

## Ida Angeline Kidder: Pioneer Western Land-Grant Librarian

*The subject of this paper was appointed librarian of Oregon State Agricultural College in 1908, a position in which she served for twelve years. Her work in the early organizing of the library, as a teacher of library use, in guiding young readers in their search for inspiration and stimulation, and as a hospital librarian during World War I, are described.*

IN 1908 the library of Oregon State Agricultural College was languishing, as indeed it had throughout most of its uncertain and checkered existence. There came in that summer to direct it, as its first professional librarian, Ida Angeline Kidder, *née* Clark. From then on things would be different, very different.

Mrs. Kidder was, at the time of her appointment, fifty-three years old and only two years out of the University of Illinois library school. In the twelve years it would be permitted to her to serve, she was to upgrade and improve the library markedly in every aspect, placing it on firm and enduring foundations. Far transcending these notable achievements, she was to enter into the lives, interests, and affections of the Oregon State students to an extent unparalleled in American library history.

Mrs. Kidder's first professional position was with the Washington State library in Olympia. After a few months there she became, for two years, a Library Organizer for the Oregon State library in Salem. It was from this position that the

new President W. J. Kerr of Oregon State Agricultural College brought her to organize and develop the college library then containing 4,284 somewhat neglected and poorly organized volumes housed in a single room of the administration building.

Immediately there was a new spirit and a new vigor in the little one-room library. Mrs. Kidder fully realized that she had much to learn about agricultural college libraries. What she lacked in knowledge, she made up for in ambition. It was her purpose to make the library "one of the best agricultural libraries of the country." So off went a letter to Claribel Barnett, librarian of the U.S. Department of Agriculture asking for help. She opened her heart, she said, "very freely to her . . . I told her that I knew very little but that I had a great ambition to learn . . . I threw myself on her mercy to teach me. . . ." On July 21, 1908, back came a six-page single-spaced letter which is a key document in the history of the Oregon State University library. On August 25, 1908, there followed a two-page letter. These letters and ensuing correspondence, reflecting the complete dedication of both of these two outstanding librarians, were the beginning of a lifelong friendship.

Immediately, too, there began a series

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of notes, letters, verbal requests, and recommendations to the President's office for more help, more books, more money, more space. While the results of these requests were not startling in terms of today's multimillioned libraries, they were, for that time and that emerging college, in comparative terms, remarkably successful.

During her twelve years, Mrs. Kidder increased the library some eight-fold in volume content. She brought the staff from the one single position she accepted to nine. She achieved, as what she considered her crowning glory, a new and well planned library building of some 57,000 square feet. Notable as these things were, all part and parcel of her philosophy and ambition, they were not the most significant aspect of her librarianship. Capable librarians elsewhere in comparable situations have achieved as much.

The uniquely outstanding things Ida Kidder brought to the little college, eventually to become a university, were of the spirit. While she was a doer in concrete, physical terms, and the results of her doing were and still are available for all to see and use and profit by, she considered it important *to be* as well as to do. It was through her outgoing living of this philosophy that she gained the love and respect of the students, and of the faculty too, to an extent rarely if ever equalled in American librarianship. Hers, however, was no lofty, impractical idealism. It was grounded in the realities of time and circumstance as her substantial measurable achievements, in developing books, staff, and building, clearly showed. It was, in one sense, from her spirit and her enthusiasm, and her energy in giving both free play, that these material things flowed.

#### ORGANIZER AND TEACHER

With sure instinct Mrs. Kidder turned first, in developing the library, to or-

ganization. With the help of a professional cataloger brought in for summer assistance in her first year, she undertook to start the books already on hand toward their first professional classification and cataloging. She also placed the acquisitions and business aspects of operating the library on sound foundations.

As early as her second year, Mrs. Kidder was offering a "library practice" course required of all freshmen, then some two hundred. It was only because she had felt that she needed to know the college and the library better that she had waited a year to introduce this instruction. Within another year, she was also offering lectures on the library in the winter short courses for farmers. These resulted, for a period of years, in voluntary contributions of about \$100 annually to the library. In those days, and for this impoverished library, this was important money. Later she lectured on the library in courses for the advanced training of secretaries. She also found time somehow to make trips out into the state to talk to farm groups. Letters and commentary from her students, as well as from farmers, make it clear that her talks were truly inspiring. It was through them that she began to enter so completely into the affections of the students and the college community. Her lectures, said one colleague, were as apt to be concerned with life and literature as with the use of the library.

#### AN INSPIRER OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Mrs. Kidder was keenly interested in building inspiring ideals among the students. She was continually concerned that the Oregon State students, many of whom came from farm homes with limited cultural advantages, should be exposed to literature and particularly to poetry. She shared with her students the inspiring literature she enjoyed herself. She felt, and frequently said to her superiors, that the college, in its empha-

sis on technical education, was neglecting cultural and humanitarian instruction.

Her faculty colleagues have recorded that in her short talks on practical ethics to students, she generated a wonderful influence for good. She regarded the opportunity to meet students as the greatest privilege granted to a librarian whose aim is service. In exercising this privilege she had readings for groups of students in her rooms at Waldo Hall. She also studied with them individually her favorite Emerson, the Bible, Shakespeare, and other authors. She felt that students of the Bible should read it, not read about it.

Great as was Mrs. Kidder's appreciation of literature and poetry, her appreciation of people was even greater. She managed always to single out the best and finest characteristics of students. She helped them to bring these things out in themselves. She was particularly helpful to foreign students. One young Hindu student, asked later if he had known Mrs. Kidder said, "She was wonderful. She opened the world to me. She showed me all the world akin."

The chief characteristics which brought Mrs. Kidder so quickly into the affections of the college were her appreciation of the fine things of life, her interest in people, and her energy and good will. In her later years when failing health required her to use an electric cart (a great novelty in those days) in her trips around the campus she scattered cherry greetings along the way. There was, someone said, a kind of "Schumann-Heink-ness" about her.

It just came naturally, apparently, for the students to begin to call her "Mother" Kidder, a designation with which she was greatly pleased. As early as 1912 she was being referred to in no other way. She was continuing good copy in the student yearbooks, the *Orange*, later to become the *Beaver*, and the student

newspaper, the *Barometer*. The *Orange* of 1918 had a picture of her in her electric cart surrounded by young women. It was entitled "Mother and her Rookesses." In that year a Co-ed Edition of the *Barometer* was dedicated to her. In the *Beaver* of 1919 the Women's section was dedicated as follows: "We dedicate our section to the most universally loved woman on the campus, 'Mother' Kidder. An inspiring teacher and the best of friends."

Perhaps her crowning student recognition within her lifetime came in 1918 when Homer Maris, writer of the new Alma Mater song which has endured ever since, dedicated it "to 'Mother' Kidder in recognition of her enobling influence and great love felt for her on the part of all who have met under the old 'Trysting Tree.'"

#### PRACTICAL AND FIRM ADMINISTRATION

Not all was sentiment and idealism with Mrs. Kidder. While she was endearing herself so completely to the students, she was also developing and operating the library with a firm hand. Her relations with the faculty were friendly and congenial, but it was her rules that prevailed and well they knew it.

To one offending professor she wrote: "Last year you exceeded your fund and, therefore, took away from the amount for general books which the library very much needs. Such a thing must not occur again because I will not endure it. It is an injustice I will not stand." In protesting this matter to the business manager she urged, "Please stiffen up on this case and make him pay for this book. He understands perfectly that he is not expected to order books without any authority." This letter was signed "with indignation and resolution."

Mrs. Kidder was in no way provincial in her all-out efforts to bring her library into the forefront of agricultural college libraries. To further improve herself, she

made a trip in 1911 to visit libraries in the Midwest. She went to Illinois, Purdue, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa State, and John Crerar "in order to get into close touch with the work as it is carried out in other institutions." Her progressiveness was reflected in opening the library for evening service when the staff consisted only of herself and student help, in establishing Sunday open hours when this was practically unheard of, and in issuing to the faculty a monthly list of new books in the library when this was far from a common procedure.

Along with her outstanding Oregon colleagues, Mary Frances Isom of the Portland Library Association and Cornelia Marvin, State librarian, Mrs. Kidder was definitely a feminist as far as the library profession was concerned. Writing to her good friend, Miss M. E. Ahearn, editor of *Public Libraries*, she said, ". . . so far as I have come in contact with library workers of the country, the women have seemed to me much more alive, broadminded, and progressive. I have certainly received my inspiration from them rather than the men, with two or three exceptions."

Along with the routine operation of the library and maintaining contacts with students, the college administration was kept constantly aware of the increasingly acute housing problems of the library and the need for a new building. In the autumn of 1909 evening library hours were instituted for the first time for the faculty. By December these hours were extended to students, with attendant publicity about relieving pressures and congestion.

In the autumn of 1912 the *Barometer* complained that a chair in the library reading room deserted only momentarily would be found "filled by a life-size student of the green cap crowd. Let us offer a bunch of prayers for a library building in which this nuisance may be remedied." At that time Mrs. Kidder assured the students that "every effort is

being made to render conditions as tolerable as possible until we can have larger library quarters."

Pressures and needs such as this culminated in a request of the Board of Regents to the 1917 Legislature for an appropriation of \$158,000 for a library building. Everything must have been in readiness because with late spring approval of the requested funds, the construction contract was let in June. By World War I Armistice time in November of 1918 the building was ready for occupancy but understandably without its steel stacks.

#### WAR WORKER

As the new library home was under construction, the young male students were going off to the armed services, and the girls, including some library staff members, were going, or wanting to go, into Red Cross or other war work. So off went Mrs. Kidder too, by then universally known as "Mother," to Camp Lewis, near Tacoma, Washington, to serve as hospital librarian for the summer of 1918. This was to be one of the greatest experiences of her life.

Reporting back to her staff from Camp Lewis, she said that her first experience, "was to go before a fine, dignified old Army Colonel to be examined as to whether I was old enough and ugly enough to be innocuous. I qualified splendidly."

It was quickly evident at Camp Lewis that the same instincts and attitudes which had endeared her to the college students would bring her into the affections of the young soldier patients. She wrote back, "In most cases they [the soldiers] needed a Mother as much as a Doctor . . . they would brighten up and take a new heart of courage at the appearance of a lame gray haired woman who came to them with a motherly spirit in her heart."

It was entirely in character that Mrs. Kidder should so quickly become a

friend of the young patients and that she should soon be known to them, too, as "Mother." Some of them arranged a wager among themselves that she was so well known that a letter addressed to her only "Mother Kidder, Oregon" would reach her. On her departure they sent her a letter so addressed. When she reached Corvallis it was there waiting for her.

Mrs. Kidder was so enthused about her work with the soldiers that in writing to her assistant librarian, Lucy Lewis, at midsummer, and mindful, too, of duties and obligations at home and the new building under construction, she said, "I wish there were a hundred of me and each one had the strength of a lion and the days were one hundred days long."

Mrs. Kidder's remarkable effectiveness in helping the soldiers and in entering into their affections is epitomized by a letter she received from a soldier in France:

Dear Mother, [began this young soldier] That is how I must address you because I could not honor the one who sent me that most interesting letter of March 24th by any other name . . . don't you again dare to call yourself "old." That applies only to people who have ceased to be interesting, who have outlived their usefulness and are social liabilities, not to such dynamos of kindness, sympathy, and understanding as you. Mother, you will never get old for the companionship of your incorruptible boys and girls and the immortals who live on your bookshelves have endowed you with a personality that defies the march of time.

September of 1918 found Mrs. Kidder back in Corvallis. From there she welcomed with alacrity numerous invitations to talk about her Camp Lewis experiences. There were not, however, one hundred of her, and the days were not one hundred days long, so early November and the eagerly awaited time for the moving of the library to its new

home found her flat on her back with a heart attack. Writing to a colleague when she was recovering, she said, "I had to endure the cruel discipline of letting someone else superintend the move."

She comforted herself in that the plans were well laid, that her staff was competent, and that the move had gone smoothly. It was November 6, 1918, with momentous events shaping up on the war fronts, when the last book truck made the trip to the new building.

Commenting to the *Barometer* on the volunteer faculty assistance through which the library was moved, Mrs. Kidder said, "One of the beautiful things to cherish in our memory and tradition is the fact that our faculty helped to move our Library, and that the new home was built in this tremendous time in the world's history."

#### THE END APPROACHES

After World War I, with her beloved library safely housed in an attractive and commodious new home about which she easily could and did go into rhapsodies, Mrs. Kidder became more and more of a legend in her own time. Even though now in failing health, she never lost her interest in or warm contacts with the students. Her electric cart which helped her to get about the campus and community as she became increasingly lame only added to her fame as someone different. Her active and wide-ranging mind continued as sharp and stimulating as ever. Her concern about broadening the cultural backgrounds of technically educated students in no way diminished.

Letters from former students came to Mrs. Kidder frequently in her later years. They wrote to ask her to help select books for their children, to congratulate her on the new building, to let her know of their doings, and sometimes just to wish her well. Always these letters were in warm and intimate terms. One man

working in the Bureau of Markets in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, asking for advice in selecting books for his three-year-old daughter said, "I know of no one who is as well qualified to give it as you."

In an interview with the *Barometer* in June 1919, Mrs. Kidder complimented the students on their good manners in the Library.

Nobody, [she said] has to teach or admonish them. They know I love the Library and love them so much that I would be very hurt if the quiet of the Library should be disturbed . . . kind consideration for me then is one of the things that restrains the impulse to talk in the Library.

It was fitting that one of the very last letters Mrs. Kidder was to receive should come from Claribel Barnett of the U.S. Department of Agriculture library, as had also one of the first, that basic and influential letter of July 21, 1908, to the ambitious and eager novice seeking help. Advice was no longer needed by the exceptionally successful librarian Miss Barnett had helped so much. Her letter of January 29, 1920, told instead, and with obvious pleasure, of what a young Oregon State graduate who had been using the USDA library had said about the librarian who had helped to set him in good paths.

He spoke so beautifully of you. I am sure it would have done your heart good to hear him. Everyone who comes from Oregon speaks the same way. You have certainly endeared yourself to all who have been there.

With her health more and more precarious, Mrs. Kidder wrote President Kerr in mid-January of 1920 telling him of her continuing illness with heart trouble and asking him for a leave of absence without pay. She received a friendly and solicitous response sympathizing with her illness and granting her request, but telling her that her leave would, of course, be on full pay. He

would, the President said, come to see her in a day or two. He expressed hope that her recovery was merely a matter of time.

Time was, however, for Ida Angeline Kidder, running out. Within a week of this exchange of letters with the President, which she must have found both comforting and reassuring, she was dead. In recording her passing the *Portland Oregonian* spoke of her as the "grand old lady of the College Library known familiarly and lovingly to three generations of College Students."

#### THE TIME OF PARTING

The reaction of students, past and present, was as intensive as it was unusual. The *Barometer* of March 2, 1920, said this:

The life and influence of Mrs. Kidder has been an inspiration to all who knew her. She held a greater place than probably any other person and this endearment gave her the name of 'Mother' Kidder. Her greatest thought after building up the Library was inspiring ideals among students. One of the groups that knew her indeed as Mother was the Cosmopolitan Club composed of students from all over the world.

"Mother" Kidder's final hours among her students and on the campus, placing an exclamation point to the universal esteem and affection in which she was held, were unique in all American library history. At the request of the students her body lay in state on March 2, 1920, the day of her funeral, in the library building of her planning. Classes were cancelled from 10 to 2 and honor guards were at the casket. The funeral services were held on the steps of the library. A student body resolution of appreciation was read at the services. Floral tributes were so numerous that they could not all be accommodated at or near the casket.

"Mother" Kidder left her library and the campus not in a hearse but on the shoulders of young friends among the

students, who carried her to the railroad station, approximately a mile distant. She was followed by a faculty honor guard and the college band playing Chopin's Funeral March. Her body went by train to a crematorium in Portland. Even there her students, mostly alumni, were with her. There was music but no services.

The library world too honored Mrs. Kidder in her passing. The Agricultural Libraries Section of the American Library Association passed a memorial resolution praising her contributions to agricultural librarianship. Her friend and colleague Cornelia Marvin succinctly said this about her in *Public Libraries* of April 1920: "Her influence on the students of Oregon Agricultural College

was greater than that of any other member of the faculty."

The small western college in which Mrs. Kidder chose to invest her brief but dedicated career was remote from the bibliographical centers and cultural capitals of the world. It was, therefore, its doubly great good fortune that there should come out of the East this warm and dynamic personality and able librarian to set its struggling library in good paths, to develop it extensively, to inspire the students, and to give of herself to all with whom she came into contact. She did much with little. By her doings and her "being" she added an enduring luster not only to her library but to the entire profession of librarianship. ■■

