, the Pratt Library School in Brooklyn, New York, which opened its doors in 1890.

Even in an era where the sheer newness of library schools made each one notable, the Pratt Library School was outstanding in many respects. Chief among them was its cosmopolitan director, Mary Wright Plummer, an innovator credited with creating the first-ever separate children’s room within a library. Open to the public, the Pratt Institute’s library was considered the prototype of the new American free library and attracted visitors from around the globe. The library school, which used the Pratt Library as a training ground, was thus at the apex of current best practices within librarianship. Although the school did not require a college degree, entrance standards were high, with proficiency required in both French and German.

At the relatively advanced age of 34, Isom became one of the 25 members of Pratt’s class of 1900. Rathbone considered her maturity an asset, not a liability, later writing that Isom’s “rare personal gifts, broad human sympathies, penetrating insight into character, magnetism, creative power, and joyous sense of humor, marked her for distinction from the first.” Pratt’s yearlong program focused on cataloging, library organization and hands-on experience, augmented by field trips to binderies, bookstores, and other libraries. Clearly, director Mary Wright Plummer sought to develop her students’ capacity for creative thinking in an evolving profession; as she wrote in 1901, the school’s goal was to provide training in key principles so that students would “not fall back helplessly on cut-and-dried methods.” Isom became one of her favorite students, and was selected to be one of a handful of librarians to participate in a second year “historical course,” which focused on advanced training in administration, Italian, cataloging, bibliography, literature and the history of books. This specialized coursework prepared librarians to work in academic libraries and to manage the nation’s growing rare book collections.

After completing library school, Isom expected to find work in a private or academic library. When she heard about a cataloging position in Portland Oregon, she decided to give it a try, expecting to stay out West for only a few months. In choosing to come to Oregon, Isom joined the ranks of those aptly described as “cultural crusaders” by library historian Joanne E. Passet: professionally trained female librarians with a passion for books, a desire to make a difference and an interest in exploring the wide-open possibilities of the
American West. In the years between 1900 and World War I, these librarians institutionalized public libraries in the West by successfully developing the community demand and political infrastructure necessary to sustaining them.

Isom’s move out West was precipitated by a significant gift that irrevocably altered the nature of the Library Association of Portland (LAP), one of the city’s oldest cultural institutions. Established by community leaders in 1864 as a subscription library, the LAP was open to those who paid a membership fee and quarterly dues. After outgrowing several temporary locations, the library had built a permanent facility downtown at Seventh and Stark streets in 1893 (leasing its top floor to the Portland Art Association) and had a total of 1,151 members (including 552 students) by the end of 1900. In September of that year, Portland pioneer merchant John Wilson died, leaving his collection of 8,891 books, maps and other materials to the LAP. There was one condition: that these works be offered as a free reference library, available to everyone. Essentially the finest book collection in the state of Oregon at the time, Wilson’s gift necessitated careful consideration by the library’s board of directors. Ultimately, they decided that the only appropriate course of action would be to open the library’s doors to the public. In taking this step, they were following national trends with respect to the conversion of existing subscription libraries to tax supported public libraries.

A few details remained, including passage of the public library law by the Oregon legislature in 1901 that allowed the city of Portland to contract with the LAP to provide tax supported library services. There was also the matter of working out an agreement to absorb the books and assets of a much smaller but existing free library in Portland. Finally, Wilson’s books needed to be catalogued, an effort that required the services of a trained librarian. So, in the spring of 1901, Mary Frances Isom arrived in Portland. Applying herself to the task at hand, she immediately showed what she was made of. The library’s 1901 annual library report notes: “Miss Isom has worked with zeal and enthusiasm and the members of the staff transferred to her department have received most efficient training and instruction.” In January of 1902, head librarian Davis P. Leach left abruptly. While documentation is scant, the record suggests that the complex task of converting his institution to a public library may have been too great for this untrained librarian, and that the library board had realized that Isom’s arrival had given them other options. In any case, sensing a thoroughbred in their midst, the LAP’s leadership offered Mary Frances Isom the job of head librarian, which she readily accepted. Two months later, on March 10, 1902, the LAP officially began operating the first tax-supported free public library in Oregon. “We have opened quietly,” Isom reported to The Oregonian, “but people have been coming steadily all day, and everything is running smoothly and well. I think that in a little while the library will become still more generally used and will be appreciated as a free library should be.” This was an understatement. In the library’s first full year as a
public library, circulation rose to 146,329, almost triple the circulation it enjoyed in its last year as a subscription library.  

At this point in Isom’s story, the trajectory of her success becomes dizzying in its rapidity and scope. In 1902, the library was a single downtown building; a few years later, there were dozens of service outlets throughout the county. A few years after that, Isom had established the complex network of permanent library facilities, school outreach programs and other services that form the infrastructure of the Multnomah County Library system even today. Her impact on statewide and regional library services was equally dramatic, leading to the founding of the Oregon State Library, the Oregon Library Association, and the Pacific Northwest Library Association.  

Certainly, Isom had some unique circumstances in her favor. Concurrent with her entry into the library profession, Andrew Carnegie began his efforts to fund public library buildings across the U.S., which had as significant an impact in Oregon as it did elsewhere. Portland’s population explosion after the turn of the century, particularly after the Lewis & Clark Exposition in 1905, created the customer base needed to support a metropolitan library system. And, Isom was also fortunate in that the LAP’s independent status gave her greater freedom than she might otherwise have had to shape the library system as her professional instincts saw fit. Nonetheless, Isom’s timing and circumstances would not have sufficed had she not also been an astute political player, a skilled collaborator and an effective administrator. Although she lacked family connections in Oregon, her affluent background gave her the social poise needed to work effectively with the prominent and powerful men who oversaw the library. Serving as the secretary to the Library Association of Portland’s board of directors, Isom leveraged their significant political and social influence to further the library’s institutional development, never hesitating to credit her successes to their consistent support.  

In turn, her talents were fully recognized by her employers. “I think it is only due to say that the Association has in the present head of the Library one unusually gifted in the qualities of enthusiasm, executive ability, intelligent sympathy and moral force, which give to an institution of the kind a soul, and inspire every worker and user connected with it,” wrote LAP vice president Thomas Lamb Eliot about Isom after her first year as library director. In particular, Isom forged a close and productive working relationship with wealthy lumberman Winslow P. Ayer, who joined the LAP’s board in 1896 and served as its president from 1908 – 1921. Like Isom, Ayer was a strong supporter of the public library movement, and had been one of the three directors who had strongly advocated that the LAP open its doors to the public.  

Once established as head librarian, Isom began to address the three pressing needs identified in the LAP’s annual report of 1902: more books, more room, and increased funding. Since it was clear that the need for free library services did not end at the Portland city limits, and exceeded the resources that the city of Portland could offer, Winslow P. Ayer had the idea of securing
funding from Multnomah County. To accomplish this goal, Isom drafted a law that enabled Multnomah County to levy taxes for library purposes. Passed in 1903 by the Oregon Legislature, the law paved the way for MCL to become the West’s first county library system in the West and only the fourth such system in the U.S.23

With county funding in hand, Isom then worked on attracting library customers in a predominantly rural environment with many transportation challenges. Developing community interest through visits, newspaper advertising and outreach to postmasters, she succeeded by the end of 1903 in placing three book stations in the east county communities of Bridal Veil, Gresham and Fairview.24 A year later, eight more were established in communities such as Linnton, Hillsdale and Lents, and more were added in the years following as the library continued its outreach efforts. Traveling through the county’s most remote villages in Winslow Ayers’ chauffeured White Steamer automobile, Isom set up deposit stations in private homes, post offices, grange halls, and any other obvious gathering places where there was a volunteer librarian willing to oversee them. The deposit stations consisted of a single box with 50 – 100 books, providing basic informational resources to remote areas that were often in desperate need of them. Isom’s 1904 report includes mention of the dictionary that was included in the Pleasant View box by request, since no dictionary or encyclopedia was owned by anyone who lived there.25

Drawing from her training at Pratt, Isom also recognized the importance of addressing the particular needs of children, a philosophy that seems obvious today but may not have been in 1903, when she asserted that “even the conservative Smithsonian at Washington does not consider it beneath its dignity to support a children’s department and to do it brilliantly.”26 Under her guidance, the children’s area at the downtown library began to incorporate changing exhibits and child-focused programming. In addition, recognizing that many students lived too far from downtown Portland to visit her library, and that school libraries were inadequate, Isom distributed boxed children’s book collections to schools throughout the county. As she wrote in 1903, turning children into life-long readers was a moral issue as much as an effort to attract new library users:

...let us see to it that the Public Library does not neglect the wonderful opportunity it has to guide the reading of the young. The child’s environment may be such that we are powerless to improve it or do away with it altogether, but we are not powerless in the matter of his reading. If we do neglect the opportunities at our hand, then the state must suffer in the quality of its citizens, and the public library must bear the reproach.27

As the years progressed, Isom continued to develop new strategies to enhance the educational system, including installing public librarians in the community’s high schools.

Although Isom once described the day-to-day exchanges at her institution as “the pleasant service of bringing the right book and the right person
together,”

this genteel characterization of the optimal library experience was backed with steely determination towards continuous improvement in providing library services. Once library director, she systematically reorganized the downtown library, making books and other materials more accessible through a card catalog, bibliographies and other search aids. She also became a relentless evangelist for what she termed the “mission of the book” within her community, never missing an opportunity to share the gospel of the public library. According to one story, her house once caught on fire, necessitating a visit by the fire department. By the time the firemen left, Isom had signed them up as library cardholders.

Because Isom believed that the library belonged “to the many and not to the few,” she actively worked to attract new customers who were not its traditional middle or upper class base. Writing about the poor location of the library’s newspaper room, she wrote in 1902, “It is a question whether a newspaper room so isolated is doing the best service for the community. Careful observance of its visitors shows that the tramp element is practically missing.”

She also made it a priority to purchase books in German, French and other foreign languages, and to host cultural programming for the benefit of the county’s various immigrant communities. “We feel that we should combat in every possible way the unfortunate desire that many of the foreigners have, particularly the younger ones, to forget their own country,” she wrote in a 1915 monthly report. “They seldom acquire at first the best of American life and it is a pity that they should not appreciate the value of their own inheritance.”

Consistent with an emerging national trend in public libraries that favored limiting the use of closed book stacks, Isom was very clear that the importance of free access trumped any slavish need to protect the library’s assets. Her early annual reports reiterate the urgency of buying more, and better books, and lists of new books were published in the newspapers each week to encourage use. However, like other librarians of her time, Isom saw the public library as guiding its customers towards the right reading choices: nonfiction and literary classics were considered to be more wholesome than light or popular fiction, and it was the librarian’s duty to uplift the community by promoting these more edifying reading selections. Consistent with this approach, Isom would regularly report with satisfaction any reductions in the circulation of fiction.

Isom was equally prescriptive with respect to appropriate reading for children. While she approved of children’s classics such as The Wind in the Willows, Peter Pan and Heidi, she also felt it was essential to begin promoting nonfiction reading at an early age. Hence, in 1905, when the children’s room was first expanded, the library utilized a “ribbon plan” that placed the fiction on the top and bottom shelves, and nonfiction at eye level on the middle two shelves. Like her professional peers, Isom regarded popular but low-end youth fiction featuring Elsie Dinsmore, Tom Swift and the various heroes of Horatio Alger’s rags-to-riches tales as “an insult to the mind;” such materials were not only banned from her library, they were also the target of a successful 1913 effort by
her staff to convince local merchants not to stock them. While the image of a librarian practicing such aggressive censorship may seem startling today, it is entirely consistent with the impetus towards social control that underpinned the profession’s otherwise laudable efforts towards education and enrichment.

In the library’s 1903 annual report, where she describes her first forays into the remotest areas of Multnomah County, Isom identified a broader need than she and her library could fulfill:

This small experience in visiting the county districts has brought keenly home the need for a state organization for library work here in Oregon. Even in those small towns within reach of our city there are few people, fewer books, and very little to stimulate toward broader mental growth, to good citizenship, to getting out of life the best there is in it…. Is it not fitting as the only free library in the state we should use our active influence to bring about such an organization, properly equipped, with a trained library organizer at its head, whose work should be to encourage libraries already started, to establish new ones and to answer fully the many demands which come to this library which we must often neglect in part, or refuse entirely because our hands are tied.

In 1903, Isom had successfully written the amendment to Oregon public library law that allowed the Library Association of Portland to become a county-funded library; however, in its wisdom, the Oregon legislature had passed the law so that it only applied to Multnomah County. To Isom’s dismay, all other Oregon communities were still subject to the 1901 law that only allowed for city-funded libraries, a situation that seriously hampered expansion of library services to rural populations.

Nonetheless, she decided to approach the problem from another angle: by creating an Oregon Library Commission that would help develop public libraries throughout the state. After a visit to the Wisconsin Library Commission in 1904 to study this national model, Isom drafted a bill authorizing an Oregon Library Commission for the Oregon house’s consideration in early 1905. She then worked hand in hand with members of the Oregon Federation of Women’s Clubs (who had been instrumental in passing the 1901 bill) to ensure that it met with success.

After the bill passed, and Isom and Winslow P. Ayer had been appointed as the two members of the Oregon Library Commission, her next step was to find a librarian to become its secretary (head). Seeking a good candidate, Isom turned to Wisconsin Library Commission staff member Cornelia Marvin (whom she had met in 1904) for her advice; Marvin responded by nominating herself. An ideal choice, Marvin had developed a broad and dynamic vision of public library service informed by relationships with renowned library educator Katherine Sharp (Melvil Dewey’s chief protégé) and progressive reformers such as Jane Addams and Florence Kelley. Despite the significant cut in pay that she would experience by changing jobs, Marvin was attracted to the possibilities of building a statewide commission from the ground up.
Isom and Marvin became Oregon’s twin beacons of public library service, forging a strong professional bond as well as a close personal friendship. Eight years younger than Isom, Marvin was an equally vivid personality, albeit a bit fierier in nature (as evidenced by historian Dorothy Johansen’s contrast of Marvin’s “hard clenched fist” to Isom’s “smiling firmness.” The two sought advice from each other, commiserated with each other and did not hesitate to disagree strongly with each other as they worked to transform Oregon’s library landscape. Their correspondence sparkles with a shared sense of humor and keen observations about the people they both knew and worked with. For example, in December, 1905, writing about a fellow librarian, Isom wrote to Marvin, “he is a gentleman with some culture and polish and we cannot say that of all our library friends, unfortunately.” Marvin’s reply readily agreed with Isom, noting that the person in question was “one of the few men librarians really worth anything.”

In her 23 years at the head of the state library commission (which evolved into the Oregon State Library), Cornelia Marvin made her own indelible mark on Oregon library history, initiating the state’s first mail order library service and assisting in the development of close to 100 libraries. Yet, she did not hesitate to credit Isom for her pivotal role in statewide library development, correctly describing her as “the founder of all our library institutions and associations.” In 1903, Isom organized the Oregon Library Association; six years later, she helped found the regional Pacific Northwest Library Association, serving as its second president from 1910 – 1911. She also invited the American Library Association to hold its annual conference in Portland to coincide with the Lewis & Clark Exposition in 1905. In 1912-13, she would serve as a vice president of ALA; however, her perceptions of ALA’s effectiveness were ultimately mixed. In a 1911 letter to Cornelia Marvin, she described herself as “a Philistine” with respect to the national organization, ultimately placing greater confidence in PNLA.

Once established in Portland, her self-identification as a “Western librarian” was complete, and she embraced the cause of responding to the West’s critical need for trained library staff. Her biggest dream in this arena was to establish a library school in Portland, and although her efforts in 1912 to convince Andrew Carnegie to fund such a school were unsuccessful, she continue to refine the library’s own training program and to pursue ways to expand the learning opportunities it offered beyond her own staff.

Almost immediately after Isom began her work in Portland, use of the library began to explode. In 1905, the Portland Art Association vacated the library’s second floor to accommodate a library expansion; at the end of that same year, Isom’s annual report pointed to the need for permanent branch libraries. In 1907, the library began converting some deposit stations into reading rooms staffed by library employees, and opened branches in Sellwood, Albina and East Portland in rented spaces. The following year, circulation jumped 44%. By 1909, Isom was expressing her vision of a modern library system:
A new central building, spacious and well planned, not only providing room for people and room for books, but also giving opportunity for growth and the broadening of the scope of the Library’s activities is a necessity. A chain of branch libraries through the city, carefully placed, suitably housed and properly equipped is also a necessity if the Library is to meet the legitimate demands made upon it.46

With a clear need established, the library’s board began to seek donated land as well as support from Andrew Carnegie to build permanent branch libraries. The first installment of Carnegie’s largesse came in 1911, with $105,000 that funded branches in East Portland, North Portland and Albina that opened from the end of 1911 through early 1913. An additional $60,000 of Carnegie funds received in 1912 supported branch libraries in Gresham, St. Johns, South Portland, and Arleta, which opened from 1913 – 1921.47 By 1920, the year of Isom’s death, the Library Association of Portland boasted 16 branch libraries in rented and permanent facilities.

To build the library system’s crown jewel, however, the process was more complicated. The library board determined that the best approach would be to sell the downtown Stark St. facility to purchase the city block bounded by SW Yamhill, Taylor, 10th and 11th street, and donate it to the county. In exchange, the county would levy a tax to support the new building and pay for its ongoing maintenance. In the spring of 1911, Isom traveled to New York to consult with colleagues at the New York Public Library, where the finishing touches were being made on a grand new library on Fifth Avenue. She also engaged the building’s architects, Carrere and Hastings, for preliminary drawings for a Portland library, but by the end of that year, the library board had shifted this work to the local firm of Doyle, Patterson & Beach, architects of the East Portland Library.48

Isom and her chief architect, Albert E. Doyle, set to work on developing a plan for Portland’s new Central Library, traveling East to visit newly completed libraries in other large cities. One immediate finding, which Isom’s fellow librarians were not shy in revealing to them, was that many of these beautiful, monumental buildings functioned poorly as libraries. In step with Isom’s pragmatic vision of library service, Doyle sought to design a librarian’s library, as carefully planned for the functions it needed to fulfill as a school, hospital or factory. At the time, large libraries were designed with reading rooms at the front of the building and closed multistoried stacks in the back; it was Isom’s idea to put the stacks in the center of the building (an architectural first)49, and to build reading rooms around the perimeter, determining, as Doyle described, “the disposition and relation of the rooms according to her definite ideas of library administration.”50 Corridors were avoided to minimize building costs and maximize use of the space.

Despite budget constraints that limited the use of embellishments, Doyle designed an elegant and engaging Georgian Revival structure that he described as having “a certain refined dignity befitting a library building.”51 Among the
building’s distinctive features are the external carvings and inscriptions that Isom selected.

The move to the new Central Library, which Isom later described as “The Great Adventure of the year” occurred on September 6, 1913, and was a fitting way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Library Association of Portland. Isom’s remarks that day noted the incredible growth of the library system in its first decade of public service as well as its deep rootedness as a democratic institution: “the public library is the people’s library, it is maintained by the people for the people.”52 To characterize the library’s rapid evolution since 1901, she described a scene from Through the Looking Glass, in which Alice is dragged along at lightning speed by the Red Queen, only to find herself under the same tree where she began:

Today, as we stand in this beautiful building, we realize that the race of the years has part of the time been “twice as fast,” for the scenery has changed; we are no longer under the same tree. We have arrived.53 Although the library system continued to evolve in the remaining seven years of Isom’s tenure, she was correct in noting that the library had “arrived.” By 1913, the foundational work that established her institution as one of the nation’s preeminent metropolitan library systems had largely been completed. When C.R. Ashbee, a leader of the English Arts & Crafts movement, visited Portland in 1916, the two things that he found most remarkable were the mountains and the public library. No doubt quoting Isom’s own words54, he described her as “hav(ing) the great work of ‘making the Library be alive,’” and noted the library’s role as “huge democratic propagandistic institution” that reached out to the homebound, immigrants, working people and school children.55

Isom herself described the library as “the great social center of a community,”56 an assertion borne out by the extensive amount of programming that the libraries hosted. In 1916, the year of Ashbee’s visit, almost 3,000 lectures and meetings were offered, attracting over 111,000 attendees. Other less formal happenings made the libraries unexpected hives of activity, as she noted in 1912:

I confess it is sometimes difficult to maintained the supremacy of the written word when the Camp fire girls are dancing around the May pole in the auditorium, and the teachers, forty strong from the neighboring school, are drinking tea in the staff room, when the Boy scouts are planning a hike in a corner of the children’s room, a campaign committee is carefully communing together over a reference room table, and a mother’s club is discussing school luncheons behind the closed doors of the committee room.57

The library took its responsibility to support the diverse interests of the community very seriously. Even the anarchist Emma Goldman was not turned away when she requested the use of a library meeting room.58

As the reminiscences of those who knew Isom reveal, hers was a personality of contradictions, perhaps best summed up by Cornelia Marvin as “delightful but entirely impersonal.” 59 Like many female visionaries with an
intense focus on achieving excellence, Isom was respected by her subordinates but not necessarily liked. Frequently noted for her charm, wit and engaging manners, she was also seen as relentless, demanding and even imperious. Considering the results she achieved, her managerial gifts are unquestionable. According to one library worker, “The mind was as sharp as a flash, and she saw the end, somehow in the beginning and wasted no time in getting on with it.” A strict taskmaster, she drove her staff to achieve the goals she had identified as important, sometimes creating fear and anxiety in the process, but also a sense of pride in being part of a worthy effort. The effect this had on those who worked for her was complex; even one who reported receiving the lash of her “violent temper,” nonetheless also said:

She influenced me more than any other person. She taught me to place a value on every worthwhile thing, she spurred an inquiring mind and she imbued me with her own driving ambition. She was tough on stupidity and swept the dull out of her path, but she made the smart, smarter. She was never lavish with compliments, but those she gave were from the heart, and were cherished like apples of gold.”

Solicitous towards the well-being of “her girls” (as she called her employees), she was also remembered for her moments of generosity, as when she sent a young trainee home on Christmas Eve, working the shift herself so that her employee could be at home with her family. Yet, for the most part, Isom maintained a formality with her staff that made her less than approachable.

Isom encouraged her staff to make the time for serious reading—and regularly reviewed the circulation files to keep an eye on the books they checked out. During the course of her day, she was prone to demanding impromptu book reports from anyone who crossed her path, even ambushing one victim on the trolley. Given Isom’s high literary standards, this caused library workers to only check out those books that would be sure to meet with her approval.

Isom never gave the impression that she was in a hurry. Instead, her relaxed and soft-spoken mien communicated self-possession and a strong sense of purpose. Cornelia Marvin recalled a 1907 overnight trip to Silver Creek Falls that she took with Isom and several of her Cleveland friends. When the group of women unexpectedly encountered a number of bulls running loose, Isom did not react with fear as the others did; instead, she called to the bulls, leading Marvin to conclude that “she was never afraid of anything.” A small “rounded but not fat” woman with snowy hair and the pink cheeks and soft blue eyes of a china doll, she was described by Marvin as more distinguished looking than pretty. She took care with her appearance, favoring embroidered, hand-sewn blouses to accompany the custom-made suits she wore to the library, and had a seamstress visit her at home each week to maintain her impeccable wardrobe.

Isom had a face that lit up when she talked and an infectious laugh that others readily responded to. The severity in her personality was leavened with a powerful dose of fun and humor that is evident in her correspondence with Marvin, as well as her handwritten monthly reports, where she was often slyly
irreverent about library customers. For example, a bulletin board for job seekers inspired this comment in 1913: “Never has such a list created such a steady demand for books. Possibly with its help many square pegs will find their round holes.” 67 She also enjoyed telling a story about her misadventures trying to help a customer at a service desk. Unaware of who she was and unimpressed with her eager interest in serving him, he told her, “Look here, girlie, you don’t need to shine up to me, it won’t get you nowhere.”68

In 1910, at the age of 45, Isom became an adoptive mother, taking in Berenice Langton, the ten-year-old daughter of Cleveland friends who were unable to care for her. Barred by Isom from reading many popular children’s books, Berenice was given free access to everything in her mother’s extensive personal library. So, she proceeded to read the complete works of Dickens, Ibsen, Whitman and so on, shelf by shelf. At thirteen, Berenice reached George Bernard Shaw’s play *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, which focuses on the moral complexities that surround prostitution. “I remember discussing it at length with my Aunt Mary,” she wrote years later, “because I couldn’t figure out what poor Mrs. Warren’s profession was.” According to Berenice, Isom “abhorred the stuffy and narrow minded, though she was thoroughly conventional in her behavior.” For example, she gave Berenice permission to smoke at 18, but cautioned her to avoid making herself “conspicuous” by smoking in person.69

Isom’s personal life was rich and meaningful, and her financial inheritance allowed her to create a domestic environment of comfort, beauty and refinement. She maintained two homes: an artistic and beautifully landscaped house she built in Northwest Portland, and Spindrift, a beachfront cottage in Neahkahnie that A.E. Doyle designed for her in 1912. Unable herself to “boil an egg or sew on a button,” 70 Isom nonetheless took pleasure in appointing her home with fine art, china and linens, while employing a Swedish housekeeper named Inga to oversee day-to-day operations.

More than just a lovely personal refuge, Isom’s home at 815 Overton Street was an asset she generously shared with her friends and library colleagues. Two of her department heads at the library lived there with her; she also regularly welcomed other library staff as visitors to her house in town and to Spindrift. Described by one staff member as “a serene and charming hostess, with the art of putting us entirely at ease,”71 Isom held frequent dinner parties and hosted a tea every other Sunday afternoon, when her dozen or so guests would join her in a reading of a novel or play. 72 Attended also by Isom’s several large cats and her Boston bull terrier, Bunker Hill, these must have been lively gatherings. (An adored pet, Bunker Hill also walked to work with his mistress every day and joined her in many of her daily activities.) Isom also took every opportunity to enjoy concerts and the theatre, again inviting library colleagues to join her as her guests, and indulged in her particular love of Bach by studying scores and playing music at home. 73

Isom’s listing in the 1914 Woman’s Who’s Who of America describes her as “Interested in social service of all kinds. Favors women’s suffrage.
Episcopalian. Independent in politics. President, Professional Women’s League of Portland.”

According to her daughter, Isom was also a passionate Anglophile, a supporter of the federal income tax and “a little ‘pink’ (very pale) in her economics.” Isom’s politics were progressive but not radical; her support of women’s suffrage did not extend to approval of the more extreme efforts of suffragists to win the vote. An Episcopal hospital chaplain who had worked closely with her described her as having “an abiding faith in freedom of speech and letting things win on their merits without repression.”

America’s entry into World War I had a great effect on America’s public libraries, presenting them with a unique opportunity to underscore their usefulness, expand their customer base and demonstrate their patriotism. Eager to get involved in the war effort, America’s public libraries offered information on food conservation, sold war bonds, and hosted book drives to benefit the troops in training camps and overseas. Portland’s Central Library was the Pacific Northwest’s regional collection and distribution center for these efforts. With pride, Isom called her main library “my soldier plant,” noting in 1918 that this effort had distributed over 50,000 books to recruiting stations, army bases, navy ships “and wherever else a book-hungry solder or sailor might happen to be.” More problematically, libraries throughout the U.S. also restricted or withdrew books in their collections that were considered seditious, unpatriotic or pro-German. Such censorship was typical at a time when anti-German hysteria was at its peak and when anyone questioning the war was perceived as obstructionist. In this context, the Library Association of Portland entered one of the most challenging moments in its history.

By April 1918, Portlanders had regularly demonstrated their enthusiastic support of various war fund drives, frequently causing the state to exceed its assigned quotas. Officials planning the government’s third war bond drive therefore spared no effort in ensuring that participation would again be outstanding. The drive began April 6; by April 12, Portland had been honored as the first city to meet its quota, and the community exulted in its success. However, as a headline in the April 12 Evening Telegram indicated, there was a fly in the ointment: “Librarian With Big Pay Check Will Not Purchase Bonds.”

The librarian in question was assistant librarian M. Louise Hunt. An LAP employee since 1910, Hunt had performed her job with distinction. Due to her opposition to war, Hunt had never previously purchased war bonds; her refusal to do so in April 1918 was reported to Liberty Loan officials via an anonymous letter. Their response was to question Mary Frances Isom about the matter, who told them that although she’d strongly urged Hunt to participate, Hunt had not been moved to do so. She then suggested they speak to Hunt directly, but Hunt’s refusal to capitulate led them to share the story with the press.

The community’s outraged reaction to Hunt’s stand was immediate and vehement. The U.S. District Attorney stated that such a disloyal person should not be allowed to hold a public office. Ministers, educators, the Mayor of Portland—all lined up to excoriate Hunt for her traitorous stance. Some also
called for the resignation of the library board and the library director, or for depriving the library of financial support. As chair of the library board, Winslow B. Ayer’s response was to swiftly convene a meeting the evening of Friday, April 12 to consider the case against Hunt. During the meeting, Isom explained how Hunt had impeccably performed the duties of her job, which included overseeing the library’s sale of war bonds. Hunt also spoke eloquently of her love of her country and her pacifist convictions. In response, with one dissenting vote, the library board passed a resolution absolving Hunt of any charges of disloyalty. They also issued a statement affirming her right to hold unpopular views, noting that “we are not willing to give up, in advance the very thing for which the best and bravest of us are now fighting, and which our ancestors risked their lives to win for us.”

The community was not satisfied, and the board’s one dissenting member, W. F. Woodward, joined the fray of those calling for Hunt’s dismissal. Responding to this public pressure, Ayer scheduled another meeting of the library board at noon on Monday, April 15. All that exists to shed light on what was happening privately between Isom and Hunt at this point is a 1958 letter that the former assistant librarian wrote in response to a request for information about “The Hunt Affair.” Although she largely demurred from giving a detailed response (writing rather tersely, “the less said about that now, the better, it seems to me”), Hunt shared that “During the last talk I had with Miss Isom she made it clear to me, altho (sic) I am not sure that she said it in so many words, that she wanted me to resign. I did so to relieve the board of further embarrassment.”

At the Monday meeting, M. Louise Hunt’s resignation was the main order of business. Woodward, the lone dissenter at the previous meeting, first attempted to have Hunt dismissed rather than to accept her resignation, but failed. He then turned to Isom, asking whether she had earlier stated that she was proud of the board’s action and would have resigned had they done otherwise. Isom affirmed that this was the case, at which point Woodward stated that he questioned her loyalty. Ayer then leapt to Isom’s defense, listing Isom’s her many contributions to the war effort and condemning Woodward’s statements as “reprehensible.”

Hunt left town immediately, but in the aftershocks of this three-day controversy, there was continued criticism of the position taken by the majority of the library board and by Isom. An April 20th editorial in the Oregon Voter, “Stand By Miss Isom,” urged the community to consider Isom’s record before condemning her, yet still stopped short of full support: “She has given us a library service that has been a blessing to our people, and her career is one Portland can be proud of, even if she did make one mistake in judgment.”

The Hunt incident had a galvanizing effect on W. F. Woodward, who continued his efforts to root out any seditious elements within the public library. At the board’s May 8 meeting, he produced three “pro-German” books that he had checked out, which in accordance with wartime policy should have been available to library patrons only with the permission of the library director.
Without blaming Isom, the board requested a new inventory and stronger control of all such offending publications. The meeting’s minutes also indicate that a letter signed by library staff and expressing “confidence in the librarian and in her loyalty to her country” was read, an indication that there was a perceived need to defend Isom’s patriotism. At the June 12 board meeting, Woodward moved that the Department of Justice be asked to review the quarantined books to consider any appropriate legal action against their writers, publishers or distributors. He also moved that on the 4th of July, the books be taken to the furnace room at Central Library to be incinerated, with the library board in attendance. Both motions failed, and the board chose to address the issue more thoughtfully through its existing book committee.

Isom has been justifiably lauded for taking a courageous stand in support of Louise Hunt. She has also been chided for not supporting Hunt more strongly than she did. Hunt’s efforts to clarify that Isom wanted her to resign suggests that her own perception was that Isom bowed to public pressure rather than taking a principled stand. However, effective leadership usually includes a generous portion of pragmatism; in the midst of the storm, Isom undoubtedly became aware that this was a battle whose continuance would only result in damaging the institution that she had worked for more than 15 years to develop. As a devout supporter of the war effort, a solicitous employer towards “her girls,” and a successful executive relatively unused to criticism, Isom must have found the Hunt affair and its aftermath to be particularly painful. On May 11, without mentioning Woodward’s name, she wrote to Cornelia Marvin, “You see that the villain still pursues us. I hope you do not believe what you read in the papers about the Library. I wonder how long one must sit and endure lies and misrepresentations, and I wonder too whether it is worthwhile.

The controversy died down by mid-summer; by that point, the 53-year-old librarian’s health had begun to suffer from other causes. Concerned about what was happening in France, and probably also desiring to definitively demonstrate her loyalty, Isom decided to go overseas and assist in ALA’s efforts to serve the troops. By that point, she had long been a prominent player in ALA’s wartime efforts. However, like Cornelia Marvin, she sometimes questioned the administrative decisions made by their colleagues to support the war effort. To Marvin, there were definitely gender issues at play; expressing her belief that certain involved male librarians were motivated primarily by personal ambition, she wrote tartly, “I don’t think library men are so much impressed with the missionary side of our work as our library women.” At the national level, Isom and Marvin’s criticisms were sometimes seen as divisive. In an October 1917 letter to Isom, Dr. Herbert Putnam, the general director of ALA’s Library War Service (and the Librarian of Congress) urged them both to “join us---or, if you like, let us join you—in united effort to secure the best results.” A year later, although Isom had determined to go to France, there were apparently some reservations that Putnam expressed to her about her ability to work well with others. Her response reveals much about her state of mind:
I do wish you wouldn’t so distrust me. You really don’t know me Dr. Putnam, you don’t realize that work is the joy of my life and my only reason for wanting to go across is that I can be of certain service there that I cannot be at home. I’m not difficult to work with, I am sure, and I do resent it a little when you say that I cannot recognize the good work others do unless it is done my way. Apologizing for what she characterized as her “horrid” comments about her colleagues, Isom promised not to overstep her authority in France. She also described the trip as her “swan song,” an allusion to her probable knowledge at that time that she was suffering from terminal cancer.

In any case, Isom set sail for France in the fall of 1918. Although the armistice was almost at hand, there was still much to be done to fulfill ALA’s wartime motto of “a book for every man.” The effort to improve morale through the distribution of reading materials only intensified in the months after the war ended, as injured servicemen recuperated in army hospitals and able-bodied men waited to be shipped home. Beginning with a description of her ship’s crossing, Isom wrote a series of letters to her staff at the library that vividly capture the highs and lows of her last great adventure. Arriving in Paris just in time for Armistice Day (November 11), Isom entered a city she described as “stark staring crazy mad with joy and excitement.” mobs of civilians and enlisted men blended with flag-festooned parades, songs and fireworks to create a raucous, unforgettable impression. At one point, Isom got through a crush of people only by linking arms with two American soldiers and bravely forging ahead.

At the time Isom arrived in France, there were over 200 American hospitals still operating in France. During her five-month stay, she visited 93 of them, focusing her work on the large base centers that encompassed multiple hospitals and convalescent camps. Isom’s job was to inspect library operations at each location and in many cases, jump start new libraries so that books that had been donated and shipped from the U.S. were placed in the hands of servicemen as quickly as possible.

Conditions at the hospitals were usually grim. At her first stop, Mesves-Bulcey, which included twelve hospitals and over 26,000 patients and staff, constant rains created a sea of yellow mud and water seeped through the concrete walls of the hospital buildings. Far from her comfortable home in Portland, Isom braved the damp, the cold, and periodic lack of running water, describing in letters to her “dear Library Family” how she drank cocoa from her toothbrush glass and used her button-hook to stir in the sugar. Yet the lack of creature comforts was nothing compared to the psychological challenge of interacting with the emotionally and physically wounded “brave boys” whom she so admired. On December 9th, she wrote: “I keep thinking it is all a bad dream and I must wake up… I work as long as I can and then I sit on my camp chair close to my tallow dip and read novel after novel and I know I shall not remember one of them.” But less than a week later, she wrote: “I can stand
anything now. I can even look on the most horrible wounds without flinching...I could write forever about this place, unhappy, miserable, sordid, wretched as it is, but it is very human, there is no pretense.”

In the hospital wards where there were no libraries in place, Isom opened them quickly and efficiently. Within two hours, she would have all the books unpacked, a simple system for keeping track of the collection in place, and a trained volunteer librarian at the helm. Roma Brashear, a librarian who worked alongside her at one point during her stay in France, described Isom’s method of engaging the troops:

I suppose that the enlisted man never “stepped livelier” in all his military career than he did under Miss Isom’s direction. After the habitual loitering of that hospital life, whether as patient or as corps man, he must have felt somewhat dazed by the spirit of activity with which he found himself surrounded... If she did not approve of what you were doing or the way you were doing it, she promptly and pleasantly without any hedging or tactful leading up to it told you so, often in a way that made you laugh and usually in a way that convinced.

With the library open for business, Isom then trolled the wards to promote the new service and to take the patients’ orders for books. In her letters and reports sent home, she described “hulking six footers” swathed in bandages who would sheepishly ask for love stories, one young man who asked for something by Milton, because “it would be such a comfort,” and another who gratefully told her that for the three months “before the books came,” his only activity had been to count the bricks in the wall.

Although she ultimately described her experiences in France as “the most difficult, certainly the most satisfying” work of her life, Isom was increasingly ready to come home. In early March, she happily wrote to library staff that she would be sailing for New York in late April. Once back in the U.S., she traveled to Cleveland to consult with a cancer specialist regarding the pain in her left arm that had begun in Portland and had continued in France. She found out that although surgery would slow the advancement of the cancer, there was no cure. So, she had the operation and returned to Portland to work for as long and as hard as she could. She also chose her successor: Ann Mulheron, a librarian she had met in France who had returned with her in 1919 to run the library’s school department.

At the end of March, 1920, when it became necessary, she left a note on the bulletin board for her staff that said: “My dear girls: I am coming just two hours a day now, 9 to 11, but I want you to come to my office and tell me your problems.” By April 8, she was working from home, brought down in her best clothes by Inga, consulting with staff in person or by phone and continuing her correspondence with little mention of her impending death. She asked Cornelia Marvin to come and help plan her funeral, and to join her close friend Nelly Fox (the library’s head of county services) in staying with her until the end. On April 15, she slipped away. The next day, all libraries were closed for the afternoon so
that library employees could attend her funeral at Trinity Episcopal Church. 

Tributes to the head librarian flowed in from diverse sources in Portland as well as from librarians throughout the U.S., one of whom wrote, “It will be long before you can replace her in Portland. You could not do it now if you had the choice of every librarian in the United States.”

Isom left her estate to her 19-year-old daughter Berenice, as well as $5,000 to the Library Association of Portland, stipulating that it should be “used as a small beginning of a pension fund for my beloved staff. I know the needs, the fears and the forebodings and I am so eager that this should grow into something adequate so that the day’s work well finished, old age may be approached in comfort and peace.” In the same spirit, Berenice Langton later gave her mother’s Neahkahnie beach cottage to the employees and retirees of Multnomah County Library for their enjoyment. Now on the National Register of Historic Places, Spindrift is enjoyed year round by Isom’s grateful library heirs.

As she made her estate plans, Isom had written, “Our library has been quite wonderful in its spirit of sympathy and understanding and I hope so earnestly that nothing may ever happen to change its atmosphere.” In her first years as library director, Anne Mulheron continued Isom’s efforts to reach out to the community, including initiatives to serve ex-servicemen. Coin boxes at Central and the branch libraries collected the community’s contributions for an Isom memorial, which was dedicated at Central Library in May 1923. Now installed on a landing between the 2nd and 3rd floors of the library, the bronze bas-relief tablet shows Isom sitting with a book in her hand. As is appropriate for the institutional mother of the Multnomah County Library system, her expressive gaze conveys intelligence, concern and a willingness to ask questions.

The resolution passed by the library board after Isom’s death notes, “Her genius lay in discovering new and better ways of attracting people to the library, in developing its system to fill wider needs and it making it necessary part of public and private life.” A professional woman working to make a difference, Mary Frances Isom achieved goals that were deeply meaningful to her and to her community. In a tribute written after her death, the Oregon Daily Journal aptly summed up the difference she had made:

No other monument can so fitly honor the memory of Mary Frances Isom as does the library as it stands today. Hers was the vision, hers the organizing force, hers the directing mind. There was a wise and generous support by an able board. There was generous cooperation by an intelligent and appreciative public. But it was the quiet, modest woman, the devoted, ever thoughtful woman, the busy working woman whose fine instincts and broad intelligence supplied the leadership and enthusiasm that carried the Portland library forward to a position of eminence among the libraries of the country.

Starting with one outdated library in 1902, Isom left the county in 1920 with 17 modern facilities and a complex service network involving 146 schools and 65
other agencies. A year later, the library’s circulation topped 2 million, an astonishing bookend to her tenure when compared with the 50,531 books circulated in 1901. More than a century later, Multnomah County Library remains one of the most well regarded urban library systems in the country, with the highest circulation per capita of any large library system in the U.S. Thanks in part to her foundational work, Isom’s “monument” shines today as it did a century ago.

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7 Ibid., 254.
12 Dean Collins, “Portland’s Successful Women,” Oregonian, October 25, 1914, 16.
15 For a detailed analysis of Portland’s transition to a free public library, see Cheryl Gunselman, “Illumino’ For All: Opening the Library Association of


18 “Free Library is Open,” *Oregonian*, March 11 1902.


21 Gunselman, “‘Illumino’ For All,” 455-56.


27 Ibid, 22-23.


35 Mary F. Isom, *Director’s Report*, April 1913. Multnomah County Library administrative archives.


37 Scheppke, p. 10-11.


Of Multnomah County’s seven Carnegie libraries, two have remained in active use as public libraries (North Portland and St. Johns). A third (originally the Albina Library) is now the home of the Title Wave Used Bookstore.


Central Library’s groundbreaking central stacks were eliminated when the building was remodeled in 1994 - 1997.

Library Association of Portland, Public Library of Multnomah County: Central Building, Portland Oregon (1913), 27.

Ibid.

Ibid, 18.

Ibid, 17.

Isom’s use of the word “alive” to describe a dynamic, effective organization is documented in a March 30, 1911 letter to Cornelia Marvin, in which she contrasts the American Library Association unfavorably with the Pacific Northwest Library Association, i.e. “I think that a small association that is alive is much more important for our people than the larger one.” Oregon State Library Records, Oregon State Archives.


Dean Collins, “Portland’s Successful Women,” Oregonian, October 25, 1914, 16.
60 Lillian Hallock to Bernard Van Horne, 26 January, 1958. OCF LAP papers.
61 Ibid.
64 Cornelia Marvin Pierce, “Mary Frances Isom,” interview transcript (interviewer unknown), Oregon Historical Society, 2 January 1956.
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67 Mary Frances Isom, Director’s Report, June 1913, Multnomah County Library administrative archives.
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75 Van Horne, “Mary Frances Isom.”
76 Library Association of Portland, Monthly Bulletin, Memorial Number, 11.
79 Library Association of Portland, minutes of board meeting, April 12, 1918, Multnomah County Library administrative archives.
81 Library Association of Portland, Minutes of board meeting, April 15, 1918, Multnomah County Library administrative archives.
82 “Stand By Miss Isom,” Oregon Voter, April 20, 1918.
84 Letter from Mary F. Isom letter to Cornelia Marvin, 11 May 1918, Oregon State Library Records, Oregon State Archives.
85 Weigand, 42.
86 Herbert Putnam letter to Mary F. Isom, 30 October 1917. ALA War Service Correspondence, American Library Association archives.
87 Mary F. Isom letter to Herbert Putnam, 18 October 1918, ALA War Service Correspondence, American Library Association archives.
88 See also “‘To Shine in Use’: The Library and War Service of Oregon's Pioneer Librarian, Mary Frances Isom,” Journal of Library History 10: 1. (January 1975), 22 – 34.
90 Letter from Mary F. Isom to Library Association of Portland employees, 15 December 1918, from Mary F. Isom and Roma Brashear, Letters from France.
91 Letter from Mary F. Isom to Library Association of Portland employees, 9 December 1918, from Mary F. Isom and Roma Brashear, Letters from France.
94 Untitled article (“Accepted for publication by Evening Post”), ALA War Service Correspondence, American Library Association archives, and letter from Mary F. Isom to Burton E. Stevenson, January 1919, Letters to Burton E. Stevenson, 1918-1919, John Wilson Special Collections of Multnomah County Library.
95 Letter from Mary F. Isom to Burton E. Stevenson, January 1919, Letters to Burton E. Stevenson.
97 “Miss Mary F. Isom, Librarian, is Dead,” Oregonian, April 16 1920, 12.
99 Ibid, 6.
100 Ibid, 6 -7.
101 “Miss Isom Memorial Soon Ready.” Oregon Journal, 8 May 1923.
102 Library Association of Portland, Minutes of board meeting, April 22,1920, Multnomah County Library administrative archives.
103 Library Association of Portland, Monthly Bulletin, Memorial Number.