Cornelia Marvin Pierce (1873-1957)

From her first arrival in Oregon in 1905 until her death in 1957, Cornelia Marvin Pierce helped shape the state's social, educational, and political conditions as state librarian, political activist, and reformer.

Born in 1873 into a middle-class family in Iowa, Cornelia Marvin attended public schools in Minnesota and Washington, received private tutoring in Boston, and pursued higher education at the University of Chicago and the Armour Institute library school. The library profession welcomed women in the 1890s, as the public library movement was spreading across the United States, and communities opened tax-funded libraries.

After completing her studies in 1895, Marvin taught library school and helped open settlement-house libraries in Chicago, working with social reformers Jane Addams and Florence Kelley. From 1897 to 1905, she worked in several Midwest libraries and joined the Wisconsin Free Library Commission, one of the nation's model library development agencies. There she became an expert in the politics and practicalities of establishing and organizing public libraries.

Marvin moved to Salem in 1905 to direct a new agency, the Oregon Library Commission (OLC), which became the State Library in 1913. At thirty-one, she was already developing a national reputation, and her skills were in great demand. The market for experienced, effective, professionally trained library leaders was extremely competitive, but the Oregon position was so appealing to Marvin that she accepted a substantial cut in salary. Under her direction, the OLC and the State Library assisted communities in organizing, opening, and securing tax funding for libraries and provided direct services from its offices in Salem.

Historian Dorothy Johansen said that her friend Cornelia Marvin Pierce "wheedled, wangled, and walloped her way toward her goals" at a time when there were few women in government leadership. She was a formidable, high-profile advocate for libraries and, more generally, for public education. She demonstrated strong executive ability and political sophistication, continually challenging the legislature, governors, and other prominent Oregonians to support the work of the State Library.

The entire library landscape of Oregon changed under her leadership. In 1905, there were three public libraries; in 1928, there were eighty-two. This explosive growth reflected Marvin's effective leadership and also the contributions of others. Oregon's women's clubs, Portland librarian Mary Frances Isom, and other civic and political leaders had helped create positive public sentiment and a legal framework for libraries in advance of Marvin's arrival, both essential foundations for her success. Marvin retired as state librarian in 1928 to marry former governor Walter Pierce.

Her public service career continued after her marriage. She was appointed by Governor Julius Meier to the State Board of Higher Education (1931-1935), and she strongly influenced Walter Pierce's decision to run for Congress in 1932. Her high public profile and her reputation helped him run a successful "two-for-the-price-of-one" campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives, and for five consecutive terms they worked as a team to represent Oregon during the New Deal era.

Cornelia Marvin Pierce's activism extended across a broad spectrum of social reforms. She joined many other early twentieth-century Progressives in embracing eugenics and Social Darwinism as tools for improving society. Reflecting on her career in 1955, she characterized as highlights her support of leading eugenicist Dr. Bethenia Owens-Adair, and her husband Governor Pierce's 1923 passage of Oregon's sterilization law.

Cornelia Marvin Pierce left her estate to Reed College and is honored there with a faculty chair in her name.

Written by Cheryl Gunselman

Further Reading:

Gunselman, Cheryl. "'Wheedling, Wangling, and Walloping' for Progress: The Public Service Career of Cornelia Marvin Pierce." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 110:3 (Fall 2009), 362-389.

Johansen, Dorothy. *The Library and the Liberal Tradition*. Corvallis: Friends of the Library, Oregon State College, 1959.

McCoy, Robert. "The Paradox of Oregon's Progressive Politics: The Political Career of Walter Marcus Pierce." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 110:3 (Fall 2009), 390-419.?

Passet, Joanne E. "Cornelia Marvin." In *American National Biography Online*. Oxford University Press. www.anb.org/articles/09/09-01052.html.

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