

7-1994

Florence Ragland, Early Librarian at Western

Jonathan Jeffrey

Western Kentucky University, jonathan.jeffrey@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fac_pub



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Repository Citation

Jeffrey, Jonathan. (1994). Florence Ragland, Early Librarian at Western. *Kentucky Explorer*, 9 (3), 51-53.

Available at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fac_pub/38

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in DLSC Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

Article appeared in *Kentucky Explorer*, vol. 9, no. 3 (July/Aug. 1994): 51-53

Florence Ragland, Early Librarian at Western
By Jonathan Jeffrey

Most people have preconceived notions of a librarian as a middle-age woman sporting her hair in a bun and wearing sensible shoes, bifocals, and a dour expression. Florence Ragland, head librarian at Western Kentucky State Normal School (now Western Kentucky University) from 1908 to 1923, in many ways filled the stereotype. However, those who have ventured more than a passing acquaintance with a librarian, know that if you scratch below the image, you often find a multifaceted personality who enjoys a wide variety of activities. Such was the case with Ragland. Although concerned about the needs of an expanding collection, Western's librarian never lost appreciation for "her students" or for her other interests, particularly botany.

Ragland was born on November 30 1861 in Gibson County, Indiana, to William S. and Sue Devin Ragland. The Raglands moved to Bowling Green, Kentucky, in the late 1870's, where William was a successful pork packer. The family's comfortable position in Bowling Green society, afforded them the opportunity to educate their daughter at the fashionable Bowling Green Female College. Upon graduation in 1895, Ragland conducted a private children's school with various associates until 1907.

Ragland terminated her school when Henry Hardin Cherry, Western's president, asked her to take charge of the school's library. Upon assuming her responsibilities, Ragland noted that "the library contained about 2500 books...in locked cases...each book was placed where it would fit the space on the shelf." A school publication noted: "The work of the school is seriously limited for lack of a good working library. We have a room with a limited number of books that belong to private persons, and this inadequate arrangement is used daily by about 400 students." The journal also lamented that Bowling Green lacked a public library, causing the public to rely on the school's collection for reading material and reference sources. Ragland's first professional pleasure was opening the stacks to public browsing, an uncommon practice in most college libraries of the day.

Ragland worked Monday through Friday from 7:15 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and on Saturdays 9:00 a.m. to noon. If an assistant was available she took six weeks' vacation in the summer. During long semesters, she had two full-time assistants but no student help. Maintaining a good

staff was a perennial problem for Ragland. Inevitably one of her assistants desired to return to school or teaching, or they married and quit their jobs.

Three years after Ragland was hired, the school moved from its location in downtown Bowling Green to its present site. One student remembered packing two horse carts of books and moving them to the new location, a converted dining room previously used by Potter College, a defunct women's college. Ten years later, Ragland recalled the move with less than fond memories: "We moved on Saturday and my assistant and I straightened all day Sunday in order that the students might be able to enter the room Monday morning, the books were on the shelves, but not in place. I never want to move again." Unfortunately Ragland was unable to escape another move in early 1923 when the library was relocated to Western's Cedar House.

One of Ragland and Cherry's disappointments was an inability to persuade Andrew Carnegie to provide a new building for Western's growing collection, Carnegie rarely granted money for college libraries in this time period. Ragland knew however that Carnegie had provided the funds at Berea College, Centre College and Kentucky Wesleyan for new libraries. In 1912 she penned Carnegie a very informative letter in which she "Most respectfully and earnestly" begged the industrialist "not to dismiss this appeal without careful consideration." Unfortunately a grant was not bestowed.

Due to a small staff, Ragland performed the gamut of library duties, including her favorite, reference work. Although she answered questions on a wide array of topics, perhaps the most common information sought dealt with the selection and acquisition of library materials for rural schools. Ragland composed copious replies to such letters, tailoring each to the person's request and financial limitations.

Undoubtedly Ragland's favorite queries dealt with her avocation, botany. She studied plant science for two summers at Cornell and worked with Sadie Price, a Bowling Green naturalist and botanical artist of modest fame. Ragland relished moments alone in the forest communing with nature and bemoaned the fact that "my time is so fully occupied it is difficult to find time for trips to the woods." Reference letters, including fragile flora specimens, requesting botanical classifications were pure joy to Ragland.

Ragland occasionally taught botany courses at Western. Excursions, a vital component of her teaching methodology, were appreciated: "A number of long hikes to the river banks and the woods has given a zest to the work that could have been secured in no way else. The large

class in Botany is most enthusiastic under the guidance of Miss Ragland.” As the authority on Pennyroyal flora, Ragland also advised rural teachers on proper ways to teach nature studies.

Concerned about conservation, she wrote one Warren County teacher: “Be certain to teach the children to love and protect the wild plants, and to see the beauty of all things out of doors, even in things about which they often think are poor and worthless—the clouds, the sunsets, the moonlight, the trees, birds and plants, the hills, valleys, springs, and streams.” Teaching appreciation of nature’s contribution to man’s physical, mental and spiritual maturation was important to the librarian.

Recognizing Ragland’s general love of nature and horticulture, Dr. Cherry appointed her and fellow faculty member Elizabeth Woods to order trees and plantings for the school’s landscaping in the late 1910’s. Later Ragland and Woods were instrumental in developing the extensive gardens surrounding the Kentucky Building. Bowling Green’s municipal leaders also recognized Ragland’s talents, asking her to oversee new plantings in the city’s oldest cemetery in the late 1920’s.

Western students loved Miss Ragland. While in the confines of her library, they had to abide by certain rules such as no loud talking, no gum chewing, and no umbrellas inside. In exchange for amiable obedience, Ragland attempted to direct the reading habits of students and they were amazed at her uncanny ability to locate materials for them. One student recalled: “It was our notion that Miss Ragland knew every book in the library, knew whether it was out and who had it, and when he was to bring it back.” She also remained a loyal friend and confidant as her correspondence clearly indicates.

Students also appreciated her efficient management of the library. A Western graduate pursuing a graduate degree at Swarthmore College wrote a friend: “The (Swarthmore) equipment is excellent everywhere, only I do not think they get the efficiency out of their library as Miss Ragland could if she had charge of it.” Each year brought Ragland “many girls and boys in whom I shall always be interested, even some who belong to the gum-chewing, umbrella class.” To supplement her meager salary, Ragland also boarded students in her rambling home near campus.

Ragland’s concern for students intensified during World War I, when Western’s enrollment dropped to its lowest level since 1908. She knitted scarfs, sweaters and gloves for some of her favorites. Expressing apologies for a tardy muffler, Ragland wrote one student

soldier: “My knitting hours are necessarily few. One long faculty meeting I knitted the whole time, perhaps you will find some of the thoughts in the stitches, at any rate they are there, all good, kind thoughts of you and our other boys who are doing their best where they are needed.”

She prepared bulletin boards about conservation of needed war materials and pinned photos or “her boys” around them. She headed the local book campaign to collect reading matter for soldiers, acquiring over 700 volumes. She also wrote numerous letters of encouragement and sent Christmas boxes. One of her more unusual contributions to the war effort was the donation of a pair of “excellent lenses for opera glasses,” which she sent to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, after his publicized request for binoculars and field glasses.

Despite her efforts, Ragland admitted that her efforts “sink into insignificance” compared to the “sacrifices and work of our young men and our part.” Besides her beloved students, Ragland had a brother serving in the Army, and her sister-in-law and nephew lived with her during his service. She reminded “her boys” that upon their return to Western “eager hearts here will be ready to do you honor.” Few people were happier to see the student soldier return than Florence Ragland.

In 1923 Ragland retired from her full-time library position at the age of 61 to teach part-time in Western’s English Department for seven years. Her seminal work in Western’s library had been significant. Ragland died in 1949 and was interred in Bowling Green’s Fairview Cemetery. She was eulogized as “a strong, positive character and she laid firm, professional foundations when she organized the Library. Her judgement, her scholarship, her energy, her professional zeal, and her deep interest in the students contributed mightily to the strength of the College.” Florence Ragland honored her chosen profession.