



*Votes for "Everywoman"*

## **Nellie Griswold Francis, the Women of Rondo, and Their Suffrage Crusade**

**LEETTA M. DOUGLAS, PAGE 1**

*Cameos (top to bottom): Lillian McKnight, May Black Mason, Elnora Smith, Bessie Miller*

**By the Numbers . . .**

Sinclair Lewis was the first US citizen to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930. The Minnesota-born author, whose doctor father once worried his son would never make anything of himself, wrote twenty-three novels, many of which were adapted to film.

Interscholastic athletic teams on which Harry Sinclair Lewis played in high school:

0<sup>a</sup>

By 1930, languages into which one or more of Lewis's novels had been translated:

13<sup>b</sup>

Main Street's rank on the Modern Library list of 100 Best Novels:

68<sup>c</sup>

Appearances on college syllabi of Sinclair Lewis's work:

399<sup>d</sup>

Rank of Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* on Amazon's Top 100 list in January 2017:

4<sup>e</sup>

Minnesota-born writers who have won the Nobel Prize for Literature:

2<sup>f</sup>

To learn more about the author, see Ralph L. Goldstein's article "The View from Summit Avenue: Inspiration Point for Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*" on page 12.

SOURCES: See page 23.

**ON THE COVER**

Portrait of Nellie Griswold Francis by artist Jennifer Soriano, based on an image from *The Appeal*, May 7, 1921. Original is a 16" x 11" charcoal drawing with sprayed gouache and a Sumi-nagashi ink print wash on heavyweight watercolor paper, which will be part of an upcoming *Persistence: Continuing the Struggle for Suffrage and Equality, 1848–2020* exhibition at Ramsey County Historical Society. Art courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society. Cameo images from *Musical America* 28. Courtesy of University of Minnesota Libraries.



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**Message from the Editorial Board**

As always, the stories of our people make history. We are pleased to publish Leetta Douglas's profile of Nellie Griswold Francis, a Black suffragist and civil rights leader in Saint Paul during the early twentieth century. Francis and a group of determined women worked to advance the cause of women's right to vote with the Everywoman Suffrage Club in the Rondo neighborhood and later supported progressive causes nationally. This issue also features Ralph Goldstein's article on Sinclair Lewis's ties to Saint Paul, where he wrote parts of his novels, including *Main Street*, which was published one hundred years ago. And Mark Taylor presents the story of Perrie Jones, longtime city librarian, whose legacy includes establishing The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library. Finally, we note that we will miss Paul Verret, who acted as a wise steward of philanthropy. During his term as RCHS board chair and continuing on, Paul had unflinching faith in our mission and our ability to fulfill it.

Anne Cowie  
Chair, Editorial Board

**Correction:** Regrets to Campbell Casper, whose first and last names were reversed in the article "Public Archaeology: Unearthing the Past in Ramsey County and Beyond" in the Spring 2020 issue.

The Ramsey County Historical Society thanks Board Member James A. Stolpestad and affiliate AHS Legacy Fund for supporting the updated design of this magazine. Publication of Ramsey County History is also supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr., and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon. Thanks to the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, the Sinclair Lewis Society, and The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library for their financial support.

## Honoring Perrie Jones, the Librarian at the Center of It All

MARK TAYLOR

Near the end of her life, Perrie Jones, a beloved former Saint Paul librarian, spent months working on a book—a book she would never finish. But her research files reveal that, if nothing else, Ms. Jones knew how the book would end. She included an excerpt from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

Alice: "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

Cheshire Cat: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."<sup>1</sup>

It's not surprising that this librarian would select a literary quote to end a book that would have encompassed much of her work, and it certainly illuminated the direction of her life. This small-town girl turned world traveler and YMCA volunteer in the Great War eventually returned to her home state of Minnesota to embark on the deliberate journey of a forward-thinking librarian who, by sharing books with people from all walks of life, left lifelong readers in her wake. She also left two priceless legacies that have impacted and will continue to benefit the residents of Saint Paul for years to come—an endowment that provides funds for staff training, conferences, workshops, and other enrichment opportunities and the establishment of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library.

This year, The Friends organization, into which Jones breathed new life in 1945, celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary. This nationally recognized group advocates, fundraises, and produces programming for the Saint Paul Public Library and consults for the betterment of libraries in Minnesota and across the nation. Jones was lauded for her efforts in getting this independent support organization running and, in fact, between 1930 and the late 1950s,

the name of the tireless librarian frequently made headlines and appeared in community newspaper calendars announcing her visits, speeches, and brainstorming sessions at libraries across the nation. Since then, however, while the Saint Paul Public Library and its steadfast companion, The Friends, have continued to grow and strengthen library services for Saint Paulites, Jones's name, outside of small library circles, has largely been forgotten.

And so we honor her here—because if you've ever spent time at today's George Latimer Central Library,<sup>2</sup> one of the smaller branch libraries, or the traveling bookmobile, you have likely benefitted from the quiet work of this exceptional woman.

### Listening and Learning

Perrie Jones was born on March 22, 1886, in the small town of Wabasha, Minnesota, to Robert Evan and Perrie Williams Jones. "Perrie" was a popular family name on Mrs. Jones's side, lovingly passed through several generations. Now there was one more child to carry the tradition. The newest "Perrie" would do the name and the family proud.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Jones ran the R. E. Jones Company, which furnished electric light and power for the town of 2,500 people and also sold, according to his letterhead, "grain, produce, wool, coal, insurance, loans."<sup>4</sup>

The family, including brothers David and Robert and sister Elinor, was close-knit, and as an adult, Jones often shared her favorite memories:

I can't tell you how lovely it was, the Mississippi was our back yard; we could sit on the bluffs and look across at the Wisconsin shore which grandmother said always reminded her of Wales. We children loved

the river traffic and knew every boat and packet by the sound of its whistle and the shape of its funnels . . . We rode horseback like wild things over the steep hills and into the coulees back of the town—it was rough going, but not too rough for us.”<sup>5</sup>

Once a week, usually at the Jones’s home, members of the Monday Club gathered for spirited intellectual debates between “all kinds of people—a Congregational minister and a Catholic priest, a couple of lawyers, school teachers, and [the] village dressmaker . . . the views expressed were as varied as the membership.”<sup>6</sup> According to Jones, “[The club] met every Monday . . . and I think I got my taste for the important things of life . . . listening when I was too insignificant to get into the discussions.”<sup>7</sup> These gatherings may have ignited that initial spark that led to a life dedicated to learning and sharing knowledge with others.

Jones was valedictorian of her 1903 Wabasha High School class of nine students. She studied at the University of Minnesota, although she was called home briefly her freshman year when her mother died. She returned to university, where she was a member of Kappa Alpha Theta and a junior representative of the 1904 Women’s League. She transferred to Smith College in Massachusetts her senior year, graduating in 1908.<sup>8</sup>

Jones hoped to teach English. She secured a job in the small town of Rushford, south of Wabasha, but not as an English teacher. Instead, she was assigned classes in physiography and botany, “full of boys no other teacher would have.”<sup>9</sup> The experience was unsatisfying. Jones soon returned to her hometown.

### The Power of a Book

In Wabasha, the young woman joined a newly formed library board, which was converting the private Ladies Library Association’s reading club into a public institution with the help of Miriam E. Carey from the Minnesota State Library Commission. Carey encouraged Jones to take classes in library science in 1911.<sup>10</sup> That fall, the twenty-five-year-old became the town’s public librarian in a space “installed above the city hall in the old room where [Jones] had played basketball as a teenager. The people of

Wabasha rallied around their new library, making it a center of community life. There were story hours for the youngsters, Campfire Girls meetings, [and] Sunday afternoon concerts.”<sup>11</sup>

Jones dove into her job straight-away, opening a branch on the west side of town, distributing books to schools, and partnering with the Women’s Club to keep the building open on Sunday afternoons in winter. She worked to expand services to as many people as possible. It was soon obvious how much more successful a public library was than a private one. “In 1910 there were 100 borrowers and a circulation of 60 . . . after the library was made public, there were 459 borrowers and a circulation of 4,447 volumes.”<sup>12</sup>

Jones had done well for herself; a small-town girl running a small-town library, but after four years, she was itching to move on. In 1916, she found herself at 476 Fifth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan, marching up the stairs of the New York Public Library, flanked on either side by the famous lion statues “Patience” and “Fortitude”—two virtues that would serve her well. Jones had enrolled in the New York Public Library School.<sup>13</sup> She enjoyed her studies and her classmates, with the exception of one: a “rebellious Russian girl from upper New York state



Even as a teen, Perrie Jones recognized how lucky she was to grow up in a home that valued thoughtful discourse. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*



Wabasha’s first public library. *Courtesy of Wabasha Public Library.*

Perrie Jones in 1917 just before heading overseas on her YMCA assignment. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



who held the Midwest in contempt and scorned anyone who had not read the modern Russian writers. Miss Jones filled this gap in her literary background, but with scant satisfaction. ‘I read and read until I felt I had to take a bath.’<sup>14</sup>

Jones earned her librarian’s certificate later that year and remained in the city to work as

Official orders for Perrie Jones while she volunteered with the YMCA in France. Here, she was assigned to locate a grave. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.

MOVEMENT ORDER A. E. F. Y.M.C.A.		RED WORKERS PERMIT (PERMIS ROUGE)
MOVEMENT ORDER (ORDRE DE SERVICE)	No. 36622	No. 5433
The bearer (Le porteur)	F. JONES	a representative of the (représentant)
American Expeditionary Forces Y. M. C. A. is ordered to proceed (L'Y. M. C. A. des Forces Expéditionnaires Américaines, a l'ordre de se rendre)		
to: La Porte sous Jonaire (S & M) and return and to report to (a) (et de se présenter)		
Y. M. C. A. the Director in charge of Y. M. C. A. service in that area. (au Directeur des services de l'Y. M. C. A. dans cette région.)		
Motive: (Motif)	Searching for grave	
Service with the American Expeditionary Forces Y.M.C.A. (Au service de l'Y.M.C.A. des Forces Expéditionnaires Américaines)		
The journey should be completed on or before (Le voyage doit être terminé au plus tard le) June 23rd, 1919.		
and the bearer is allowed to travel first class at military rates. (et le porteur est autorisé à voyager en 1 <sup>re</sup> classe au tarif militaire.)		
Passed by (Visé par)	Issued by (Délivré par)	Manager
	Circulation Department (Bureau de la Circulation)	
Leaving June 23rd.	Approved by (Approuvé par)	
	Director General A. E. F. Y. M. C. A. (Directeur Général A. E. F. Y. M. C. A.)	
	Date of issue: Délivré le	June 21st, 1919.

an assistant in the institution’s technology division.<sup>15</sup> While there, she wrote “Dehydrated Foods: A List of References to Material in the New York Public Library.” The pamphlet noted 195 articles and books about food dehydration; useful information, but perhaps one could say it was—a bit dry.

Energized by the city and people from around the world, Jones was in the mood for more adventure. She applied for three jobs: one with an international oil company; another with a library in Montevideo, Uruguay; and a third at a library in Alaska. Nothing panned out, which wasn’t surprising, given that much of the world was at war.<sup>16</sup>

### There Are Many Ways to Serve

The United States entered World War I in April 1917. Jones pursued an opportunity to serve overseas with the YMCA. Taking a leave of absence, she sailed to France that November on the SS *Rochambeau*.<sup>17</sup> Originally sent to Tours to find housing for recruits, she also served as a translator between French nurses and British and American soldiers and worked in hospitals, “identifying the name tags of rows of wounded waiting . . . for medical care.”<sup>18</sup> Jones journaled often. In May 1918, she wrote, “Everything that I have ever dreamed of doing I am doing.”<sup>19</sup> She signed up for six more months of service despite the fact that she was in the middle of a war zone and witnessed unfathomable destruction and death.

Jones didn’t speak much about her war-time experiences. When interviewers asked, “she just calls those years ‘an interlude’ and refuses to talk about them, in common with most people who were part of that horror.”<sup>20</sup> She did write a little about what she saw, though. Her journal includes poetry and notes and impressions about people and landscapes.

There may be another reason Jones did not care to talk about her time in France. While there, she got involved with Hugh Hill, a British officer. The problem? Hill had a wife and two daughters waiting for him in England. Jones’s journal makes it sound like a deep relationship; “I feel as if I belonged to him already,” and they were “enjoying each other to the point of real love.” Ultimately, Hill was transferred. Jones seemed to have ended their relationship. A

couple of weeks after their breakup, she wrote, "I don't know if I like him or not."<sup>21</sup>

### Reading Can Be the Best "Medicine"

Jones returned to the US in 1919 before traveling back to Europe in 1920, spending six months in England, Wales, and Sweden. Did she hope to rekindle the relationship with the British officer? Did she feel the need to see how Europe, including her ancestral country of Wales, was healing? Was she traveling to "find herself" in her early thirties? We don't know. But then, in a letter to her father, Jones wrote:

Your last remarks about hoping my money lasts make me laugh and you, of course, have received my SOS call by this time for more. As a matter of fact I have been living off friends since I have been here, am now selling my clothes and only wish I had brought along old uniforms. You do not speculate any more than do I about what I shall turn to permanently. My inclination is to be in my own country and state and at my own job, that of libraries. It is no good this jumping about and this life abroad is futile for a permanent arrangement . . . I have thought the last few days rather seriously of investigating the State Library Commission in Saint Paul. I know people there and should like to get a job in the organized end of it, starting new libraries about the state.<sup>22</sup>

That's just what Jones did. She returned to Minnesota in 1921 and, with the commission's support, landed a job with the Saint Paul Public Library, organizing hospital libraries for wounded veterans. It was a pilot program partially funded by the Amherst H. Wilder Charity.<sup>23</sup>

Jones understood the power of books and was eager to get them into patients' hands. The library made this mission clear, as a number of newspapers featured the concept at its inception. For example, the *St. Paul Dispatch* wrote, "When Miss Perrie Jones breezes into the Aberdeen Public Health Service hospital the tedium of the dull hours breezes out. Miss Jones . . . brings romance, adventure and instruction to occupy the minds of war veterans while their bodies are fighting disease or mending

### The Battlefield of the Marne, 1918<sup>a</sup>

Green wheat swaying in the breeze  
Warm winds stirring lazy trees  
And always blood-red poppies<sup>b</sup>

Spruce made fragrant by the sun  
White bedded brooks with pebbles run  
And then the blood-red poppies

Wild mustard flaunting yellow tops  
A soaring lark that never stops  
And countless blood-red poppies

A summer sky with spongy clouds  
Folk of the grass in noisy crowds<sup>c</sup>  
But always blood-red poppies

The avions<sup>d</sup> with lazy whirl  
A huge sauciss<sup>e</sup> with scarce a stir  
And still the blood-red poppies

The Boche<sup>f</sup> are hammering on the line  
That all our men are counting time  
But what of blood-red poppies

A cloud of dust on the hardchalk road  
Huge camulus<sup>g</sup> with each its load  
There'll be more blood-red poppies<sup>h</sup>

One hundred years after the end of World War I, poppies are still a common sight across Europe. Courtesy of Meredith Cummings.





Organizations like the Amherst H. Wilder Charity and the American Library Association provided donated books, magazines, and newspapers to veterans of war who were recovering at hospitals and convalescent homes. *Image 1209, courtesy of the American Library Association Archives.*

wounds.”<sup>24</sup> In a way, she was still serving veterans as she’d done overseas.

When book service was expanded for all patients in the hospitals, Jones recalled:

Our entrance was met with loud shouts of welcome. Eagerness to look over and select books from the cart was great, and the circulation was enormous. I could scarcely get away from the wards, their demands were so persistent. Again and again I went back to the bookshelves for more books, and each time the patients all but fell on the cart for joy. I realized again how weary, how lonely these poor souls were with nothing to fill their hours.<sup>25</sup>

By 1923, Jones and an assistant were visiting eight hospitals. Monthly circulation soared to over 3,000 books. Jones’s work was very much needed and well recognized. In 1924, she was elected Chairman of the Hospital Librarians section of the American Library Association.<sup>26</sup>

She worked with hospitals until 1928, when at forty-two she was appointed Supervisor of Minnesota State Institutional Libraries. Jones’s appointment made her one of the state’s most visible public literacy champions. She was vice president of the Minnesota Library Association in 1928 and president in 1930. She traveled throughout the country talking about the necessity of libraries for all. She also felt it important

to examine other library systems to see what could be gleaned from them. Between 1925 and 1935, she journeyed overseas six times.<sup>27</sup>

Over a decade, Jones oversaw the library needs of eighteen institutions, serving 18,000 people. “One was a penitentiary, one a reformatory, one a women’s prison, three hospitals for mental cases, three asylums, two training schools for delinquents (boys and girls who were minors and first offenders), one an orthopedic hospital, one tuberculosis hospital, a school for the blind, a school for the deaf, one school for feeble-minded, one colony of epileptics, and one state public school for dependent children.”<sup>28</sup>

Robert Hoag worked with Jones for years. He described her as a regal woman who “. . . certainly had an undying interest in other people’s advancement and welfare.”<sup>29</sup>

She may have seemed regal to some, but mostly it was patience and fortitude that kept her going. (Remember her lion friends at the New York Public Library?) It wasn’t glamorous work, but Jones knew that “. . . one of the easiest ways to keep anyone out of mischief, young or old, in or out of prison, is to keep that person busy. . . .”<sup>30</sup>

A reporter from the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* followed Jones to the Minnesota State Prison at Stillwater in 1931, where she explained how libraries should be run. “A plump, orderly, well-filled shelf in any library is a sure sign that something is the matter with the book ordering.”<sup>31</sup> She made certain inmates were getting the books they wanted. And they were—on average each inmate checked out four books a month.<sup>32</sup>

Requests ran the gamut: adventure, biographies, nonfiction, newspapers, and magazines. Sometimes, Jones was presented with a challenge. By her account, one inmate, for instance, requested Ivan Pavlov’s *Studies on Physical Reflexes*. “The book was too expensive to buy, particularly as we should never have another request for it. . . . But the man was a lifer, and I made up my mind he should have it. So I managed to borrow it for him.”<sup>33</sup>

According to friend Al Heckman. “She was not the old-fashioned librarian who hovered over her books and protected them and didn’t like to have people handle them and was always sorry that they were wearing out from use. Perrie was very pleased when books were worn out. . . .”<sup>34</sup>

By the end of her tenure, Jones and her team had placed Minnesota at the leading edge of institutional library service. Other libraries looked to the state for ideas and advice, and they shared their progress: Dorothy Randolph with the Industrial School in Huntington, Pennsylvania, noted that many of the juveniles could not read well. She encouraged the boys by focusing on their interests and presenting story hours related to a popular treasure hunt program. Soon they were interested in stories about the Wild West, detectives, and famous men and women in history. The librarian ended her letter to Jones with this:

One of the most pleasing experiences came most unexpectedly when a boy who was ready to go out on parole came to say good-bye and thank me for the good books I had given him to read. He ended by expressing a desire to be able to read further when he arrived in his home town. I gave him a letter to his librarian and later learned he was an ardent and faithful borrower where once he had been a 'perfect pest.'<sup>35</sup>

### City Librarian—The Feather in Her Cap

The capstone of Jones's career was the nearly twenty years she spent as City Librarian of the Saint Paul Public Library. At the time, the job was appointed by the city council. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* applauded the appointment: "That she will place the Saint Paul Library among the first of its kind and class, full confidence can be felt."<sup>36</sup>

Despite the praise, Jones faced challenges from the start. She succeeded Jennie T. Jennings in January 1937. Jennings held the role since 1931, shepherding the library through the darkest days of the Great Depression—no easy task. However, John S. Findlan, the councilman who served as Director of Libraries, Auditoriums, and Public Buildings, appointed Jones to bring new life to the position, while demoting Jennings. Several months later, it was announced that Jennings was resigning, and a new hire would replace her. Truthfully, Jones had dismissed Jennings, who quickly secured a lawyer and threatened to sue. Findlan complicated matters when he announced that he was eliminating the position. The council overruled Findlan's decision.

Jennings stayed in the position until the next August when she ultimately retired.<sup>37</sup>

Challenges continued for Jones as the Great Depression wound down and World War II ramped up. Just as we've seen businesses shut down or put plans on hold with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the new librarian couldn't accomplish as much as she'd hoped beginning in 1941 when the country went to war. Her libraries emptied, with a third of her staff leaving to fight overseas or work in much needed war-related jobs. Of course, Jones understood; she'd done the same thing in 1917.

Still, Jones loved her job and might have reflected on how best to tackle her work as she walked a mile and a half from her apartment on Portland Avenue to the library each morning.<sup>38</sup> Overlooking Rice Park to the north and the Mississippi River to the south, Central Library is situated in a picturesque spot, and it's easy to imagine Jones walking briskly from Cathedral Hill into downtown, with the library shimmering ahead of her. It is a regal building built in 1917 for \$1.5 million and meant to make a statement.<sup>39</sup> It did, yet Jones wasn't convinced that its grand architecture was necessary. She once said, "It's perfectly beautiful—but . . . Now at this important period in our history we must



Perrie Jones made sure the Saint Paul Public Library was welcoming for readers of all ages. Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society and The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library.

manage to break the old patterns of the monumental, awe-inspiring library, which citizens point to proudly but do not enter. We must see that it goes out to the people, young and old, and that the people come in to it with ease and eagerness.”<sup>40</sup> She had lots of ideas.

Jones supervised 150 employees and oversaw an annual budget of over \$250,000 and a book collection of 450,000 volumes. In addition to administrative duties, she made improvements to attract new readers. In 1939, her staff dedicated the James Skinner Memorial Room, designed by architect Magnus Jemne as a comfortable, bright, and informal space specifically for the city’s teenagers. But the librarian wasn’t done: an exquisite puppet stage, a music listening room, a new children’s room, a traveling bookmobile, a film lending service, and a curbside book return soon followed.<sup>41</sup>

Jones worked non-stop. One of her children’s librarians lamented, “It isn’t what she’s doing with herself, it’s what she’s doing to the rest of us! We haven’t had a peaceful moment since she came in. Sometimes I think it would be nice and restful to have a boss who isn’t so brimful of new ideas.”<sup>42</sup>

Jones looked for opportunities outside the walls of Central Library, as well. She had advocated for additional branch libraries across the city and felt “a public library has not achieved its objective until it is the mother of active branches in every district of the community.”<sup>43</sup> When the library board sold a plot of land at Seventh and Wabasha in 1946, they had \$826,000 at their disposal, which went toward the construction of three mid-century modern

branch libraries—Rice Street, Highland Park, and Hayden Heights. Jones had deliberate ideas as to where these new institutions should be built. “It was characteristic of Miss Jones to insist . . . that the addition be placed where one of the city’s least privileged groups could take advantage of it.”<sup>44</sup>

In 1945, Jones had another idea: The city libraries needed help securing funds for salaries, new programs, and the several new branches that were so needed as soldiers returned from war and families began enjoying more leisure time. Why not start a fund and strengthen the libraries in the community? Actually, that idea wasn’t a new one. The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library actually got its start in 1923, encouraging citizens to join its organization for \$1 annually and donate books when they could. The idea petered out after a year and was mostly forgotten . . . until Jones took the reins. She did her homework, sending surveys to public and university libraries to learn how other such organizations were run. Before long, volunteers and a small staff formed a support organization that continues serving the libraries of Saint Paul seventy-five years on.<sup>45</sup>

### In Addition to Books

As might be expected, Jones was passionate about books, particularly poetry and fiction. As part of her personal collection, she acquired all but one of the forty-two titles published by the Welsh Gregynog Press, which produced small editions using old-fashioned printing methods to create, not just books, but works of art. Two of her favorites included *Poems* by Welsh poet Henry Vaughan and *The Story of a Red-Deer* by John William Fortescue.<sup>46</sup>

Jones was also a poet, an artist, a long-distance walker (she never learned to drive), and a world traveler. She’d often write poems or sketch scenes from her walks and travels. In 1930, Jones submitted poems to *Commonweal* magazine and to the Paget Literary Agency, only to receive rejection letters from both.<sup>47</sup>

Her hopes were dashed further when she sent six poems to Oscar W. Firkins, a University of Minnesota literature professor. In her cover letter, Jones wrote that she hopes he “will find something of interest if not of value and is certain criticism will be helpful.”<sup>48</sup> Firkins

Perrie Jones believed libraries, including a branch at 1011 Rice Street, should be enjoyed as community centers, not merely storage warehouses for books. Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.



## The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library

In the seventy-five years since Perrie Jones founded The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library, the organization has pursued her original mission to keep the library strong. With Jones as its North Star, The Friends' core beliefs still echo her legacy:

**Belief in libraries.** Jones recognized the power of libraries to change lives and create thriving communities. That's why The Friends exists. Its mission is to act as a catalyst for libraries to strengthen and inspire communities.

**Belief in connecting.** Jones brought library services outside library walls to people in hospitals, prisons, and schools. She created public-private partnerships to launch innovative programs. Today, The Friends still pursues this partnership model through its advocacy and fundraising work, which has led to successful pilot programs for story times in multiple languages, a library social worker, libraries in laundromats, and community cultural liaisons—programs that are now embedded in the organization's core work. As the Library of Congress-designated Minnesota Center for the Book, The Friends also connects people all over the state with stories, libraries, authors, and each other.

**Belief in everyone.** Jones championed people no matter their age, ethnicity, or background by highlighting authors of color and speaking out against censorship. The Friends' work continues to break down barriers so that the library can truly belong to *everyone*.



With support from The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library, the city's libraries provide early learning opportunities for children through their collections, story times, programming, and additional resources. *Courtesy of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library.*



**Belief in learning.** Jones believed in knowledge as a way to guard against the "tyranny of ignorance." The Friends supports initiatives like homework help centers, digital literacy classes, and play-based programs for its youngest residents, ensuring that the library can remain an essential part of a lifelong learning ecosystem.

**Belief in potential.** In 1968, Jones left her estate to The Friends to provide scholarships and grants for library staff. Today, the Perrie Jones Fund is strong and supports staff in its continuing education to meet the ever-changing and diverse needs of the community.

These values have guided The Friends' work for years. And, they will continue to lead the organization forward as it supports the library through a radical reinvention of its service model in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and as both The Friends and the Saint Paul Public Library commit to their roles in addressing systemic racism and inequity to create meaningful change in their communities.

The needs of communities continue to evolve. The Friends empowers libraries to adapt and respond to those needs in their role as critical social infrastructure. Its vision—one that it believes Perrie Jones would readily champion—is that one day there will be a dynamic library at the heart of *every* community.



critiqued her work matter-of-factly: “Your verses are neither boorish nor insipid, but they contain no warrant for advising you to adopt poetry as a career or even as a sub-career.”<sup>49</sup> Never one to give up, Jones submitted an article to *American Mercury* magazine in 1931, beginning a short correspondence with the critic and satirist H. L. Mencken. That piece, too, was rejected.<sup>50</sup>

Still, Jones was a prolific author of articles—in library journals. She contributed over forty articles, including her early pamphlet on dehydrated foods, as well as one on “2,500 Books for the Prison Library” and “One Thousand Books for Hospital Libraries: An Annotated Bibliography.”<sup>51</sup>

In her role, Jones was invited to local literary and arts events. Sauk Centre-born author Sinclair Lewis lived, wrote, and researched in Saint Paul from time to time. It is unclear if Jones knew the writer personally, although she likely did if he spent any time researching at Central Library. In fact, at one point while working on a manuscript, Lewis stayed at the posh Saint Paul Hotel across the way. Another time, in 1939, he was in town starring in his own play, “Angela is Twenty-Two.” Jones received an invite. (See page 19.)

### Retirement . . . Sort of

On September 13, 1955, the librarian announced her retirement after “nineteen years of exciting and deeply satisfying experience.”<sup>52</sup> There were no displays of self-importance in her letter,



The community celebrated Perrie Jones’s accomplishments at a retirement reception at the Lowry Hotel in 1955. Jones looked forward to traveling, and a small contingent, including Charles Kneissel, Pierce Butler Jr., Dean T. C. Blegen, Severin A. Mortinson, and George Brack, presented Jones with new luggage precisely so she could see more of the world. *Courtesy of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library.*

which was simple and to the point. Her years of service were lauded at several receptions, one of which took place at the Hotel Lowry.<sup>53</sup> Jones would be missed, but she was looking forward to spending more time at the home she’d built a few years earlier at 348 Stonebridge Boulevard—a home on a hill with views of the Mississippi River bluff.<sup>54</sup>

Did retirement mean slowing down? Absolutely not. The retiree set to work on what she planned to be a comprehensive book *Hospital Libraries: What and Why*. Jones did a lot of research for this book early on—her notes take up a box in a Minnesota Historical Society collection. She sent out surveys to hospital libraries across the country in 1958 and 1959. But what’s lacking in her papers is a finished draft of any of the chapters she had outlined. Jones’s health may have been a factor. In the early sixties, she had arthritis in her hand, knees, and ankles, and told an interviewer, “For two or three years, I couldn’t even write my own letters.”<sup>55</sup>

Still, she traveled when she could, often wintered in Arizona, and continued to share her thoughts with reporters when asked, including opinions on censorship: “Neither a policeman, nor a mayor, nor a minister, nor a librarian, nor an individual has a right to impose his personal prejudices on a reading public.”<sup>56</sup>

In 1964, the University of Minnesota awarded the respected elder an Outstanding Achievement Award for public service, a suitable tribute to a woman who dedicated her life to serving veterans, hospital patients, prison inmates, children, teens, everyone. The Association of Hospital and Institutional Librarians also paid tribute with its Exceptional Service Award.<sup>57</sup>

### The Perrie Jones Legacy

Even at the end of her life, Jones was thinking about how she could help the library. With no spouse or children, she left the bulk of her estate, around a half-million dollars, to what is today the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation to administer the Perrie Jones Library Fund. That fund continues to support The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library, which, in turn, supports and strengthens the city’s libraries. Not long after she endowed this generous gift, Jones died of a stroke at eighty-two on November 7, 1968.<sup>58</sup>

J. Neil Morton, who worked with Jones as president of the Saint Paul Board of Education, had this to say about his friend, “She had an ease [when] dealing with people which was remarkable. She could talk to people with all levels of interests.”<sup>59</sup> Maybe that gift came from those days long ago, when as a child, Jones hid in the corner listening to the banter at her parents’ Monday Club—the banter of “all kinds of people . . . getting a taste for the important things in life.”<sup>60</sup>

In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the Cheshire Cat asks Alice where she wants to go.<sup>61</sup> Perrie Jones knew where she wanted to go and what she wanted to do. She was determined to share “the important things in life” with the reading public, and her tireless efforts helped ensure that the Saint Paul Public Library system

remains a rich, vibrant, transformative community resource to this very day.

**Mark Taylor** is a writer and historian. The former social studies teacher gives F. Scott Fitzgerald walking tours for the Minnesota Historical Society and serves on the editorial board of the Ramsey County Historical Society. He is a Trustee of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library and proudly serves on the Perrie Jones Committee. He lives in Saint Paul with his wife and two children.

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## NOTES

1. Hospital Libraries Handbook: correspondence, printed materials, and other papers, Perrie Jones and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society; Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (London, England: MacMillan and Co, 1865), 53.

2. “History of George Latimer Central Library,” St. Paul Public Library, accessed June 8, 2020, <https://sppl.org/about-george-latimer-central-library/history-of-george-latimer-central-library/>. In 2014, Central Library was renamed the George Latimer Central Library in recognition of a former Saint Paul mayor. The largest branch in the city, it houses 350,000 books and resources and is visited by 300,000 patrons annually.

3. Perrie Jones, family background and biographical information, Perrie Jones and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

4. Perrie Jones, family background and biographical information.

5. Vivian Thorp, “Wabasha Girl Becomes Library Authority,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 8, 1940, 1.

6. Thorp, 1.

7. Thorp, 1.

8. Perrie Jones, family background and biographical information; “Robert E. Jones, 84, Dies at Wabasha,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, January 26, 1939; “The Thetas Dine,” *The Minneapolis Journal*, January 29, 1904, 11; “Women’s League Elects,” *The Minneapolis Journal*, October 26, 1906, 18.

9. Morton, 325.

10. May P. Jesseph, “Perrie Jones: Librarian and Humanitarian” (master’s thesis, University of Minnesota, 1976), 5-6.

11. Morton, 326.

12. Jesseph, 6-7.

13. The New York Public Library Archives & Manuscripts, Library School Records, accessed May 1, 2020, <http://archives.nypl.org/nypla/5066>. The Library School opened in October 1911, with funding from Andrew Carnegie. In 1926, it merged with Columbia University’s library school. Columbia closed its program in 1993.

14. Morton, 326.

15. Morton, 324.

16. Morton, 326.

17. “The French Liner ‘Rochambeau,’” *The Marine Engineer and Naval Architect* 33 (April 11): 315, accessed June 7, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/marineengineer33londuoft/page/314/mode/2up>. This ocean liner was built in 1911 to transport travelers between Havre, France, and New York City. During World War I, the vessel was used as a hospital ship.

18. Morton, 326.

19. Perrie Jones, journal entry May 1918, Perrie Jones and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

20. Thorp, 1.

21. Perrie Jones, journal entries, May 1918.

22. Jesseph, 10.

23. The Amherst H. Wilder Charity became the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation in 1953.

24. “Hospital Patients Puzzle Librarian,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 11, 1921, 10.

25. “Reading Helps Hospitalized,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, November 18, 1923.

26. Jesseph, 12.

27. Morton, 327.

28. “Library Service for Hospital Wards is Recommended Here,” *The Daily Colonist*, June 26, 1936.

29. Robert Hoag, oral history interviews, Saint Paul Public Library, records, Minnesota Historical Society.

30. Thorp, 1.
31. "Stillwater Prisoners are Avid Readers," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 6, 1931, 9.
32. "Stillwater Prisoners," 9.
33. Thorp, 1. Jones may have been referring to Pavlov's 1927 book, *Conditioned Reflexes: An Investigation of the Psychological Activity of the Cerebral Cortex*.
34. Al Heckman, oral history interviews, Saint Paul Public Library records, Minnesota Historical Society.
35. Dorothy Randolph, letter to Perrie Jones, in "Library Service to Prisoners," American Library Association Archives at the University of Illinois, accessed June 2, 2020, [https://archives.library.illinois.edu/ala/files/2014/04/Dorothy\\_Randolph\\_PrisonLib.pdf](https://archives.library.illinois.edu/ala/files/2014/04/Dorothy_Randolph_PrisonLib.pdf).
36. Jesseph, 18. The job title is now Director of the Saint Paul Public Library.
37. Biloine W. Young, *A Noble Task: The Saint Paul Public Library Celebrates 125* (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 2007), 101-103. According to Young, some library patrons were upset that Mrs. Jennings did not get the credit she deserved for her good work under challenging conditions.
38. "History of George Latimer Central Library," St. Paul Public Library, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://sppl.org/about-george-latimer-central-library/history-of-george-latimer-central-library/>.
39. "History of George Latimer Central Library."
40. Thorp, 1; Perrie Jones, typescript and printed speeches, articles, book reviews, and similar papers, Perrie Jones and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society.
41. Perrie Jones, typescript and printed speeches; Morton, 328.
42. Thorp, 1.
43. Thorp, 1.
44. Young, 116; Morton, 328.
45. Young, 89-90; Perrie Jones, correspondence, Perrie Jones and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society. In addition to library duties, Jones taught a course at the University of Minnesota training librarians. It was the first of its kind in the country. She served on the boards of numerous charities, including the Community Chest and Council, Saint Paul Family Service, the United Nations Committee for Minnesota, and the Saint Paul branch of the Foreign Policy Association.
46. "Rare Collection of Books is Given to U. of Minn.," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 1962. Jones donated her collection to the University of Minnesota Library.
47. See Perrie Jones and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society, for examples of sketches and poetry.
48. Perrie Jones, letter to Oscar W. Firkins, April 1930, Perrie Jones and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society.
49. Oscar W. Firkins, letter to Perrie Jones, May 1930, Perrie Jones and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society.
50. H. L. Mencken, letters to Perrie Jones, January 21, 1931; February 11, 1931; and March 11, 1931, Perrie Jones and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society.
51. Jesseph, 48-51.
52. Perrie Jones, retirement letter to Severin A. Mortinson, City Commissioner, September 13, 1955, Perrie Jones and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society.
53. Young, 121. Speakers at the retirement celebration included T. C. Blegen, the dean of the University of Minnesota graduate school, Pierce Butler Jr., Severin Mortinson of the Saint Paul City Council, and Mrs. J. R. Sweasy, President of the Minnesota Library Association.
54. Magnus Jemne, who built the library's James Skinner Memorial Room, also built Perrie Jones's home.
55. Carl Henneman, "Miss Jones is Weak of Limb But Strong in Spirit," *St. Paul Dispatch*, August 25, 1965.
56. Henneman.
57. The Perrie Jones Library Fund," pamphlet, 1980. Perrie Jones and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society.
58. "Perrie Jones, Former City Librarian, Dies," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, November 8, 1968.
59. J. Neil Morton, oral history interviews, Saint Paul Public Library records, Minnesota Historical Society.
60. Thorp, 1.
61. Carroll, 53.

#### Notes to Sidebar on p. 27

- a. "Second Battle of the Marne," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Battle-of-the-Marne>. The Second Battle of the Marne (July 15-18, 1918) was the last large German offensive of the war in France.
- b. Eric Blakemore, "How the Poppy Came to Symbolize World War I," *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 20, 2016, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/how-poppy-came-symbolize-world-war-i-180960836/>. Poppies grow underground and can lay dormant for up to eighty years. The battles of World War I ravaged the European countryside, resulting in stunning blooms of poppies in abandoned battlefields and near burial grounds. John McCrae, a Canadian doctor, noticed the flowers and wrote the poem "In Flanders Fields" in 1915. The poppy became a symbol used to honor the war dead.
- c. Possibly toads, crickets, etc.
- d. Perrie Jones's description for combat aircraft.
- e. Saucisse, spelled with an "e" at the end means sausage in French but likely describes the airships or zeppelins used in aerial warfare in World War I.
- f. Julian Walker, "World War One: Slang terms at the Front," British Library, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/slang-terms-at-the-front>. A derogatory slang word sometimes used by the Allies to describe German soldiers.
- g. "Camulus," Oxford Reference, accessed August 9, 2020, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/search?q=camulus&searchBtn=Search&isQuickSearch=true>. The name of an Old English/Celtic war deity.
- h. Journal, 1918, Perrie Jones and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future.

*The mission statement of the Ramsey County Historical Society  
adopted by the Board of Directors on January 25, 2016.*

The Ramsey County Historical Society's vision is to innovate, lead, and partner in preserving the knowledge of our community, delivering inspiring history programming, and incorporating local history in education. Our mission of *preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future* guides this vision.

The Society began in 1949 when a group of citizens preserved the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family acquired in 1849. The original programs at Gibbs Farm (listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974) focused on telling the story of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, the site also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways. RCHS built additional structures and dedicated outdoor spaces to tell the stories of the remarkable relationship between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people of Heyate Otunwe (Cloud Man's Village).

In 1964, the Society began publishing its award-winning magazine, *Ramsey County History*. In 1978, the organization moved its library, archives, and administrative offices to St. Paul's Landmark Center, a restored Federal Courts building on the National Register of Historic Places. An expansion of the Research Center was completed in 2010 to allow greater access to the Society's collection of historical archives and artifacts. In 2016, the Research Center was rededicated as the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center.

RCHS offers a variety of public programming for youth and adults. Visit [www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com) for details of upcoming History Revealed programs, summer camps, courthouse and depot tours, and more. RCHS serves 15,000 students annually on field trips or through outreach programs in schools that introduce the Gibbs Family and the Dakota people of Heyate Otunwe. These programs are made possible by donors, members, corporations, and foundations, all of whom we appreciate deeply. If you are not yet a member of RCHS, please join today and help bring history to life for more than 50,000 people every year.

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History informs us, inspires new choices, brings people together, and builds community. Likewise, it can be misused to inspire fear, create division, and perpetuate racism and other injustices. We resolve to present history in accordance with our values of Authenticity, Innovation, Inspiration, Integrity, and Respect. We believe that by doing so our community will be more informed, more engaged, and will become stronger.

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Perrie Jones in the early 1940s around the time she stepped into the role of city librarian. Her presence and the ideas and changes she brought to the table still positively impact the Saint Paul Public Library System today. (See "The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library Celebrate Seventy-Five Years: Honoring Perrie Jones, The Librarian at the Center of It All" by Mark Taylor beginning on page 24.) *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*