

Clara Louise Kessler (1893-1968) “knows and loves children and is vitally interested in them,”¹ said actress Jane Cowl after reading Kessler’s poetry. Clara Kessler had a lifelong interest in books, songs, and children. She began her career of working with children as a kindergarten teacher, and then in 1919 embarked on a 33-year long position as the head children’s librarian at Withers Public Library (today named Bloomington Public Library). Her mission was not only to present the very best children’s literature and encourage its enjoyment, but to create an environment which would stimulate children’s imaginations, encourage children to freely express themselves, and help children grow into adults that would help build a better Bloomington. In addition to fulfilling the literary and creative needs of the children of the community, she was dedicated to preserving local history. In 1950, Kessler completed a five-volume history of Bloomington in honor of the city’s centennial. Her compilation, *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950*, was her gift to the community and would help “every citizen....to know the background of his community.”²

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

Kessler’s father, Samuel, was a pharmacist his entire life, having learned the trade from his father. Samuel’s father, Lewis, moved the family from New Berlin, Pennsylvania to Warren, IL in 1867 after having spent a year in Tipton, Iowa and another year in Buchanan, Michigan. It was in Michigan that Lewis, Kessler’s grandfather, learned the drug business. Upon the family’s relocation to Warren, IL, 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 pharmacy trade. In 1881, Samuel purchased the store from his father and began operating it on his own. In her reminiscence “Sixty-five years in a Drug Store,” Kessler recalled that the family pharmacy only served lemonade at first. “A large jar was filled with lemonade and ice and dipped up with a dipper into glasses at 5 cents a glass.” She remembered glassware and lamps along with all the different patent medicines, extracts, and tinctures (dyes or coloring) in liquid form, from all sorts of plants were sold. The store was filled with different plants and herbs like camphor and sassafras and her father made his own vanilla extract too. She also recalled that a large tank was kept in the back room for kerosene oil from which customers brought their kerosene canisters to regularly fill their lamps.⁴ When her father took over the pharmacy, he added an elaborate marble soda fountain and soda was dispensed at 5 cents a glass. He also began serving ice cream which was kept in a metal container and set in a tub of ice under the counter.⁵

According to Kessler, when her father Samuel was a young man, his father sent him to Bloomington to participate in a discussion about the formation of the State Board of Pharmacy. During his stay in Bloomington, Samuel took a site-seeing tour of Normal via the Bloomington-Normal Horse Railway. What he saw and experienced during his visit must have left an impact

¹ “Actress Lauds Miss Kessler’s Library Work,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, April 25, 1945

² “Local History Much Needed,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 4, 1951

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, 278

on him because in 1898, her father sold his drug store in Warren and moved the family to the Town of Normal.⁶ Kessler recalled that her parents hoped that by moving the family to Normal, 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 ahead of the rest of the family to find a job and a house for them to live in. He found a position working at Loer's Drug Store and a few months later; found a house to rent on Ash Street.

After living in Normal for a few short years, around 1903 Kessler and her family moved to Bloomington. Her family settled at a house located at 1004 North Main Street, next door to the old Benjamin Funk home. Louise finished her education by attending Franklin School and then graduated from Bloomington High School in 1912. Her father 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.⁷

Kessler was very passionate about the creative arts which included music, writing, literature, and hand work like knitting and sewing. She said that music had always been an interest in her life and she credited her family for that love and appreciation of music. Kessler recalled that her father told her stories about musical instruments he found that were stored in the attic of the Pennsylvania house where he grew up. Those instruments belonged to his uncles (his mother's brothers) who fought in the Civil War. She felt that those musical instruments stored in the attic of her father's childhood home formed a bridge from unknown musical ancestors to the present. Kessler's 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. Kessler, her siblings, and parents formed their own family orchestra while she was growing up. Her sister 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 Louise played the cello.

While Kessler did not pursue a career in music, she did not leave her musical heritage behind completely. She wrote lyrics for songs. Fifty of her song lyrics appeared in the school book series *The World of Music*. Twenty-five more appeared in the song anthology *Music for Living*⁸ and she wrote the lyrics for the *Alice in Wonderland Suite* by Edgar Stillman Kelley.⁹ One known performance of the lyrics Kessler wrote for *The Alice in Wonderland Suite* was on May 22, 1925 during the Thirty-Second Annual May Festival at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The suite was performed by Children's Festival Chorus.¹⁰ Additionally, she and her sister Frances also collaborated on musical composition throughout their lives; Frances writing the music and Louise writing the lyrics.

Kessler credits her mother and grandmother for her interest in hand work such as sewing, knitting, crocheting, and tatting. She had fond memories of her grandmother's handwork; listening to the click and clack of the knitting needles as her grandmother worked, and of all the

⁶ Ibid, 279

⁷ Ibid, 283

⁸ "Retired Children's Librarian, Miss Clara Kessler, Dies," *The Daily Pantagraph*, May 14, 1968

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Program for *The Thirty-Second May Festival, University of Michigan, May 20-23, 1925*, University Musical Society http://ums.aadl.org/ums/programs_19250501b. Date Access April 15, 2016; 42-46

things her grandmother made. Kessler recalled that the first piece of handwork she did was hemstitching handkerchiefs. She was also proud of the fact that she was the only one in her family that learned how to do tatting. During World War I she knitted for soldiers and later on, crocheted carpet warp for table runners and piano tops. Later in life, Kessler wrote that she felt handwork was becoming a lost art. She said “modern amusements do not encourage creative handwork among young people of today... everything is ready made. Hands are losing their cunning. There is something wonderful in creating a piece of handwork. Every child should have one or two crafts for his own enjoyment.”¹¹

After graduating high school, Kessler attended Illinois State Normal University (today known as ISU) where she studied to be a kindergarten-primary school teacher. The topic of the theme she wrote for completion of her studies was “Why is the Kindergarten Worthwhile?”¹² Later, she also took courses in Library Science at the University of Illinois in Urbana.

After graduating from ISNU in June 1915, she began teaching kindergarten at the Day Nursery and Settlement Association located at 1320 West Mulberry Street in Bloomington when the new school year began in September of that year. She was listed as superintendent of the kindergarten department.¹³

The Day Nursery Association was a private day care and kindergarten which opened in January 1908. It was organized by a group of women affiliated with the Bureau of Associated Charities. These women felt they needed to do something “worthwhile for mothers who were obliged to work away from home during the day” and who had to keep older children out of school to watch younger children. The Day Nursery was a safe place for working mothers to leave their children who were not of school age, thus allowing older siblings to attend school regularly.¹⁴ For just five cents a day, “the children will be given dinner and cared for the same as at home.” Even if they could not afford the daily fee, women could still leave their children at the school because of the generosity of local residents who donated funds for just such a need.¹⁵ The Day Nursery was always very busy with children attending the kindergarten and babies being left in the care of the nursery department staff every day.¹⁶

Kessler ran a very orderly classroom.¹⁷ During her first year teaching kindergarten at the Day Nursery, it was reported that the children attending were “not only interested and happy, but under most excellent control.” An average of 37 children attended the kindergarten every day and all who attended were taught “obedience, cleanliness, and manners.”¹⁸

In addition to being a very efficient teacher, Kessler began adding activities that promoted the growth of creativity among her pupils. One activity she expanded was the annual Christmas party. Prior to her arrival, the Christmas parties were more simple affairs that included a Christmas tree decorated with ornaments made by the children, presents for each child

¹¹ Kessler, Clara Louise. *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950 in five volumes, Volume II.* (Bloomington: Self Published, 1952) 61-65

¹² “A Festive Week: ISNU: Program of Normal University Exercises,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, June 8, 1915

¹³ “Day Nursery To Open in All Departments,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 2, 1915

¹⁴ Fleming, Florence. “An Historical Sketch of the Day Nursery Association,” (July 1925), McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives.

¹⁵ “Reception at Day Nursery: Formal Opening Next Monday,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 18, 1908

¹⁶ “Hundreds Visit the New Day Nursery,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 14, 1914

¹⁷ Fleming, 3

¹⁸ “Day Nursery Work For Year Reviewed,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 27, 1916

in attendance (delivered by “a real Santa”), a short program was presented, and candy and fruit were served. Local merchants donated many of the toys given out.¹⁹ Kessler’s first Christmas party at the Day Nursery was reported to have been “the largest party every held of the kind” with about 100 mothers and their children in attendance.²⁰ The entire house had been decorated with Christmas colors, candy, and trinkets. Kessler told the children a Christmas story and each child was given a gift and a candy cane. One interesting feature of the party was an orchestra of children ages 3 to 6 who played upon toy instruments. These instruments included a violin, mandolin, drum, accordion, tambourine, and bells. The children played and sang a variety of Christmas songs during the course of the program.²¹ Similar parties were held each Christmas that Kessler taught at the nursery.

Kessler taught kindergarten there for a four years until she was hired as the head children’s librarian at Wither’s Public Library.²² In 1916, three years prior to her departure, a plan to expand the children’s department at Withers Public Library was announced. The services of Miss Marian Wallace from Pittsburg, PA had been engaged to serve as the head of the Children’s Department at the library. Wallace’s plan included expanding the number of books for children, creating a story hour, establishing satellite branches of the library in local schools, and more, thus increasing the amount of children using the library. “Any child that is old enough to go to school may take out a ticket in his or her own name and draw books from this department whenever desired.”²³ At the same time, a small branch of Wither’s Public Library was already in operation at the Day Nursery where Kessler worked. Kessler would have worked with the library staff during her time as a teacher at the nursery. Additionally, Miss Nellie Parham, head librarian at Withers Public Library, was actively involved in the Day Nursery, was a member of the board, and served as an officer. This is most likely how Miss Parham became aware of Kessler’s work and came to hire her. Later in life at a meeting of the Illinois Education Association (of which Kessler was a member), Kessler said that “formal education tries to discover the child’s reading interest and reading levels, but library books offer him the challenge of finding levels beyond his own.”²⁴

At the annual meeting of the Day Nursery Association in January of 1919, in addition to Kessler’s departure from the nursery being announced, she was praised yet again for all of her work at the nursery. “Too much cannot be said in praise of Miss Kessler, her talent, her

19 “Three for the Little Ones,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 15, 1910; “Day Nursery Christmas,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 19, 1911; “Day Nursery Christmas Party,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 19, 1914.

20 “Christmas Party at the Day Nursery,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 23, 1915

²¹ Ibid

²² Withers Public Library was founded by the Bloomington Library Association. Using money donated by the public, funds generated by membership dues of the association, and land donated by prominent resident Sarah Withers (whom the library was named after), the library was opened to the public in 1887. The library was designed by local architect George Miller and constructed on the former site of Sarah Withers’ home at the corner of Washington and East Streets. However, control of the library was turned over to the City of Bloomington in 1894 due to budget woes, caused by lack of paying members of the Library Association. With this, the library became a tax-supported institution and free public library open to anyone in the community (Bowman, Anthony. “Sarah Withers,” McLean County Museum of History <http://www.mchistory.org/research/resources/sarah-withers.php>. Date Accessed July 19, 2015 and “History of Bloomington Public Library,” Bloomington Public Library http://www.bloomingtonlibrary.org/about_us/library_history/. Date Accessed July 19, 2015)

²³ “More Children to Library Object of Department Plan,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 23, 1916

²⁴ “Teachers Discuss 17 Topics in IEW Sectional Meetings,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 9, 1943

earnestness, and faithfulness. Miss Kessler will soon enter a new line of work, and while we regret her loss we wish her great happiness and success.”²⁵ However, she did not leave the Day Nursery behind completely. She continued to plan and present activities for children at the Day Nursery during her career as a librarian. In July 1925, Kessler, assisted by Miss Mattie Crump one of the playground directors of the Day Nursery, gave a party for 75 children at the nursery. Dances were presented by some of the children in attendance and readings were presented by others. A group of children from the Fell Avenue Playground also presented a succession of stunts and dances too. The party concluded with ice cream cones for all the children at the nursery.²⁶

During her 33-year career as the head children’s librarian at Withers Public Library, Kessler did much to not only expand library offerings for children, but also for the entire community. Using her own passion for writing and creativity, she passed that same passion on to others (in particular children) through her work with at the library.

Kessler had only been working at the library for a few months when she put on a children’s pageant for the Fourth of July. Written and directed by Kessler herself, the pageant, called “The Twins,” was performed by 60 children and presented at Withers Park located next to of the library. It was reported that “a great throng of people watched from nearby streets as the children went through their actions” and that Kessler was to be congratulated “upon the successful presentation and the patriotic thought given to the children who took part and also those who saw it.”²⁷ Four months later, another one of her plays, a Halloween playlet called “The Witche’s Wand” was performed at the library. *The Daily Pantagraph* reported that the play “made so decided a hit that they were obliged to perform three times instead of two that had been scheduled.” The children who participated in the play took their parts seriously and performed excellently.²⁸ These along with the May Day and Christmas plays she presented that year were all performed to record audiences. It was reported that since Kessler had taken over the supervision of the children’s department at the library, it “has grown wonderfully” and Kessler has been “winning friendship and confidence of the children who find her a helpful and sympathetic friend.”²⁹

During the first 18 months of Kessler being in charge of the children’s department, it began gaining a reputation as a “mecca for little folk.” In addition to the plays Kessler wrote and directed for children, she began offering a wide variety of programs for children of all ages. These programs included lectures for boys on Saturday evenings, bird house contests in the spring, a girls club for girls beyond the fifth grade in the winter, and instructive games. Special exhibits for children were created and displayed throughout the library frequently. Game and story hours were held during the summer months. Picture shows (using an opaque projector) with the reading of an accompanying story were also presented for children in first through

²⁵ “Day Nursery in Review of Busy Year,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 23, 1919

²⁶ “Day Nursery Library Party was Much Fun,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 29, 1925

²⁷ “Large Crowd Watches Miss Kessler’s Pageant,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 4, 1919

²⁸ “Children Play Well,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 3, 1919

²⁹ “Large Crowd Watches Miss Kessler’s Pageant.”

fourth grades. The diversity of the activities she created for children was a credit to the originality that she brought to her work as children's librarian.³⁰

One way in which Kessler spread her love and passion for literature and writing outside of the library to even more children in the region was through the pages of local newspaper, *The Daily Pantagraph*. For several years, starting in September 1923, Kessler was editor of a children's section of the newspaper that was conducted by "grade school boys and girls of Bloomington, Normal, and Central Illinois" and published every Saturday during the school year from September to May.³¹ It was known by various names over the years including: *Juvenile Bloomington and its Many Interests*, *The Daily Pantagraph Week-end Juvenile Page*, *Juvenile School Page/Our School Page*, *The Junior Newspaper*, *The Juvenile Pantagraph*, and finally *The Junior Pantagraph*.

Starting in the fall of 1922, The Pantagraph started a juvenile page for school age children. Here students from the various schools in Bloomington could submit stories about the happenings at their school. In the November 18, 1922 edition of the juvenile page, stories published by students included: formation of a girls basketball team at Irving Elementary, about Lincoln School's orchestra, Franklin School's Drum and Fife Corps, how students used the public library, and school spirit at Bloomington High School.³² In September of 1923, upon the commencement of the new school year, The Pantagraph began publishing its juvenile section again with Kessler serving as editor of the page. "So much interest was manifested in this department last year and the venture was such a pronounced success, that the Pantagraph takes pleasure in continuing its efforts in this direction."³³ Prior to Kessler becoming the editor of the juvenile section, she was already a regular contributor to the page through her "Children's Library Corner." In this section Kessler would highlight new books in the children's department at Withers Public Library or books that would be of interest to students each week.³⁴

In April 1925, the juvenile section included a junior crossword puzzle, short stories written by local students, the "Library Corner," and stories written by Kessler herself. Kessler's stories were often about children growing up and learning life lessons. One such story Kessler penned was called "The Magic Key." The story was about a young girl named Virginia who wished the other girls in her school would talk to her and ask her to play on the basketball team. Virginia's teacher Mrs. Hawley informed the Virginia that her mannerisms were off putting to the other students and that she herself did not make an effort to talk to the other girls either. Mrs. Hawley gave Virginia a magic key that she said would open the door of friendship. In the end, it was Virginia herself that opened that door of friendship when she took the first step to befriend the girls and was then asked to join the girls' basketball team. The moral to this story was that you should "always remember what the other person's interested in and don't forget to meet him half way."³⁵

By the fall of 1925, the juvenile page came to include stories from students outside of Bloomington including Lexington, Normal, Gridley, El Paso, and other towns near Bloomington.

³⁰ "Library Mecca for Little Folks: Children's Room in Charge of Miss Louise Kessler is Achieving a Reputation," *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 6, 1920.

³¹ "The Daily Pantagraph Junior Newspaper," *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 19, 1926

³² "Juvenile Bloomington and its Interests." *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 18, 1922

³³ "Pantagraph Will Publish Juvenile School Page Again," *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 1, 1923

³⁴ Kessler, Louise. "Children's Library Corner," *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 13, 1923

³⁵ Kessler, Louise. "The Magic Key," *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 28, 1925

Kessler continued to publish short stories for her young audience including one such story called "Dixie's Punishment." This story was about an older sister, Dixie, who punished her younger sister, Jean, for breaking her favorite pitcher. Their mother found out about this and inflicted the same punishment on Dixie, with the moral to the story being to "make the punishment fit the crime."³⁶ She also started a writing club for children called the Quill and Ink Club. In order to join the club, children had to write a story and submit it to Kessler at the Pantagraph. Stories written by members of the club and those children interested in joining the club were published in the juvenile section of the newspaper.³⁷

On May 1, 1926, The Pantagraph announced that *The Daily Pantagraph's Week-End Juvenile Page* would undergo some changes. The biggest change was that instead of only being published during the school year, it would be published every weekend throughout the year and would become a true "junior newspaper." The Pantagraph proclaimed that it would be "a real newspaper of the young people, by the young people, and for the young people."³⁸ The first edition of the new *Junior Newspaper* was published on May 8 of that year.

After this section was reformatted, Kessler was no longer editor of the *Junior Newspaper*. However, she remained a regular contributor of short stories, poems, and book puzzles to that section of the newspaper as long as it was published because of her dedication to promoting reading, creativity, and writing among children. She also supported the weekly contests offered by the *Junior Newspaper* by arranging for material related to contest themes to be on display in the children's department at the library. The new editor of the *Junior Newspaper*³⁹ also encouraged their young readers to visit Miss Kessler at the library to learn more facts and history that would be useful towards the creation of their stories, poems, and pictures.⁴⁰

All throughout the years, Kessler and her staff hosted many activities in the children's department that encouraged the growth of creativity and encouraged students to read and write. In addition to traditional story and game hours held at the library (during which Kessler herself read many of the stories), Kessler planned and presented other unique activities such as the ones she offered during the nation-wide Children's Book Week. Every fall libraries across the country came up with their own events around a common theme during this week. In 1931, Book Week's theme was International Friendship. Libraries and book stores throughout the nation displayed many books about other lands and several radio stations supplied talks about juvenile books.⁴¹ Kessler arranged a "colorful display in the committee room" with a series of booths about different countries around the world, starting with America and then leading "travelers" to such destinations such as Holland, Japan, China, and England. At each display were books about each country that children were encouraged to read. The display was up the entire week for children and interested adults to explore.⁴² In 1940, the theme of Book Week was "Good Books...Good Friends." The display created for this year was the "Modern Home

³⁶ Kessler, Louise. "Dixie's Punishment," *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 26, 1925

³⁷ "Quill and Ink Club," *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 28, 1925

³⁸ "The Daily Pantagraph Junior Newspaper," *The Daily Pantagraph*, May 1, 1926

³⁹ Publication of The Junior Pantagraph (as it was renamed starting in 1929) continued until August 1942 when operations of that section of the newspaper were suspended due to World War II, a paper shortage, and as a way to conserve other supplies ("Junior Pantagraph Will Be Suspended," *The Daily Pantagraph*, August 28, 1942)

⁴⁰ "Flag Day New Subject," *The Daily Pantagraph*, June 4, 1933

⁴¹ "Book Week Is Observed," *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 15, 1931

⁴² *Ibid*

Library,” which depicted “suggestive home libraries for children, youth, and adults.” As always, new books to the library were on display and people could reserve them to check out after Book Week concluded. Additionally, local businesses such as W.B. Read and Company, displayed books which they sold at their shops.⁴³

Every year library staff decorated a Christmas tree and every year it had a unique theme. The staff started planning the Christmas decorations weeks in advance of the holiday season. One year giant wreaths were made out of pine cones and greenery and were displayed in the windows of the library.⁴⁴ In 1938, the library Christmas tree was decorated with things that filled the air of the library with a wonderful fragrance. Kessler wrote that the evergreen tree was filled with strings of popcorn and cranberries, red apples, gingerbread men, and gilded walnuts.⁴⁵ Kessler recalled that perhaps the most dramatic tree that the library ever decorated was in 1945, right after World War II ended. Kessler invited the school children of Bloomington to send the library the names of their brothers and fathers who had served in the military during the war. Five hundred and fifty names were received and each of those names were written on a small blue star. Kessler wrote each of the names, including their rank, in white ink on the stars. The reference librarian at the time gave Kessler the names of 150 soldiers from McLean County who had died during the War and their names and ranks were inscribed on gold stars. The 300 stars were then hung on a pure white tree and many people, including a large number of soldiers home on leave, came to view the tree which was dedicated to the men who helped win the war.⁴⁶ Kessler wrote down several of these memories of library Christmases past in the five-volume book she compiled and contributed to called *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History for Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950*.

Several other programs Kessler implemented or enhanced during her tenure at the library included a summer reading club for grade school boys and girls. The earliest mention of a summer reading program such as this was in 1925. Kessler visited a class of students at Jefferson School and told them about the summer reading club which required members to read one book each week for six weeks during their summer vacation.⁴⁷ In later years, the number of books required to complete the summer reading program was increased to eight books and those who finished all eight books received a diploma.⁴⁸ In the spring of 1938, Kessler co-organized a kite building contest with the Municipal Recreation Board. This contest was open to both boys and girls in grade school. There were two divisions in this contest; grades four through six and grades seven and eight. The kites were put on display in the children’s room of the library for a week and ten prizes would then be awarded by Kessler for the best and most creative kites.⁴⁹

For a few years beginning in 1947, the library began to offer artisan guilds for children, under the direction of Kessler. Children could choose to be a member of one of four guides: the craftsmen guild, poets’ guild, sculptors’ guild, or artists’ guild. Once children become members of one of these guilds, they could exhibit their creations in the children’s room. Bird houses,

⁴³ “Good Friends National Theme For Book Week,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 10, 1940

⁴⁴ Kessler, Clara Louise. “A Pageant of Christmas Streets,” *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950 in five volumes, Vol. IV*. (Bloomington: Clara Louise Kessler, 1950) 151

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 152

⁴⁶ “Once Upon a Time There Was...,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 31, 1945; Kessler, Vol. IV, 154-155

⁴⁷ “Jefferson Seniors as Guests of their Mothers at Party,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, May 30, 1925

⁴⁸ “150 Children in Summer Reading Unit,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, June 18, 1938

⁴⁹ “Kite building contest will be March 26,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 8, 1938

kites, and paper dolls were the most popular crafts displayed. Poetry that was written by members of the poets' guild would go into a poetry booklet that would be created for the Spring Festival of Books.⁵⁰

Kessler and her associates at the library offered many different programs that appealed to children of any age. From marionette programs to art shows, show and tell programs to plays, doll and toy shows, poetry contests, and listening to stories and classical music on the children's department record player. Kessler and the other librarians under her charge always had interesting and exciting programs for the children of community.

Kessler felt so strongly about the need for children to develop creative skills and ingenuity that she suggested the construction of a "children's building." In September, 1950 Kessler wrote a letter to *The Pantagraph* suggesting that the key to creating a better Bloomington in the future, would be to develop in the "minds and imaginations of the Bloomington residents of tomorrow," the children. Children needed "free moments during the day for thinking and reading, time for the imagination to grow," which in her opinion was not happening as much. Kessler stated that these traits have been in decline because of the new technique of "directed play." Children were being "told how to play and what to do in play periods after school, in public playgrounds, youth centers, and summer camps." Her dream of a "Children's Creative Arts Building" would allow all children, "rich or poor, young or old, intelligent or dull" the opportunity for creative expression...to experiment...to recognize their own potentialities and kinship with one certain medium of expression." She said in this type of building, "children may be truly themselves as I see them in the public library." If such a building were created, "Bloomington boys and girls will grow into men and women with imagination, idealism, ingenuity, initiative, inventiveness, industry and independence—all fine attributes for the building of a better Bloomington of tomorrow."⁵¹ Unfortunately this was one dream that did not come to fruition.

In addition, Kessler helped manage the branch libraries at schools in Bloomington. In an effort to reach more boys and girls, the library established branch libraries in the public schools starting around 1920. One such branch was established at the Day Nursery (sometime around 1916) where Kessler worked before she became a librarian.⁵² The establishment of these branch libraries not only increased readership among children in the community, but also helped supplement and improve local curriculum because books were easier to access for teachers and students. When Kessler came to Withers Public Library in 1919, 34,367 books were checked out by students in the community. By 1940, that number increased exponentially to 126,859 books being checked out according to Kessler's annual report. Kessler credits some of this increase to the work that publishers had been doing by "re-editing the classics in beautifully illustrated volumes and more attention has been given [to the] publication of worthwhile new books." Kessler stated that children are given the freedom to choose their own books from the shelves. They seem to "instinctively find the volumes that best appeal to them" and this makes them want to read more. Kessler also gave Miss Nellie Parham, head librarian, much of the credit for the development of the children's section. According to *The Daily Pantagraph* during those past 20 years, a concerted effort had "been made to bring children and good literature together, and with

⁵⁰ "Artisan Guilds for Children Offered Again," *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 29, 1949

⁵¹ "Suggests Children's Building," *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 16, 1950

⁵² "More Children to the Library Object of Department Plan"

the results shown, staff members now say that this 20 year dream has come true.”⁵³ To her credit, Kessler had much to do with making this 20 year dream come true. She was a major driving force behind this growth in readership among the community’s children despite her modesty.

Another report from 1944 stated that 95,000 books and magazines were checked out from the library yearly by children in Bloomington-Normal. Nearly 3,000 children had library cards and of those children, Kessler stated that the majority of those young readers were in the fifth and sixth grades. She proclaimed that the majority of grade school readers read multiple books per week. She continued to say that she doubted if there were any children in Bloomington schools who had not developed a reading habit. Kessler again took no credit for herself in the continued increase of young readers in the region. She stated that this “increase in number of young readers is an inevitable development in democracy. Wit and taste, beauty and joy, are as much a necessary part of the democratic heritage as economics and utilities and children’s books are part of that art in the right of free people.” In her opinion, “children who are readers of books develop seeing eyes. The book may be new or old, have fine print or large clear type...[but] the children will look beyond the books garb straight into its heart. In their love of books children find the spirit of imagination, which later develops into creative powers to serve the world.”⁵⁴

In honor of her years of service, Kessler (along with Elizabeth Abraham, another long time librarian) were honored for twenty years of service at a tea from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Sunday, January 22, 1939 at Russell Art Gallery in Bloomington. About 200 guests including Miss Nellie Parham, head librarian, Spender Ewing, head of the Wither’s Public Library Board, and other members of the library staff, all came together to honor the work of these two women. Mrs. Spencer Ewing served as hostess and Miss Jane Cohn played harp music during the occasion.⁵⁵

Kessler was also very active in the community outside of the library. She participated in events and programs that promoted creativity and ingenuity in children. One such event was a birdhouse building contest that was held in the spring. The contest was at first only open to boy scouts in local schools, but later the contest was open to any boy or girl under the age of 16 in Central Illinois.⁵⁶ Prizes were awarded for bird houses in a variety of categories including rustic colony house, rustic houses for single tenants, wren houses, blue bird houses, etc. William Brigham (Superintendent of McLean County schools at the time) was chairman of the event and Kessler along with several other community members participated as judges during the 1923 bird house contest.⁵⁷ During the summer of 1934, Kessler gave two hours each day to the children at Limberlost camp (a camp for children who needed special medical care) at Lake Bloomington. As the children were resting, Kessler told stories.⁵⁸

Kessler was a prolific writer throughout most of her life. Fortunately her job as a children’s librarian and editor of and contributor to the *Junior Pantagraph* encouraged her writing. Most of the stories and articles that she wrote were written for children and were

⁵³ “Dream Realized, Children Read More,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, June 1, 1940

⁵⁴ “Children Take 95,000 Books Magazines Yearly From Library,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, May 18, 1944

⁵⁵ “200 Attend Tea Honoring Librarians,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 23, 1939

⁵⁶ “Bird House Contest to Close Friday—Exhibits to follow, with Prizes Awarded Tuesday,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, March 23, 1930

⁵⁷ “Prizes Awarded to Winners,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, May 5, 1923

⁵⁸ “Second Contribution by Church Raises Limberlost Fund to \$194,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 13, 1933

published locally, specifically in the pages of *The Daily Pantagraph*. One of her earliest published works was a small booklet entitled *War Poems for Children* in 1918. This book consisted of 11 poems, the topic of most was the First World War. Poems included in the booklet were “Just Knitting Squares” about knitting items to be given to soldiers, “Havin’ Fun” about children playing soldier, and “Stayin’ Home,” about a child whose father has gone off to war and his desire to join his dad.⁵⁹ The booklet was printed in the Bloomington School Printshop which was managed by the Bloomington School District. The print-shop was created in 1913 to teach boys that good honest work was worthwhile and “an honor to him who does it,” while careless work was dishonest. The print-shop was only open to boys and eventually came to include all boys in the sixth grade in Bloomington schools. Kessler’s booklet of poems was printed to be sold to help raise funds for the war effort.⁶⁰ Some of the poems included in this booklet were reprinted in *The Daily Pantagraph* on November 29, 1918.⁶¹

In addition to poems and short stories written by Kessler frequently gracing the pages of *The Daily Pantagraph*, a few of Kessler’s works were published in national magazines. These magazines included *St. Nicholas Magazine*, a popular American children’s magazine published beginning in 1873. This magazine was designed for children ages five to eighteen.⁶² One of Kessler’s poems was printed in the magazine in 1923⁶³ and her short story “Being Still” about a child who found it hard to play without making any noise, was published in this magazine in February 1924.⁶⁴ Kessler’s work was also published in *Child Life* (an American magazine for children ages 9 to 11), *The Grade Teacher* (a professional magazine for classroom teachers of any grade), *The Instructor*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Kindergarten-Primary Magazine*⁶⁵ (published monthly except for July and August and was “devoted to the child and to the Unity of Educational Theory and Practice from the Kindergarten through the University”⁶⁶).

Kessler’s work received even more national praise, by way of a nationally known Broadway and early film actress, Jane Cowl. Cowl had read a series of poems Kessler had written that were published in a Chicago newspaper. On a national radio program broadcast sometime in April 1945, Cowl pointed out that “libraries are one of the greatest safeguards against juvenile delinquency.” The actress went on to talk about Kessler and the Bloomington library where she worked. “I don’t know how many years Miss Kessler has worked there, but I do know what kind of job she has done. And I know it not because of anything that anyone has told me, but because of the series of poems that she has written which I have read...” Cowl

⁵⁹ Kessler, Clara Louise. *War Poems for Children For the Benefit of the War Funds*. (Bloomington: Junior Red Cross Bloomington School Print Shop)

⁶⁰ Kessler, Vol 1, 213-217

⁶¹ Kessler, Clara Louise. “War Poems for Children,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 29, 1918

⁶² “St. Nicholas Magazine,” George Smathers Libraries, University of Florida Digital Collections, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/nick>. Date accessed July 20, 2015

⁶³ “Miss Kessler Writes Poem,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 22, 1923

⁶⁴ “Two Bloomingtonians Write for St. Nicholas,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, February 9, 1924

⁶⁵ Kessler, Clara Louise. “After Play,” “The Moon Man,” and “Gardening,” *The Kindergarten-Primary Magazine*, September, 1918, Volume XXXI, No. 1, 29. Google books, accessed July 20, 2015; “Retired Children’s Librarian Miss Clara Kessler, Dies.”

⁶⁶ *The Kindergarten-Primary Magazine*, September-October 1980, Vol. XXI No. 1, <https://archive.org/stream/kindergartenprim21kind#page/n1/mode/2up>, Date Accessed July 20, 2015

stated that Kessler's poems were "written by someone who knows and loves children and is vitally interested in them. Someone who is helping to shape their lives by every book she recommends." Cowl ended by telling her audience to remember that "there are thousands of Miss Kesslers here in America...who work in the public libraries...who are among our most potent allies in our fight to make this the kind of country we want it to be."⁶⁷

Kessler also won several contests for her writings. In May 1938 she won both the Community Players Theatre and the Playcrafters amateur one-act play contests for her one-act comedy "Truth to Tell." Her play was presented at a meeting of the Playcrafters later in their season.⁶⁸ The Playcrafters was a club that was formed in the fall of 1933 and was "dedicated to the study of drama in all its forms." Membership was limited in size because the founders felt that having a small number of members would allow members to "derive the most benefit from a yearly program of play production which includes study of directing, acting, makeup, costuming, lighting, and play writing."⁶⁹ The Community Players Theatre was founded in 1923 by a women's club that wished to create a group that would allow them to display their theatrical talents they had learned elsewhere by performing amateur plays.⁷⁰ The Community Players Theatre was open to anyone in the public whereas the Playcrafters was a member's only club. Traditionally, submissions to the Playcrafters' one-act play contest were limited to members of the club. However, because the club had partnered with the Community Players Theatre, the contest was open to anyone. Kessler's play was performed in the Little Theatre in the Unitarian Church on June 14 that year.⁷¹ The performance was open to the public, however, non-members of the Playcrafters were asked to pay a small fee.⁷²

In 1947, Kessler also won second prize of \$25.00 for a juvenile story submitted to a contest held by the annual Midwestern Writers conference held in Chicago. She won for the story, "Bunny Wanted a Name."⁷³

Kessler was a member of several other organizations including the Amateur Music Club, the McLean County and the Illinois Library Associations, a member of the Central Illinois branch of the National League of American Pen Women (Abraham Lincoln Chapter in Bloomington), and the Bloomington Quill Club.⁷⁴

The National League of American Pen Women was founded in 1897 by a group of women in Washington D.C. who were writers, poets, newspaper women, teachers, and artists. These women were concerned with how women were particularly vulnerable to plagiarism and inequality in their chosen craft of writing. These women came together to form an organization of "active pen women" who would find in the group "mutual aid, advice, and future development for each other and their careers." To be a member of this organization, the women who joined

⁶⁷ "Actress Lauds Miss Kessler's Library Work," *The Daily Pantagraph*, April 25, 1945

⁶⁸ "Playcrafters Contest Closes," *The Daily Pantagraph*, May 1, 1938

⁶⁹ "Playcrafters Plan Future," *The Daily Pantagraph*, April 8, 1936

⁷⁰ "About Community Players Theatre," Community Players Theatre, <http://www.communityplayers.org/about-cpt/>, Date Accessed July 20, 2015.

⁷¹ "Prize Play To Be Given Tuesday," *The Daily Pantagraph*, June 10, 1938

⁷² "Playcrafters to Finish Season," *The Daily Pantagraph*, June 13, 1938

⁷³ "Louise Kessler Wins Juvenile Story Award," *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 17, 1947

⁷⁴ "Retired Children's Librarian Miss Clara Kessler, Dies."

needed professional credentials.⁷⁵ Kessler was one of the first members of the Central Illinois branch of the NLAPW (Abraham Lincoln Chapter in Bloomington). The local chapter of the NLAPW was founded in 1929.⁷⁶ Typical meetings included speakers, lectures about famous and successful female poets and writers, recitation of poems and literature created by female authors, and members would share their own recent creations of poetry, musical compositions, and manuscripts.⁷⁷ Weekly luncheons and general monthly meetings were also held at the homes of various members.⁷⁸

Kessler and other members of her branch of the NLAPW were invited on several occasions to the Governor's Mansion in Springfield for a tea. At the tea held in October, 1939 a group of songs written by Kessler and her sister Frances were performed for the members present.⁷⁹ Another tea held in 1950 at the Governor's Mansion when Adlai E. Stevenson II was governor of Illinois also featured songs written by Kessler and her sister.⁸⁰

Kessler was one of the founding members of The Bloomington Quill Club, organized in 1931. The club was founded by people who were interested in learning about the "technique of the short story, the essay or play, and to criticize manuscripts submitted."⁸¹ The club had two types of members: active and associate. Active members were required to attend all meetings and be willing to submit their work for criticism whenever possible. They were also entitled to vote on all club matters.⁸² Club meetings were held at Withers Public Library.

The first poetry contest offered by the Quill Club was in 1934. The "prize winning" poetry contest was open to any adult living in Bloomington and Normal (Quill Club members excluded). Prizes would be given for first, second, and third place. There was no limit to the number of poems entered, but they could not exceed forty lines in length. The poems were to be submitted anonymously with the name and address of the submitter included in a separate, sealed envelope. All poems were to be sent to Kessler at Withers Public Library. The response the club received was overwhelming. One hundred and forty poems submitted by 40 individuals were received. They even received four poems from a woman in Denver, CO. Being ineligible, they were returned to the writer. The contests were very popular and the club continued offering them for the next few years.⁸³

Kessler also organized a poetry corner and contest at Withers Public Library for several years. She was inspired to create the poetry corner by the tragic events of December 7, 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor thus thrusting the United States into World War II. In one of her reminiscences published in her book *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950*, Kessler recalled wondering what could she do to help. She wanted to do something special, something to lift people up when everything was being torn

⁷⁵ "History of the National League of American Pen Women," <http://www.nlapw.org/history/>, Date Accessed July 21, 2015

⁷⁶ "League of Pen-Women Mid-Illinois Branch , Choses Local Officers," *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 10, 1929

⁷⁷ "National League of Pen Women, Abraham Lincoln Branch Meets," *The Daily Pantagraph*, August 1, 1929; "Pen Women Meets for First of Series of Programs," *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 10, 1943

⁷⁸ "League of Penwomen Meets for Luncheon with Mrs. F.H. Funk," *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 14, 1932

⁷⁹ "Pen Women and Guests attend Tea," *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 30, 1939

⁸⁰ "Pen Women Plan Tea in Springfield," *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 8, 1950

⁸¹ *Quill Club Scrapbook*, McLean County Museum of History Archives

⁸² *Ibid*

⁸³ *Ibid*

down. “If this library could only create a little beauty in the lives of its patrons to offset the horrors of war, it would help, perhaps, a little bit.”⁸⁴ She decided that original poetry, which brought her so much joy, could be the avenue that would lift the spirits and bring happiness to others in her community. She decided to start a poetry corner and on May 1, 1942, “timidly” started her first poetry contest.⁸⁵ She hung ten original poems on a bulletin board in the corner of the main room of the library. Beneath it, she placed a ballot box and ballots for patrons to vote for their three favorite poems. Kessler remembered being astonished at the number of ballots she received for this first contest. The winning poems were displayed in the poetry corner and the local radio station and *The Pantagraph* announced the names of the winners. Because of the success of the first few contests, Kessler decided to offer a new contest on the first and fifteenth of each month. And she received ten new poems from not just people who lived in Bloomington and Normal, but from out of town folks too.⁸⁶ In 1943, the winning poems were broadcast each week over the local radio station, WJBC. The result of this broadcast was more out-of-town poems being submitted to the contest.

Kessler recalled several authors who left a lasting impression on her. One woman submitted a letter with her poem which touched Kessler’s heart. The author wished to express her gratitude “for the joy you have given me and mine is indeed deeply felt.” The woman told Kessler that her poetry program and her poetic insight were like a lantern during these troubled times.⁸⁷ Another submitter was a young Jewish soldier who was stationed in Bloomington for several months to attend the Midwest Trades Institute. He became a regular submitter and even continued submitting poems wherever he was stationed after he left Bloomington. She received poems from him from places like Mississippi, North Carolina, Texas, and Georgia. The young soldier told Kessler that he thought it was very noble of her to crusade for poetry “and make such a successful attempt to stamp it in the hearts of the public at large.”⁸⁸ Kessler recalled that the oldest person to submit a poem to the contest was 87 years old and the youngest was just sixteen. For almost four years, Kessler kept the Poetry Corner going, twice a month, ten new poems each time. When World War II was over, Kessler decided to end the Poetry Corner and the library presented its final contest on January 1, 1946. All total, 850 poems were submitted to the contest. All that remains of the contests are a few poems and the letters from the contributors that were gathered together into “three great scrapbooks” to be kept at the library.⁸⁹

Two years before Kessler retired from Withers Public Library, she compiled her greatest literary work, the five-volume history *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950*. Kessler created this set in honor of the centennial of the city of Bloomington in 1950 and, in her own words, “as an attempt to recapture those particular days of my childhood and make them live again.”⁹⁰ The five-volume history contains 171 articles, which includes 39 biographies, and 52 poems contributed by 132 people in Bloomington and Normal. The five volumes each had individual themes: Volume one “Home Town Childhood;” Volume two “Home Town Entertainments;” Volume three “Home Town Personalities;” Volume

⁸⁴ Kessler, “An Experiment in Poetry,” Vol. IV, 159-160

⁸⁵ Kessler, Vol. IV, 160

⁸⁶ *Ibid*

⁸⁷ Kessler, Vol. IV, 161

⁸⁸ *Ibid*

⁸⁹ Kessler, Vol. IV, 163

⁹⁰ Kessler, Vol. I, 7

four “For the People—Public Institutions;” and Volume five “Home Town Clubs and Organizations.”⁹¹ It appears to have taken her between four to five years to collect the stories, compile the information, and retype the information she received from the contributors. This estimation is based on the dates some of the materials included in this set were written.⁹²

Kessler did not edit or revise any of the submissions she received for this “encyclopedia” of Bloomington history since 1900. She simply compiled the articles into the massive set of books. In the opening pages of the book, Kessler admitted that she wished she could have included more, but that she did not have time to find authors for all the topics she wished to include.⁹³ Contributors of articles included Adlai E. Stevenson II, Florence Fifer Bohrer, Clara Brian, William Brigham, Etta Brokaw, Henry Capen, LaFayette Funk, Mildred FitzHenry, Charles Kirkpatrick, Fannie Livingston Ochs, Carl and Julia Vrooman, and so many more.⁹⁴ In her own words, Kessler said that her project “merely scratched the surface of Bloomington’s past fifty-years.”⁹⁵ The *Pantagraph* proclaimed that “every citizen needs to know the background of his community. Every school should have authentic sources for teaching it” and Kessler’s books would help people do just that.⁹⁶

Kessler produced two sets of typewritten pages that were bound and indexed like a published book but the book was never officially published. One set was presented to Withers Public Library (Bloomington Public Library) and the other set was given to the McLean County Historical Society. Both organizations still have their respective copies today. It was reported by *The Daily Pantagraph* that while “only two copies are available, they will serve as sources for future historians”⁹⁷ which they have done so well.

After a 33-year long and distinguished career, Kessler retired from Withers Public Library in 1952. A couple of years before Kessler retired, Miss Nellie Parham, the head librarian who hired Kessler in 1919, stated that Kessler’s background as a kindergarten teacher and her “training, her knowledge and love of children’s literature, and her own skill in writing” were great assets to the children’s room. “Her services to the children and parents of this community over the years cannot be estimated. She has never ceased in her efforts to present the very best in children’s literature, and to encourage its enjoyment.”⁹⁸

But Kessler did not stop creating or being a supporter of activities for children after she retired. She continued to be active in the community till her dying day. She maintained active membership in the National League of American Pen Women, participated in the Children’s Theater program in Normal, authored a historical pageant for the centennial observance of Second Presbyterian Church in 1955, and championed to save Withers Park from being torn down to make room for commercial development in 1960.

On May 13, 1968, after a lifetime interest in reading, books, songs, the creative arts, and children, Clara Louise Kessler quietly passed away at the home she shared with her sister Frances in the LaFayette Apartments (apartment 407), 410 East Washington Street in

⁹¹ “Bulging ‘Home Town’ History Makes Bow,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 27, 1950

⁹² Kessler, Vol. IV, 154

⁹³ Kessler, Vol. I, 3

⁹⁴ *Ibid*

⁹⁵ Kessler, Vol. 1, 3

⁹⁶ “Local History Much Needed,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 4, 1951

⁹⁷ *Ibid*

⁹⁸ Kessler, Vol. IV, 132

Bloomington. For some time before her death, Kessler had been under a doctor's care for a heart ailment. Kessler never married or had children of her own, having devoted her life to her work at Withers Public Library and to children all throughout the region. She herself described her life-long hobby as "creative writing—especially in helping boys and girls do creative work."⁹⁹ Clara Louise Kessler was laid to rest at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.

By: Candace Summers, 2015

⁹⁹ "Retired Children's Librarian, Miss Clara Kessler, Dies"