

Frances (“Fannie”) Maria Brainerd O’Linn and the Chadron, Nebraska, Carnegie Library

The Chadron Public Library sits in a quiet residential neighborhood in this town of some five thousand Cornhuskers. In 1899, Dr. J.S. Romine, [Frances \(“Fannie”\) Maria Brainerd O’Linn](#) and Mary Hayward-Smith met to discuss forming a library for the town. Then, they formed it, with Fannie serving as its secretary

Fannie faced her share, and more, of sorrow. Born in Iowa in 1848 “of revolutionary war stock,” by the time she moved to Chadron (her name first appears in [The Chadron Democrat](#) in 1885), she had lost her husband, Dr. Daniel Henry O’Linn, who died in 1880 at age 36, and a son, Daniel Egbert, who died in 1884 at age 14. Her office – more on why she had an office appears below – burnt to the ground in 1887. Another son, Hugh, died at 27 in 1899, the year that Fannie began her library work. In 1900, only her daughter, Elizabeth, lived with her.

Fannie was not just a survivor: she was a pioneer. Chadron’s original name was O’Linn, as she was a founding member of that town, where she settled at the confluence of two creeks with the expectation that a railroad would establish a branch there. (The branch was built six miles away, and most residents picked up, moved there, and [gave the town its current name.](#))

She pioneered more than land: Fannie “[was a trailblazing figure](#) in Nebraska’s legal, civic, and historical landscape.” She opened the first post office in Chadron in 1884, and it was later named after her. According to the [Chadron Record](#) “she conducted the first school and first Sunday school in Dawes County.” In her first 1885 appearance in the *Democrat*, she was stepping down as the postmistress of the town as she had become a “full-fledged notary public.” By 1886 she had put out her own shingle as a solo-practice notary public, real estate agent, and insurance agent. She was Nebraska’s first woman to serve as an insurance agent, and her obituary states that “As the founder of one of the largest abstract and public land title businesses in American homesteading history, [Fannie’s] influence on land documentation and settlement in the West was profound.” In 1887, [her insurance business was called](#), with perhaps a bit of local boosterism, “one of the largest and best insurance practices in the northwest.”

That year she also added a new title to her business ads: attorney at law. She does not brag about this, even though she was the fifth woman in Nebraska to be an attorney ([one source claims](#) that she was the first woman to be admitted to the Nebraska bar; another, the second). She did not confine her practice to deeds, divorces, and deviant acts (although she lawyered many of each): she was also the eleventh woman admitted to practice (argue) before the United States Supreme Court.

As if she was not busy enough, in 1887 Fannie became an instructor in the Dawes County “Institute of Teachers” (we know this because she wrote and published the full report of the institute in the *Democrat*), where she gave lessons in reading and orthography (she also played the organ while the roll was being called). Still, not all her news items were groundbreaking. In April of the year, she listed “Brick for sale 28-2t.” In 1888, she put her eight-volume *Johnson’s Encyclopedia* (“good as new”) on the market. She also opened the “White River Nursery,” with trees for sale, bought a new house, moved into a new office, and hosted parties, including ones for her daughter, Elizabeth (“Bessie”).

On January 17, 1889 Fannie was one of the individuals who called the Chadron Library Association to order. The agenda was brisk. A motion was made to form the association; it was approved. Fannie and A.E. Sheldon were appointed as the committee to write its constitution. After a five minute recess, the committee made its report; the constitution was adopted and the committee dissolved. It set membership fees at \$1/year. Officers were then elected, and Fannie was chosen as the secretary. The meeting adjourned.

Over the next months, books were collected for the library and the gifts were sometimes listed in the papers (Chadron had two, the *Chadron Democrat* and the *Chadron Advocate*). C.W. Horr, of Minneapolis, sent Fannie a fine collection which included *Don Quixote*, *Last of the Mohicans*, *Oliver Twist*, and a number of other classics. (In January 1890, Fannie’s library report stated that the library had 184 volumes, and that the next purchases should involve more history books.) Fannie relaxed, it seems, by attending meetings of the Shakespeare Club and occasionally hosting receptions, or in canvassing the town to raise funds for the library. In January 1890 – it’s pretty chilly in Nebraska in January – she and Mrs. Smith Hayward collected \$32 from the locals to support it. Fannie hosted a “pleasant and unique” party at her home in March, which raised \$16.85 (worth \$600 in 2026). Every dollar counted.

By this time, Fannie was prominent enough to be parodied. The *Advocate* published a political cartoon “to cast a slur, or ridicule, on the heroic act of Mrs. Fannie O’Linn.” The *Democrat would have none of it*, and responded with praise for “the cool nerve and fearlessness of the lady” and criticism for “the only paper to reflect contempt on a brave act by one of our most respected citizens.” The context for the satire is unknown to me (and I could not locate the comic), while the sentiments are clear: those who enter public life, and especially women entering historically male-dominated professions, open themselves to widespread scorn as well as praise.

By 1890, at the latest, Fannie had become engaged in the struggle for [women’s right](#) to vote. In September of that year she had traveled to Wyoming, which had granted this power to women in 1869 when it was still a territory. She came away impressed:

[T]he affairs of state are all talked over by the fathers and mothers, and young men and maidens, with equal interest...Equal suffrage has been tried, tested and not found wanting in Wyoming and everyone there is in favor of it, as nothing succeeds like success.

Oh, that women could be accorded the same right all over the United States, and they will be, for right will prevail, and the injustice of leaving one-half of the law abiding tax paying citizens unrepresented will not last much longer.

The [Record noticed](#) that Fannie was admitted to practice before the Supreme Court (in 1891) in a single sentence, which was wedged between the alerts that Arthur Chase “has been quite sick this week” and that J.L. Paul & Co. are selling groceries “as low as the lowest.” The town had become inured to her accomplishments, it seems. The *Democrat* might have given Fannie a more glowing tribute, but it had gone out of business that year. Meanwhile, Fannie’s daughter, Bessie, was preparing to go off to school in Chicago. In preparation for her time alone, Fannie thought it appropriate in 1892 to join yet another organization, the Owl Club (not to be confused with Denver’s Owl Club for Black men which originated in 1951). She moved up to the position of [President](#) of the Chadron Public Library, for one year, before returning to her slot as Secretary. Her barn also burned down, immolating her “fine horses.”

Chadron’s library escaped the flames (other libraries, most notably the Los Angeles Public Library, would not), although as Fannie sadly reported, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *Les Miserables*, *Anna Karenina*, and *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* had gone missing. Still, in 1892 the town’s library had just over 400 books on its shelves; Fannie also reported that it needed additional shelves for its growing collection, and she hoped that the patrons’ generosity would provide for both. (Sidenote: many of the digitized copies of the local newspapers have Fannie’s name and the date typed on the front page, as they appear to have been in the library’s collection.)

In 1893, [The Chadron Recorder](#) – yet another of the town’s newspapers – itself began advocating for a tax-supported library in a series of stories, including one stating “A town that can spend so much for booze and gambling...can afford to spend something in a direct and regular way for a library.” Not much news about Chadron’s library appeared in the press in the early 1890s other than announcements of its annual meeting, usually held early in January.

Fannie took a bit of time off in 1893 to attend the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. Given her heavy workload, she undoubtedly needed the break. The vacation did not appear to bring her zen-like serenity. At a meeting of local educators, which Fannie “chaperoned,” she was apparently chatting with a reporter in the back of the room when “suddenly she heard someone say something about ‘squelching’ something. [Fannie]

rose and said 'If it is me you want to squelch I want to say you'll have a hard time doing it.' All was quiet. No one wanted to 'squelch' Mrs. O'Linn." When Thanksgiving rolled around, and the *Recorder* published what the locals were thankful for, Fannie went full political, saying "I'm thankful the Republicans are again on top, as we will now have more prosperous times." (For what it's worth, the [Republican Party](#) did not officially support women's suffrage until 1896.) She remained the Secretary of the library, which had grown by an additional ten books.

The year 1895 brought some mixed news to Fannie. Bessie had returned to Chadron and had begun teaching in its public schools. Her son Hugh, four years younger than Bessie, had at age 23 not quite launched himself, and he did not have the ambition of his mother. He had earned a business degree from Eastman College in Poughkeepsie, New York, and he had done some work as a journalist (one *Recorder* story referred to him as "the [Demosthenes of the Northwest](#)") although he appears in the papers most often in anecdotes about umpiring baseball games and going on fishing trips. ([Asked to give his hot take](#) on the "bloomer" fad, he opined "They are alright to look at.") A possibly friendly competitor to the Chadron library was also in the works. A YMCA had been formed, and its founders were intent on building their own library there; admission to one of its social events required guests to bring a book to donate. By the end of that year, that library had opened its doors.

Fannie expanded her business in 1896 when she opened an office in West Point, Nebraska, in the eastern part of the state, some 400 miles from Chadron. She continued on as Secretary Chadron's library, although she appeared in the local news less and less frequently as she began spending more and more time away from the town.

She was in Chadron in 1897 when another loss came to her door. Her son Hugh died in 1897 after he fell off a train when returning to Nebraska after having spent a few months in Central America as an Associate Press correspondent (or searching for gold; stories vary). In reporting on his death, the *Recorder* barely mentioned his career ("he did business here with his mother") while it noted that he "was intimately associated with the social life of Chadron and was universally liked."

Fannie was no longer advertising in the local papers in 1898, and her name appeared only once, in a brief announcement that she was visiting briefly on court business. By 1900 she had (mainly) moved to Omaha, although she kept her home in Chadron and visited frequently (and repeatedly complained to local officials about her property assessments). Articles about the libraries appeared from time to time; a common argument was that the Chadron library and the YMCA library should be merged and that the town should provide financial support. ([Patrons of the Y](#) were about three times more likely to take a bath there than to check out a book.) No mention was made, so far as I could ascertain, that the library association held its annual meeting.

Maybe it is just a coincidence, but it seems that whatever enthusiasm Chadron had for creating a public library diminished as Fannie's interest in other matters expanded. It does make me wonder. In the decade the (first) Chadron library was active, two individuals served in the key leadership positions: [Dr. J.S. Romine as President](#), and Fannie as Secretary. Was this because they wanted to hang on to these positions, or was it because no one else wanted to claim them? Either way, without them the library seems to have faded away.

Yet, in 1899, Carnegie funded his first library in Nebraska (in Lincoln). The gift received prominent coverage in local news, and over the next few years other Nebraska grants were reported on (23 of the 69 Carnegie libraries in Nebraska were funded before Chadron received its grant). Other library doings in the state also received publicity, as when Mrs. Lydia B. Woods left a \$10,000 library bequest in Falls City in 1902. While the YMCA library continued to operate, only in 1907 did Chadron renew its efforts to create a public library. In July of that year it was reported that "[the ladies of the Culture Club](#)" hoped to "arouse" local interest in forming one (no mention was made of previous efforts). In November, the Woman's Club of Chadron announced *its* plans to establish a library association, and called for a town meeting to consider this possibility (although it also seems possible that the Culture Club and the Woman's Club were in fact the same organization, and that the newspaper got the story wrong). In a subsequent article, the Culture Club outlined the eight reasons that Chadron needed a library, beginning with "It keeps the boys at home in the evening by giving them well-written stories of adventure" and ending with "It offers pleasant and wholesome stories for readers of all ages."

In December, the women met. They picked Mrs. C.C. (Elizabeth, "Bessie," a music teacher) Smith to be the librarian, they arranged for the library to be placed in a room in the city hall, and they asked that anyone who had books from the "old library" to please drop them off at the new one. The library opened in March 1908, free to the public, although it did cost five cents to get a library card. The library was open on Saturdays, from 2 until 5. Its president, Mr. G.W. Mitchell, or Bessie promoted it most weeks in the *Record*. The library's biggest Christmas gift – \$5 – came from Chadron's former mayor, Mr. J.C. Dahlman, who had moved on to become Omaha's mayor, which I'm guessing was more appreciated than Congressman Kinkaid's gift of the eight-volume Payne Tariff Bill Hearings the following year).

In 1910, the [library expanded its hours](#) to include 7.30 to 9 on Saturday evenings – what a pleasant way to spend weekend time! – and to include a children's story hour in the afternoon: fifty-five children attended the first one. The town council also voted to take it over and pledged to support it with \$400 in annual taxes; the views of the Culture Club on this were not recorded. The council also chose to move the library out of the city

hall and to place it in Fannie's old office, although no mention of her contributions to the first library was made. In October, the library board was given the power to purchase a lot and to "erect, lease, or occupy an appropriate building" for the library.

Most importantly, the mayor wrote to Carnegie asking for money (the *Record* reported on this), noting that the town had a library but not building for it. (An unidentified member of the library association had written to Carnegie in 1905; that letter went unanswered.) The negotiations were straightforward, and no mention was made of the efforts of the town's women to create a library. On April 22, the *Record* announced that a \$5000 grant had been given.

And what of Fannie? She did not appear in the local papers in 1910 and only rarely after that. As late as 1925, she was active in the Dawes County Teachers Association. When she died in 1926, the papers published substantial obituaries. The one in the [*Omaha Bee*](#) summarized

When the roll of Nebraska pioneer builders is finally made up, the name of Fanny Maria Brainard O'Linn ought to be very near the top. She was one of the women who helped subdue the frontier in a literal sense as well as in a figurative sense. Going into the Indian country before it was organized for white man's uses, she worked to set up a civilization and make possible the prosperity that has followed.

It's not surprising that nowhere in the commendations is her library work mentioned. Given her many accomplishments, it might rank low on the list. It is possible to conclude that she failed in it, as her efforts did not lead to a library that was sustained, whether or not its decline was in spite of her efforts or, perhaps, because she did not work to build broader support, although canvassing the town to raise money during the coldest Nebraska months does not seem to suggest that she lacked enthusiasm for that task. I would like to think that her library work mattered to others and that, even if it does not show up in the records, she inspired others to follow her lead.