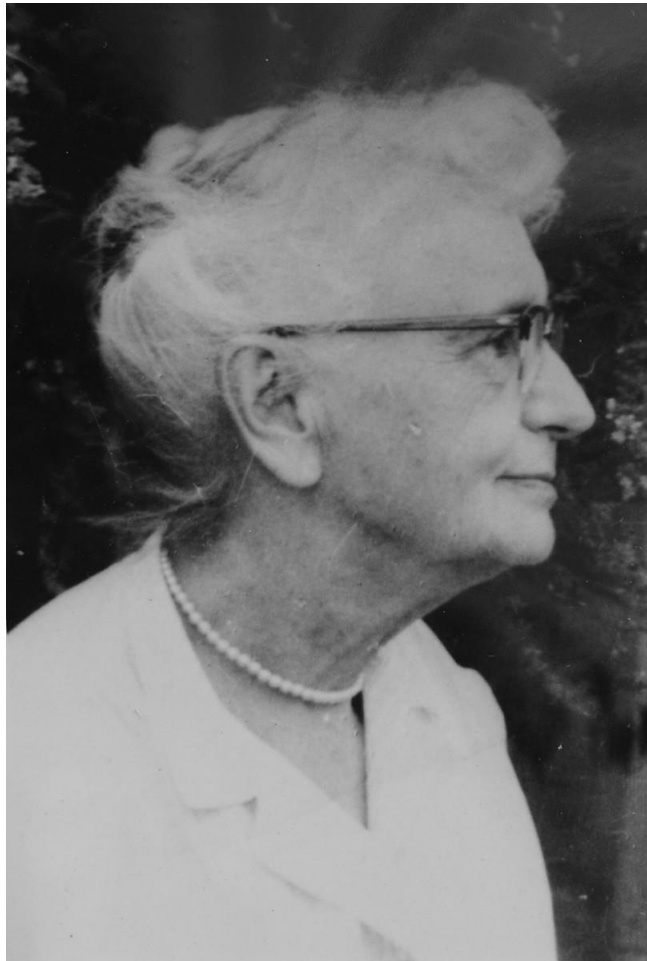


MARIANNA FISCHER BLACK

by Jim Casada



Marianna Rosalind Fischer Black

from the Black family collection, courtesy of Stanley Black III

Although she has been dead for a full six decades, the name of Marianna Black is one which should be familiar to the vast majority of local residents. That is thanks to Swain County's public library, which she founded, bearing her name.

The story of the library's founding is an oft-told one, but perhaps it bears recounting, at least in part, as a reminder of one of many stellar aspects of this remarkable woman's life. An avid reader in her own right and a firm believer in the role which books could and should play in education and community life, Marianna Black launched a one-woman crusade for a library to serve the residents of Swain County.

Starting with a decidedly modest collection of books she carried in two suitcases, she formed the library which eventually bore her name.

It began in 1929 in the grand jury room of the courthouse. Two afternoons a week she would tote the books along and loan them to children and their parents who came to the nascent library. She did more than make books available though. She greeted patrons warmly, took time to make sure each child and adult who visited felt like an honored guest, and recommended

works she thought they would find enjoyable. Those distinctive personal touches became a defining characteristic of the library. Her husband, Stanley, contributed as well, serving as library treasurer for many decades.

Marianna's winning ways shone brightly through the library's impressive growth. Within three years there were some 1400 books in the collection and as many as 700 volumes were being loaned each month, with regular library hours held from 2-5:00 p.m. on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Patrons in the county and beyond began making donations to the collection, with one of the substantial early gifts being "a number of especially fine books" from Margaret Gooch, of Lexington, NC. Something of a woman of mystery, the widowed Gooch was a friend of Horace Kephart and George Masa who hiked and corresponded with them, lived on the local scene for some months while researching the Cherokees living in remote Big Cove, and clearly had a keen interest in the high country and its residents.

Years later, well after the deaths of both parents, the Blacks' daughter, Dr. Ellen Black Winston, would relate a delightful anecdote connected with her mother's interaction with visitors. "One time my husband and I were visiting soon after we were married and being a little critical. I said to Mother, 'You have so many Zane Greys. Don't you think you ought to have better books in this library?'"

Her mother's response was one that blended wisdom and practicality in a fashion typical of the woman. "Well, you know, so many of the people who come into this library have never read a book. I find I can get them started on Zane Grey and gradually upgrade their reading habits." As a reader whose habits leaned distinctly in the direction of Zane Grey during my adolescence, this writer finds Mrs. Black's insight a piece of pure delight, never mind a lifelong failure to do much "upgrading." I still enjoy Grey's Westerns as well as the books he wrote on fishing.

In due time, as the number of books and patrons grew, shelves were constructed to replace the suitcases. Then, during the Depression, the Works Progress Administration constructed a county building that included a section devoted to the library which featured permanent shelving for the general collection along with a children's reading room. That structure, long known as the "community building," over ensuing decades housed the local police department, served as a kindergarten classroom, a meeting space for various civic groups, and as headquarters for the local historical and genealogical society.

In due course growth in terms of popularity and the sheer size of the book collection led to hiring of a librarian and establishment of regular hours of opening. Always a public library, despite bearing the name of a private individual, Marianna Black Library became part of the Fontana Regional Library system in 1944 and remains so to this day.

From its beginnings in the most humble of fashions, over time the library expanded to regular daily hours, and ever growing collection, a bookmobile to serve rural areas, full-time employees, and eventually construction of a building devoted exclusively to housing the library. Today, what Marianna Black began has reached a point where a new facility is desperately needed. Sadly, at this juncture it appears county commissioners are singularly lacking in anything comparable to the visionary outlook which motivated this remarkable woman.

I use the description “remarkable woman” advisedly, because her effort to launch a library was but one facet of a fascinating and fruitful life.



Marianna with Ellen, Stanley and Louise, ca. 1909

from the Black family collection, courtesy of Stanley Black III

While local folks will most readily identify with Marianna Black through patronage of the library bearing her name, perhaps her single greatest achievement from the perspective of posterity lies in the accomplishments of her children and grandchildren. Each of the Black’s four children achieved significant success in their careers. Ellen, who featured in earlier pieces in this ongoing series, was a major player in social and welfare-related issues on both the state and national level; Stanley, Jr., was executive vice president of a major bank and a man of great stature in Charlotte, NC when he died a fairly young man; Louise earned plaudits as an expert on fashion and buyer for a major New York store prior to her marriage to Oscar S. Cox, who was a key player in both the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, drafted the Lend-Lease Act, and figured prominently in post-World War II matters of international finance and formation of the War Refugee Board; and Fischer edited and published *Electrical World* magazine for McGraw-Hill before becoming affiliated with the Tampa Electric Company, eventually retiring as vice-chair of its board. All were college educated and, in the words of my father, who knew them all well and went to school with Louise and Fischer, “bright as four new pennies.”

Intellectual achievement, significant contributions in their chosen career fields, and sheer brilliance continued in the next generation. One granddaughter, Blakeney, is a member of Mensa, while her brother, Louis (Lee) became a senior partner in a major Wall Street legal firm, Black & Associates. Their older brother, Fischer, Jr., was a Harvard Ph. D. who would have been a Nobel Prize recipient in the field of economics had he lived two more years. The Nobel Prize is not awarded posthumously, but he was mentioned, along with the two recipients of the 1997 prize, Myron Scholes and Robert Merton, for pioneering work on the valuation of stock options.

His cousin, Stanley W. Black, III, now retired, also garnered recognition as an internationally recognized scholar in economics, earning a Ph. D. at Yale followed by teaching stints at Princeton and Vanderbilt before taking the position he held until retirement, Georges Lurcy Professor of Economics at UNC-Chapel Hill, his undergraduate alma mater. The two sons of Louise and Oscar Cox likewise achieved considerable renown. Peter Cox was a pioneer in the field of advocacy journalism, co-founder and publisher of the alternative weekly newspaper *Maine Times*, and author of a posthumously published book, *Journalism Matters*. Warren Cox, a magna cum laude graduate of Yale, became a renowned architect specializing in institutional buildings such as museums and libraries and was co-founder of the Washington, DC firm of Hartman-Cox Architects.

Along with raising her children and launching a public library, Marianna busied herself in the town's religious, educational, philanthropic, and social affairs on an impressive array of fronts. A mere cataloging of some of her more important endeavors, while inadequate when it comes to presenting the full scope of her energies, should at least serve to tell a bit about her contributions to the community.

She took the lead in founding the first parent-teacher association in Swain County schools, and both she and Stanley were quite active in educational matters, especially as their four children moved through the eleven grades leading to a high school diploma. It is worth noting that their children attended local public schools, although they could have afforded to send them to exclusive private boarding schools.

Together the Blacks led the movement to expand local educational offerings from nine grades to eleven and eventually twelve years of schooling. Marianna also made special efforts, along with donating time and equipment, to see that the town's small population of black children had meaningful educational opportunities. Most of these children resided within an easy walk of the Black home, and Lillie Inabinett, who would for decades be a fixture at their home as a faithful, highly efficient maid, came from that little community.

As someone who delighted in entertaining and being around other people, Marianna was quite active on the social front. Perusal of old newspapers reveals regular notes of her hosting bridal and baby showers, tea parties, circles and other church gatherings, and the like. She was the founder and first president of the Bryson City Women's Club, an organization which remains in active existence to this day. Marianna taught and for many years directed Sunday school at Bryson City Presbyterian Church, which she and Stanley joined soon after their marriage. When she suffered the stroke that soon took her life, this stalwart octogenarian was getting dressed for

her regular teaching stint in the Sunday school class. She also headed the Women of the Church group for many years. The "Education Building" at the Presbyterian Church was built in her honor after her death, and her loving husband was on hand virtually every day to observe the progress of its construction.

I was fortunate to grow up next door to the Blacks, which meant getting to know Mrs. Black far better than might otherwise have been the case for a carefree youngster. She was frugal to a fault, highly opinionated, a tad domineering at times, often outspoken, but most of all a loving, caring soul. Her husband Stanley recalled the advice of an old friend, Colonel Bason. "He had met Marianna and was fascinated by her beauty and intelligence. He remarked to me, 'Young man you always do what she says and you will never go wrong' and how true it has always been." It was sound, accurate advice, and she was a woman who left her mark on Swain County to a degree few others have attained.