

Whitehall Libraries and Librarians

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*Helen E. Davenport-Hedges
(1847-1914)*

A newspaper item from May 1887 indicated that G. W. Frost's store was now the site of the town library as former Librarian Nettie White was teaching school. This was the first mention in the available local newspapers of a library in town. George W. Frost operated a Book and Stationery business and had charge of the books.

Esther Jane "Nettie" White was the niece of C. W. Redfern. She was born on 5 September 1856. Nettie married John Lowe (1844-1930). He served in Co. K 21st Michigan Infantry. At some point, they moved to the Lake Odessa area. John died in Lake Odessa in 1930. Nettie also died at Lake Odessa, MI on 5 Dec 1938. They are both buried in Oakhurst Cemetery in Whitehall.

In 1889 the library was moved from Frost's store to the home of Charles Walwyn Redfern, Nettie's uncle. It was reported that Genivieve Law would sometimes cover for Nettie as librarian.

Genivieve "Jennie" Law was born in Oswego, New York in 1869. She came to Whitehall with her parents when she was one- and one-half years old. They built a home on Mill Pond in 1870 which she maintained until her death. She graduated from Whitehall High School in 1892. According to her obituary, she worked in New York and Chicago for the next 25 years as a financial broker. She returned to Whitehall in 1917 where she remained until her death in October 1961.

After the fire of 1890 which destroyed Redfern's house, the books that were saved were moved to the Scott residence on Colby. Mrs. Scott was the former Annie Elizabeth Redfern, the sister of C. W. Redfern. She was first married to Samuel Kellogg White on 1 Jan 1856. They had two children: Esther Jane "Nettie" (1856-1938) and Francis Oliver (1859-1865). It appeared they divorced by 1870 and Samuel White died 1908. Annie then married Carl O. Scott 9 April 1871. By 1880 they too were divorced. Annie died on 12 August 1908 in Whitehall. She is buried in Oakhurst Cemetery in Whitehall.

Mrs. Paul Hedges (pictured above) was next mentioned as librarian. Her home was located on Division and Slocum. Mrs. Hedges was the former Helen E. Davenport who was born 23 August 1847 in New York. She married Paul Hedges in New York in 1867. They were living in Whitehall by 1870 where he was a lawyer at the time. He died 26 Sep 1904. They had no children. After her first husband died, she married Charles H. Smith on 28 Oct 1906. Helen died 10 March 1914. She and her first husband are both buried in Oakhurst Cemetery in unmarked graves.

Mrs. M. G. Hollis was appointed township librarian in March 1914 to fill the vacancy caused by the passing of Mrs. Smith. The books were placed in Mrs. Hollis' dry goods and millinery store which was a very convenient location for the public. Minnie G. Hurd was born in VanBuren County, MI on 18 December 1860. She married Frank D. Hollis on 2 May 1889, and he died ten years later. They had no children. She then married Charles A. Ocobock in 1923. Minnie died in Whitehall on 26 January 1931 and is buried in Oakhurst Cemetery.

Mrs. H. H. Olsen was the next librarian. Bertha Helene "Bertie" Christiansen was born on 19 March 1861 in WI. She married Herman Hagberth Olsen on 24 Dec 1879 in Milwaukee, WI. Her husband was a sailor and they sailed their own boat from Milwaukee to Whitehall in 1883 with their young son. Her husband founded Olsen and Dagen Roller Mill and she was his bookkeeper. She opened a grocery and dry goods store from 1902-1906 before becoming the Librarian. Her husband died in January 1918. She served his remaining term as Township Supervisor. In 1920 she entered into business with her son Herman B. Olsen in Olsen's Eat Shop, which became Connie Quint's Restaurant in 1946. Bertie died in 1952.

In 1935 the library became a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project.

In 1938 Mrs. Julia Milnes had the library in her home on Colby Street between Division and Livingston. She was born Julie Knowlton on 19 Mar 1876 in Boscobel, WI. Julia married Frank J. Milnes in Wisconsin on 11 Sep 1900. They had two children. They were living in Bangor MI prior to moving to Whitehall. Frank died in Traverse City in 1940. Julia died 15 Jul 1943 in Muskegon.

In November 1939 an extraordinary gift was made to the library with the donation of more than 1,000 volumes from the personal library of Judge R. W. Butterfield. Many of the books were beautifully bound rare volumes. At the time the gift was the finest ever made to the local library and it was expected to stimulate the giving of additional volumes by other residents.

Miss Levina Landberg succeeded Mrs. Milnes in November 1939. Landberg was born in Whitehall on 31 December 1882 and attended Whitehall High School graduating in the class of 1899. She attended Armour Institute in Chicago and studied to become a Kindergarten teacher, but her health would not permit her to continue. She returned to Whitehall where she lived and devoted herself to the library. She made a sincere effort to read every volume herself in order to make sure no unworthy books fell into the hands of youngsters.

In 1939 the state required the library be moved out of a private residence into a public building of some sort. By May 1940 the library was established on the 2nd floor of the City Hall/Fire Department building. Several book sales were conducted during that time. A competition between various classes of the Whitehall School resulted in a large number of books being donated to the library.

In June 1940, Miss Landberg was classified as non-certified by the WPA so there would be no funds available to pay for a librarian. This resulted in the local library being without an official head and forced

the village to choose between keeping Miss Landberg or keeping WPA support. They chose her. While working out the payment details, Levinia provided her library services as a volunteer.

A "home-owned" library was preferred over the WPA and residents of Whitehall Township and the Village of Whitehall joined together to form a Library Board.

The library board pointed out that under Miss Landberg's direction a noticeable increase in circulation had taken place with more than 1,100 books being loaned out each month. She was also able to obtain large gifts of books from various White Lake residents.

The village and township each offered to pay \$175 per year for the upkeep of the library. Of that sum, \$260 was paid to Miss Landberg as librarian, and the remainder for fuel and to purchase new books from time to time.

In 1943 when the Village of Whitehall became the City of Whitehall, the city's budget included some funds for the library.

In March 1945, when Levina Landberg became ill, her sister Nina Landberg and Mrs. Lyman Bjorkman volunteered their services on alternate afternoons to keep the library open. Levina was finally forced to stop working in November 1945 and was confined to her bed most of the time. She died in her sleep on 23 May 1946.

In July 1946 Nina Landberg was appointed librarian by then Whitehall Mayor Alfred C. Woller. Nina Cecelia Landberg was born in Whitehall on 14 June 1884. She attended Whitehall High School and Ypsilanti Normal School. She taught school most of her life, nearly all the time in the Detroit school system. She specialized in teaching art. After her retirement in 1937 she returned to Whitehall to live.

In February 1949, Suggestion Boxes were placed in the library for the patrons having suggestions, requests, criticisms or favorable comments that could be made.

In 1946 Story Hour was started. For Fourth grade pupils, it was held at 3:00 p.m. Fifth grade pupils were also welcome to attend. Story hour for first through third grades were held on Wednesday mornings at 10:00 a.m.

In 1954 there were talks of combining the Whitehall city library with the school library. After studying the idea for some time, it was decided not to go ahead with the idea.

In June 1955, Librarian Nina Landberg became ill and retired shortly after.

In September 1957, Assistant Librarian Mrs. Marguerite Alfredson was named Librarian replacing Nina Landberg. She had been the assistant librarian since 1956.

In June 1960, the city library was moved from the second floor of the old fire barn/city hall to the first floor of the former Gee funeral chapel behind the Klinefelter store on north Mears Avenue. The move eliminated the steep flight of stairs which for years had made it difficult for many older people to access the library, and at the same time gave the library a great deal more space.

In September 1960, Miss Vivian Freeman was appointed as head librarian in charge of the Whitehall City Library. She replaced Mrs. Alfredson, who agreed to act as assistant if needed. Vivian was born on 6 April 1889 in Illinois. She died 20 February 1986 in North Muskegon.

Story Hour was reinstated in March 1961 and was held on Saturdays at 10 AM.

In 1961 the Whitehall City Library Board was composed of six Whitehall residents appointed by the City Council. Chairman was Mrs. Leonard Blomdahl, city councilwoman. Secretary was Mrs. John Jacobs, elementary teacher, and third year on the Board. Other members were Mrs. George Barefoot, John Klinefelter, George Schaaf and Robert Langkawel, city manager.

Joyce Wilkins became the next Whitehall City Librarian in 1963, replacing Vivian Freeman. Joyce was born Joyce Weber on 19 Jul 1926. She married Lloyd Arnold Wilkins on 11 May 1946. They had four children: Patricia, Mark, Bruce and Wendy.

During her tenure, Joyce was instrumental in persuading the library board to join the Lakeland Library Cooperative. She also oversaw the computerization of the library's entire collection at that time. Wilkins held the position for over 21 years.

In October 1986 the Library formed a group called Friends of the Library. The purpose of the group was to focus public attention on the library, receive and encourage gifts and bequests to the library and support and cooperate with the library in developing and sponsoring programs.

In the Spring of 1996, the city announced plans to defund the library and suggested that if "a passionate need" for a local library became obvious, they might be willing to participate in a solution to provide one. They did not propose a plan themselves.

In late March 1998, the White Lake Community district library was officially recognized by the state. The new district library was established within the public school boundaries of Whitehall District Schools. Bette Carson, who had been involved with the library since about 1986, was named as the new administrator of White Lake Community Library.

In 1999 voters went to the polls and approved two bond issues (1) to build and (2) operate the White Lake Community Library. The community vote succeeded by nearly a two-to one margin to approve the borrowing of .47 mill to build and provide .70 mill in perpetuity to operate the system. The cost of the approximately 10,000 square foot library to be paid over 20 years. The new library was nearly three times the size of the one at the time. And the design of the library will easily allow for expansion if needed in the future.

On Saturday, October 30, 1999, at 8:30 a.m., the public was invited to attend the official groundbreaking ceremony which took place on the four-plus acre site donated for use by the former Howmet Corp. The library is no longer a city-owned facility. Rather it is a separate taxing entity, collecting revenue from residents within the Whitehall school district boundaries. Additional revenue comes from penal fines and state aid.

The official open house for the new White Lake Community Library was held at 11:00 a.m. on October 7, 2000.

With the formation of the White Lake Community Library in 2000, Bette Carlson became the Library Director, a position she held until 2011. She was replaced by Shelley Williams in 2012. Current Library Director Virginia DeMumbrum has been with the library since August 2000 and became its Director in January 2019.