

S. Fannie Botkin and the Gothenburg, Nebraska, Carnegie Library

Librarian Mary greeted me just after the Gothenburg, Nebraska, library, one of only two Carnegies designed in the [Jacobethan revival style](#), opened at 9 a.m. (The other library is in Ashland, Nebraska, in case the mystery of its location was going to bug you all day.) She wore a monogrammed gray polo shirt emblazoned:

Gothenburg
Public Library
Mary

She was friendly, greeting each person who came into the library by name; all the patrons this sunny spring morning were regulars. She was glad to hear about my project, and told me that I might find this book helpful. There, on her desk, the book *Gothenburg Area History* was already open to the section on the library (I told her that she had read my mind). Without giving details or naming names, it begins with “In 1913, serious effort for a Gothenburg library began.” (The town had had a [library association](#) as early as 1892.) The earliest two librarians, S. Frances (another “Fannie”) Botkin and Ferne Hugo ran the library for its initial fifty years (with Fannie serving 26 years and Ferne 24).

Frances Botkin’s history was hard to trace because she had a Nebraska relative named, problematically for this researcher, Frances Botkin, with both going by the nickname Fannie. While the librarian was S. Frances, and the other Frances R., the local newspapers often simply referred to each as “Miss Frances Botkin.” In U.S. census reports, each is commonly listed simply as “Fannie.” S. Fannie, born in 1862, was the older of the two (Fannie R.’s birthdate was 1895).

Fannie R. seemed to have a more entertaining life. She was frequently in the local newspapers for social events (parties and recitals, at which she often played the piano), academics (she was the president of her school's Latin club), and acting (she took a star turn in her high school’s Shakespeare club’s senior class play). After attending college, she took a job teaching German and mathematics at a Nebraska school, and then she went on to earn a masters degree in philosophy before taking a position at Smith College.

S. Fannie makes the news much less often. In the 1900 census she is listed as a “sales woman” living in the Newman household as the sister of Mrs. Dwight (Jennie Susan Botkin) Newman. Fannie R. was her niece. The earliest substantial article about S. Fannie in the local papers had the title “That Hen Shower,” which was not a party held for her upcoming wedding. It literally involved hens: each guest brought a chicken to give to S. Fannie, her sister Jennie, and her brother C.W. (Charles) as they were

preparing to go to the Snowflake farm as laborers. Egg sandwiches and chicken salad were served.

For whatever reason, Gothenburg does not seem to have had any women's clubs – or anyone else – advocating for a public library in the early 1900s. It was a small town; its 1900 population was 819, although it doubled in size during the next decade. Not until 1913 did the [Gothenburg Independent](#) lead a story with “Why should not Gothenburg have a Carnegie library?” After stating that other, smaller, Nebraska towns had gotten Carnegies, the paper asked “What is wrong with Gothenburg?” The *Independent* itself reached out to Carnegie and, after hearing back that if the town wanted a library the city would have to raise public funds to fund its operations, the city council took affirmative action. Early in 1914, Carnegie awarded the town a grant.

In 1916, while the library was being finished, S. Fannie was selected to become the town's librarian as the library prepared to open. In noting her appointment, the *Gothenburg Times* reported that she had been working at Hinkley's pharmacy the previous nine years and “she will undoubtedly make a capable librarian.” As she had no experience in library work, it was also disclosed that prior to taking the job she would “[spend two weeks at some library](#)...to become familiar with the methods of handling the work.” It is not clear why S. Fannie was offered the job, although it was her brother, Charles, (Fannie R's father, “[who has devoted considerable time](#) toward securing a public library,”) who initially approached the town council to make the pitch for a Carnegie gift. After the grant was received, the *Gothenburg Times* stated that the library came about through “the efforts and initiative” of Charles. Charles, the editor and owner of the competitor newspaper the *Independent*, was not chosen to serve on the library's board or, if he was, he turned down the offer.

S. Fannie spent those two weeks across the state at the Carnegie libraries in Gibbon, Kearney, and Shelton. Charlotte Templeton, the secretary of the state library commission, also came to Gothenburg to spend two weeks assisting S. Fannie in the opening of the library. (The women's Alpha Club volunteered to handle the landscaping.) A few months after the library opened, the *Gothenburg Independent* published a glowing profile of the library, with only a single sentence devoted to S. Fannie as an “efficient and obliging secretary.” Mrs. C. Williams, who donated a copy of Teddy Roosevelt's *Fear God and Take Your Own Part*, got more ink.

It is safe to say that S. Fannie kept a low profile. She did not seek publicity for the library in the local press, nor did the papers note her activities, not much, anyway. She does not appear in a story again for more than a year, when in October 1917 it is reported that she is attending a meeting of the Nebraska library association. Her matter-of-fact annual reports were published; in 1918, for instance, she reported on how many books were checked out, and so forth, and that the library had \$4.77 cash on hand. (By the next

year, the surplus had grown to \$14.80) Her brother's newspaper usually got the scoop, with the *Independent* running the reports a few days before the *Times*. When she appeared in social news, it was usually because she was doing something with R. Fannie. Nebraska's secretary of the library commission generally made an annual visit, and in some years S. Fannie would attend a library convention in the state.

The 1920s appeared to be a quiet decade for S. Fannie, although one requiring its own emotional journeys through pain. Her introspective best ten books list of 1923 followed two years after her sister, [Jennie, died in Gothenburg in 1921](#). Jennie was followed by brother Charles in 1927, and then her three other siblings (Edward, John, and Rose) all in 1930. Fannie R. would occasionally visit S. Fannie, and from time to time the papers report that S. Fannie attended dinner at someone's home, or went on an outing with friends. In 1934, one of her jokes appeared in the *Times*:

Little Peggy was playing on the floor with her dolls one day. Looking up at her mother, who was sewing nearby, Peggy said "Mother, there are three kinds of berries I like."

Mother: "What are they?"

You can guess the punchline: "Strawberries, raspberries, and liberries."

By the late 1930s, S. Fannie's jokes, generally involving library or grammar-related word play, appeared along with other locals in the weekly column "Squirred Food." Otherwise, S. Fannie toiled, quietly, in her library. In 1935, she wrote a profile of Carnegie and his libraries for the *Times* – Carnegie that year was giving his portrait to all the libraries he financed – and related that Gothenburg had received its library in the final years of his program.

S. Fannie's library work came to an end in 1941 after she fell and broke her hip. She never fully recovered. She fell again in 1943, breaking her shoulder, and died ten days later. Her obituary did make the front page of the *Times* and, "while known to everyone in the community," this is what it said about her life: "She worked for many years in Hinkley's pharmacy, and when the Carnegie library was built and opened became its first librarian, serving until two years ago when she broke her hip." Her only surviving relative was her niece, R. Fannie, and her niece's family.

That's it. No glowing tributes. No warm remembrances. No heartfelt recollections.

There is one last thing that I should mention. In 1939, shortly before her career-ending injury, she was quoted in the paper as saying She also was quoted as saying "you can tell a person by the material he chooses to read." S. Fannie had, actually, in 1923 told the community in the *Independent* what her ten favorite books were. Here's the list:

1. *The Bible*
2. *The Privilege of Pain*, Caroline Kane Mills Everett, a 1920 book in which the author “[takes readers on an emotional journey](#) through the highs and lows of living with chronic pain.”
3. *Queen Victoria*, Lytton Strachey, “the definitive biography of Britain’s greatest monarch.”
4. *My Year in a Log Cabin*, William Dean Howells, who “[shares his personal journey](#) and reflections during a year spent in a log cabin, offering readers a glimpse into a life of tranquility and introspection.”
5. *Famous Affinities of History: The Romance of Devotion*, Lyndon Orr, which “[delves into the private passions](#) that altered the course of nations and defined the legacies of the powerful.”
6. *The Flute of the Gods*, Marah Ellis Ryan, “follows the [fictional] journey of a [young woman named Naida](#), who is half Native American and half white...[and] confronts racism, prejudice, and violence, but ultimately finds strength and resilience in her music and her connection to the natural world.”
7. *Lalla Rookh*, Thomas Moore, “[a narrative poem](#) that weaves together themes of love, identity, and cultural heritage within a rich, exotic setting.”
8. *Black Tulip*, Alexander Dumas, “[a tale of romantic love](#), jealousy and obsession.”
9. *By Inheritance*, Octave Thanet, in which “a devoted aunt and a tight-knit circle of relatives confront a painful past and a fraught future.”
10. *Battle Ground*, Ellen Glasgow, a novel in which “[the female characters](#) [are] stronger than the male characters.”

One thing I am confident in is that this is a deeply personal list, of deeply personal books: S. Fannie did not select these books in an attempt to appeal to young readers, or casual readers, or men, it seems. The choice of *The Bible* might have been obligatory or, maybe, a matter of true devotion. (Her obituary stated that she was a “faithful member” of the Presbyterian church, but I found no reports of her engaged in church activities.) I cannot help but wonder if S. Fannie lived with chronic pain and sought to live a life of “tranquility and introspection” “finding strength and resilience” in music and nature. (I found no mention of S. Fannie joining any social clubs.) These books feature strong women, interior lives, and private passions. They likely resonated with her because she – like many of us – gravitated towards literature that speaks to us as we identify with their characters and their stories.

In that article S. Fannie also stated that, in case anyone was wondering about what librarians actually do, her “everyday duties prevent extensive reading.”