

The Library Ladies of Clay Center: Clay County, Kansas, 1898

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Figure 1: A Postcard from the 1910s depicting the completed Carnegie Library in Clay Center. The black and white photograph is stylistically superimposed against an added blue sky. SOURCE: SandyCreekCollectibles.com

The Library Ladies of Clay Center: Clay County, Kansas, 1898.

When we consider the variety of individuals who ventured west throughout the mid-to late nineteenth century, it's a fascinating commentary indeed that so many of us picture the settler women of the rural West in a such narrow and specific construct. If she were a rural woman, she must have been the internally reluctant but loyal wife and mother figure who suffered many great dangers and struggles to adapt and sustain the care and health of her family. There is not anything inherently wrong with this image, but as a universal representation, it falls rather flat when the concepts of education and self-improvement are introduced into the conversation. Not surprisingly, many of these "reluctant" settler wives did not simply withdraw; rather, they actively campaigned to maintain decencies within their new humbler abodes. (*) From this collective attitude toward keeping alive culture and sociality came a very strong comradery for many women who likely felt a significant amount of isolation in their unfamiliar and sometimes difficult surroundings. For one town in particular, Clay Center, there is a fascinating history to the nature of the clubs and organized activity that often came about when rural women sought not only company, but self-improvement, education, activism and reform.

The Clay Center Library Club commanded a great amount of respect and prestige within its community. It oversaw the cooperative drive toward the establishment of a public library, became the premiere organizing force behind countless drives, fundraisers, tributes, socials both formal and casual, community service events, and artistic exhibitions. From the earliest days of meeting in the houses of individual members through the end of World War II and beyond, the Library Club of Clay Center accomplished many diverse goals. However, it is certainly a refreshing point to note that they were not a standalone entity in this era, nor were they an oddity. Robert C. Haywood wrote in his book *Victorian West*: "For the small prairie towns of western Kansas, the presences of an active literary society ranked just below having a church with a full-time pastor and a schoolhouse with a trained teacher as evidence

of a town's stability."¹ The Clay Center Library Club was one of many that contributed to the spread of a vast movement of women's clubs -- a movement which definitely did not stay relegated to Kansas or simply the Midwest but encompassed a great portion of the country.

Social Self-improvement

Before we examine any of these clubs on an individual basis, it is important to understand the earliest roots of the self-improvement movement among American women. After being denied access to an event hosted by an all-male press club, New York journalist Jane Cunningham Croly (as pictured below in Figure 2) took it upon herself to establish a women's club known as Sorosis, in 1868.



Figure 2: Sketch of Jane Croly, circa 1897. The text written at the bottom reads: "*Sincerely yours, -J. C. Croly 'JJ.'*" SOURCE: *American Women: Fifteen Hundred Biographies with Over 1,400 Portraits*.

Around the 21st anniversary of the group, Croly invited representatives of many similar women's clubs across the country to attend a convention in New York City, the goal of which was to establish a federation for themselves. Therefore, on April 24, 1890 the convention pictured below in Figure 3, which

¹ Robert C. Haywood, *Victorian West: Class and Culture in Kansas Cattle Towns* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991), 126.

consisted of representatives from 63 different clubs, gathered to form what is now known as the General Federation of Women's Clubs or GFWC.²



Figure 3: Black and white photograph of the convention that led to the formation of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in 1890. SOURCE: Women's History and Resource Center, General Federation of Women's Clubs.

As the century carried on, and small communities began to appear throughout the Midwest, the phenomenon of women's organizations, clubs and other social gatherings began to reach a degree of prominence. Women of all occupations flocked to these groups that often began as sewing circles, craft-making socials, or church groups. Many of the first officially organized groups of this nature were politically charged, preaching temperance, women's suffrage, children's welfare, and education. Education and self-improvement were common sentiments of several women's clubs; in particular, these were often known as either Literary or Library Clubs. Library Clubs often vied for the self-improvement of their individual manners, imposing it as a personal responsibility, for the sake of creating well-informed and sensible women who might benefit their families and their communities at

² "Our Story," General Federation of Woman's Clubs, last modified 2016, <http://www.gfwc.org/who-we-are/history-and-mission/>

large. The primary goal for many of these clubs was to establish the presence of a public library within their communities, either by acting as a library themselves through a makeshift organization or by fundraising for the construction of an official library building, often through the aid of the Carnegie Library Foundation. According to the Carnegie Libraries' page of the National Park Service website: "Between 1886 and 1919, Carnegie's donations of more than \$40 million paid for 1,679 new library buildings in communities large and small across America."³ In the absence of library buildings, meetings for these groups were usually held in either the houses of the individual members or in public meeting places such as churches. Self-improvement groups structured their meetings to be both an opportunity for the reading and discussion of published literary works and a platform for its members to exhibit their own writings. Many of the women wrote about subjects that interested them whether they be historic, artistic, scientific, or pertaining to current events. Others wrote poetry and even short stories. It wasn't uncommon for groups of this kind to encourage musical exhibitions as well. Women were invited to give vocal, piano, violin, guitar and wind solos, as well as group performances, and music in general was often a popular subject to discuss.⁴ On the whole, library and literary clubs were a result of the collective efforts of women across rural America that contributed to the cultural enrichment and spread of civilized social activity in small and developing rural towns.

Clubs in Kansas

These women's clubs held a particular prevalence in the state of Kansas. In 1880 Kansas became one of the charter states for the new nationwide General Federation of Women's Clubs. The following year in 1881, the earliest subset of the federation, the Social Science Club of Kansas and West Missouri, was organized in Leavenworth. There were representatives of clubs from Atchison, Leavenworth,

³ *Carnegie Libraries: The Future Made Bright*, National Park Service, accessed Jan. 26, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/50carnegie/50carnegie.htm>.

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Lawrence, Topeka, Wyandotte and Kansas City. Before the organization reformed as the Kansas Social Science Foundation in 1895, many more towns joined their efforts, including Emporia, Wichita and Fort Scott, to name a few.⁵ The steadfast focus for the women of these clubs, and that which lead to the formation of many more similar societies across the state, was always education, particularly the education of children. As per the common practice of the time for women activists, the justifying rationale behind this notion was the idea that the women in these groups were acting as concerned mothers, responsibly working in the best interest for their children and families. This particular sentiment is also widely associated with the equally popular temperance and later prohibitionist groups. By cementing themselves as activists that remained within their separate spheres, women were able to use the socially imposed gender roles as an anchor to assert their dominance of opinion when it came to matters of family preservation and civility.⁶

There were plenty of less politically charged groups that did serve their communities in no small way. One example of a sorority formed out of a primarily social necessity can be found in the rapidly diminishing town of Matfield Green in Chase County, Kansas. Wes Jackson, in his book *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, discusses in great detail his discoveries about the women's organization in the town known as "The New Century Club." After acquiring the property rights to several abandoned homes within the community, Jackson was delighted to uncover a series of the club's old programs in the upstairs bedroom of one of the old houses. By perusing this collection, he was able to learn a great amount about the organization and the role of this club that existed between the years of 1923 and 1964. "Each listed the officers, the club flower (sweet pea), the club colors (pink and white), and the club motto ("Just be glad.")"⁷ Keeping with the common practice of women's clubs of the

⁵ "General Federation of Women's Clubs in Kansas," General Federation of Women's Clubs, last modified 2016, <https://www.kshs.org/p/general-federation-of-women-s-clubs-of-kansas/13808>

⁶ For the concept of separate spheres, see...

⁷ Wes Jackson, *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, Ed. William Vitek (1996), 98.

period, the women of this group also opted to include the “Collect for Club Women,” to be recited at the beginning of every program. The “Collect” was originally written in 1904 by Mary Stewart, a high school principal from Longmont, Colorado, and during the age of women’s clubs its popularity as an opening prayer became more and more prominent.⁸ Jackson goes on to mention the various subjects that the club members chose to focus on for their programs. It is a rather diverse list, consisting both of topics as significant as the effects of movies on children, the threat of disease, and the importance of good citizenship—as well as more mundane subjects such as canning, birds, flowers and poetry. Jackson acknowledges both the simplicity and the nobility in their efforts: “There was a kind of naivete among these relatively unschooled women. Some of their poetry was not good. Some of their ideas about the way the world works seem silly. Some of their programs don’t sound very interesting. Some sound tedious. But their monthly agendas were filled with decency, with efforts to learn about everything from birds to our government, and with coping with their problems, the weather, diseases.”⁹

The New Century Club certainly serves as an example of common issues that interfered with the longevity of many clubs in rural Kansas. Clubs that resided within smaller communities were often prone to problems such as waning interest due to a shrinking population, inadequate educational resources, and insufficient funding to continue club activities. However, Matfield Green’s little club should be applauded for enduring well into the 1960s, when in all likelihood, the dwindling population could no longer supply the proper interest in such an organization. The same fate, however, was not shared by the plucky larger rural towns who hosted clubs that persisted against all odds; they worked in league with the GFWC to accomplish remarkable goals for not only self-improvement of individual members

⁸ ‘Collect for Club Women’ by Mary Stewart, GFWC/Iowa Federation of Women’s Clubs, accessed Oct 18, 2016. <http://www.gfwciowa.org/id27.html>

⁹ Jackson, *Rooted in the Land*, 99-100.

but the community as a whole. A shining example of this is the organization that originally began as the Clay Center Ladies Library Club in Clay County.

“The World is Advancing”

According to the history provided by the Clay Center Carnegie Library website, the predecessor to the Library Club was “The Ladies Library Association.” Very little is known about the group during this period, but in 1898, their name was officially changed to the Ladies Library Club upon their formal organization during November of that year.¹⁰ This development was not unique to Clay Center, as other similar clubs began to form in other county seat towns nearby. Nearly two years later in 1900, Riley County’s seat, Manhattan, formed its own library association. It was created to be an auxiliary to the Literary Institute with a similar goal to their parallel club in Clay Center: “Erect[ing] a building for a library.”¹¹

As to be expected from any club of this sort, the recording of minutes for each meeting was of great importance. This duty fell to the secretary, or those appointed to fill in for the secretary should the need arise. Each meeting typically took up about a page or so of writing, although this often varied on a case-by-case basis and was often dependent upon the writing style of the individual secretaries and the length of the meetings, prone to fluctuation. It is from these records, carefully preserved by the Clay Center Historical Society and Museum, that a great majority of the information given here is presented, and it is by far the most important primary source we can ask for when researching this organization. According to the first edition of records for the club’s minutes, the very first meeting of the club was held on Dec. 1, 1898. The club constitution was adopted and the earliest club officers were named :

¹⁰ “Clay Center Carnegie Library: History,” accessed November 15, 2016, <http://claycenter.lib.nckls.org/about-us/library-history/>

¹¹ Manhattan, Kansas Public Library informative exhibit, library history. Viewed February, 2017.

President, Mrs. Dr. John Scott (pictured in Figure 4 below), Vice President, Mrs. M.M. Miller, Treasurer, Mrs. L.G. Nichols, and Secretary, Miss Sue Harkness.¹²



Figure 4: Black and white portrait of the first president of the Clay Center Library Club Mrs. Dr. John Scott. Her husband Dr. John Scott sits beside her. Circa 1890s. SOURCE: Ancestry.com.

The club colors were originally gold and silver but often changed between this and green and pink, depending on the style of the times. However, the club flower always remained a pink carnation and the club motto was always a memorable quote by Giuseppe Mazzini, the famous Italian journalist, politician, and activist: “Slumber not in the tents of your fathers, the world is advancing, advance with it.”¹³ The club was responsible for the introduction of the first public library within the community, located in the basement of the former Garfield School building, as seen below in Figure 5.

¹² Susie Harkness, “Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1898” (Nov. 1898).

¹³ Carrie M. Loomer, “Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1900” (Oct. 26, 1900).



Figure 5: A colored postcard for the Garfield School Building which housed the earliest public library in Clay Center. Circa 1910. SOURCE: ebay.tv.

The ultimate objective for the club (outside of their overall devotion to self-improvement) was always the organization of and creating the funding for the construction of an official public library building. The earliest mention of this project occurred in March of 1900, and by that time the following year, the club began making arrangements to procure an available lot on Sixth Street for the future site.¹⁴ In March of 1902 the first steps toward applying for the Carnegie Library Foundation were taken up upon motion: “Mrs. Campbell spoke for the need of a library fund and made a motion that Mrs. Underwood be appointed as a committee to write to Andrew Carnegie, asking for a donation of (\$5,000) for public building.”¹⁵ In 1902, the club also began attending the semi-annual conventions of the Fifth District of the Kansas General Federation of Women’s clubs. These meetings were usually held in April and October – at the end and beginning of the club years respectively, since clubs associated with the federation often refrained from holding meetings during the summer. Throughout the first few decades there were several mentions of special ‘magazine days’ which likely pertained to sharing and reading of

¹⁴ Carrie Loomer, “Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1901” (Mar. 21, 1901).

¹⁵ E.M. Ross, “Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1902” (Mar. 27 1902).

various magazines of the time. Such magazines could have included the official magazine of the GFWC for club women, as seen in Figure 6 below.

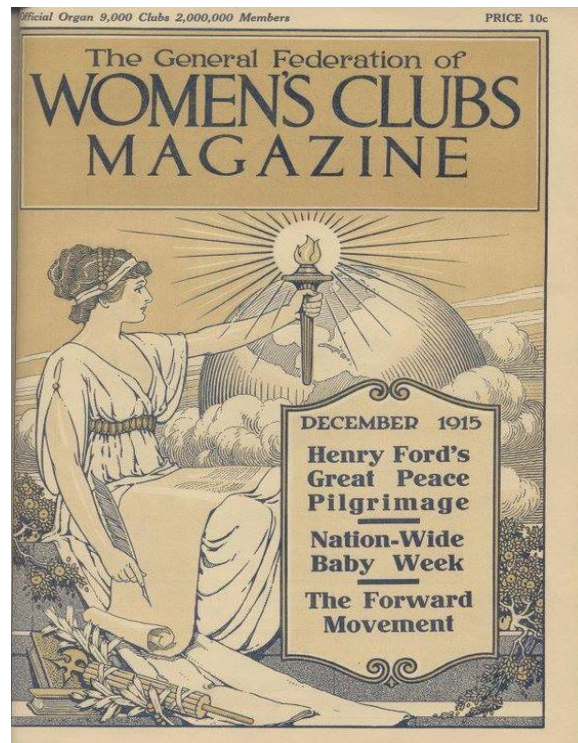


Figure 6: December 1915 edition of the General Federation of Women's Club Magazine. The cover depicts a detailed illustration of Columbia with the torch of knowledge in one hand and a pen in the other. SOURCE: gfwc.org.

Attendance at the meetings was of special importance for the club members. The earliest edition of the club's bi-laws contained rather stringent rules about tardiness (which would result in a fine of five cents), and especially, a member's inability to provide her segment within the scheduled program: "Any failure of a member to perform her part of the program, shall subject her to a fine of not less than twenty-five cents, unless a valid excuse be tendered the club in writing. (Bi-law #3)."¹⁶ It is also stated within the bi-laws that club members who had been absent for three or more consecutive meetings would be dropped from the roll. The process by which new members were inducted into the club was by

¹⁶ Harkness "Library Club Minutes: 1898." (Nov. 1898).

written application, which would then be deliberated by the Committee on Applications. The names of any valid candidates would be then given to the secretary who would report them at one meeting, to be voted upon by the club at the next. There was always a level of semi-formality to the meetings. For example, the individual members often referred to each other, at least in writing as “Mesdames,” and, as is hinted by the minutes kept by certain secretaries, the interspersing of Latin and French wordings was a common occurrence in casual conversation for some. This pervading sense of order and sophistication was a virtue that the club held in the highest regard; each elected officer actively worked to maintain its importance and influence on the group throughout the first fifty years of club history.

Programs, Papers and Projects

As for their efforts toward self-improvement, the Library club from its earliest meetings established an enduring format by which the meetings would be run, mostly based on the guidelines given in “Robert’s Rules of Order”.¹⁷ The meetings would be officially called to order by the president or the next highest ranking officer present, and this would be followed by the roll call which would typically be answered by the members uttering a word or phrase linked to a certain theme or subject. For example, if the theme of the day was botany, the members would be invited to respond to roll call by naming their favorite flower. Starting in the mid-1920s the club began reciting the aforementioned “Collect for Club Women,” at the beginning of each meeting, and at various points in the club history other prayers and an opening song were also included as part of the club meeting. These opening songs were often hymns, with the exception of those sung during the years of World War I, which were patriotic in nature. The “Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “America” were especially popular. After this, the section of old and new business would begin where officers, committees and individual members alike would make announcements of importance and make motions that would decide the further

¹⁷ Henry Martyn Robert, *Roberts Rules of Order* (Boston: De Capo Press, 1876).

actions taken by the club if any. After this would come the program segment which often took up the bulk of the meeting. During this time, papers would be presented, books, prose and poetry would be read aloud, plays would be re-enacted, lectures would be given, and musical recitals of all sorts would be performed. In the earliest days of the club history this format was not as rigid. Before the days of organized fundraising and pre-planned programming, the ladies of the club were often quite content simply arriving, attending to business promptly, enjoying an enriching educational program, and then perhaps devoting the remaining time to a social hour.

Beginning in the mid-1910s, the club began the practice of planning their programs and themes in advance. This included the process of appointing the club members who would be responsible for presenting at any given meeting. The themes for these programs were incredibly diverse and dealt with a broad variety of subjects. These included such topics as language studies, American, European and Asian history, home economics, cooking, housekeeping and childrearing, domestic science, law, philosophy, psychology, art discussion, sociology, horticulture, government, racial studies, topics of reform, ethics, politics, religious studies, music appreciation, music theory, and of course, literature. Certain subjects -- such as music -- were exceedingly popular and often served as reoccurring themes. For the first decade and a half of the club's existence, the primary focus of the business section concerned the progress of procuring funding and support for the local library building. A committee known as the building branch, or simply "The Branch," was created by the club as an accessory group, specifically charged with the task of forwarding these efforts.¹⁸ These efforts certainly did not go unnoticed by the local residents, who by most accounts were generally in favor of their proposals and missions toward public education. According to the Clay Center Carnegie Library's website: "In an election on April 6, 1909, the establishment of a Carnegie Library was voted upon favorably. The present

¹⁸ Harkness, "Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1907" (Apr. 25, 1907).

site was chosen and the deed secured by the city. The building and furnishings, excluding the books, cost \$12,548.78, and of this Carnegie donated \$10,000.”¹⁹ The club had managed to secure their funding, submit their proposal to be considered and eventually approved by the Carnegie program, and were finally able to purchase their lot in July of 1910. The construction, as pictured in Figure 7, likely began in the summer of 1911 and concluded in autumn 1912.



Figure 7: Black and white photograph showing the construction of the library building in the back ground with the wreckage of a demolished building in the foreground. Circa 1911. SOURCE: Courtesy of the Carnegie Library of Clay Center.

The official grand opening of the new Clay Center Carnegie Library was in late 1912, and the first meeting of the club within the building took place on January 9, 1913.²⁰ Previously, the club had begun to hold meetings in the local court house, but upon the building’s completion, they made immediate use of its facilities and introduced their large collection to its new residence. In addition to the overarching goal of establishing a public library building, the Library Club played hostess to many local events held annually and often in conjunction with other clubs, particularly a group known as the Helianthus Club.

¹⁹ “Clay Center Carnegie Library: History,” 2016.

²⁰ E.N.W., “Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1913,” (Jan. 9, 1913).

The two events of this nature that stand out in particular are the annual Kansas Day celebration and Summer Field Day, both of which often served as opportunities for the club to be interactive and network with other clubs both locally and within the surrounding area. Fundraising events such as benefit concerts, silver teas, and club plays were often part of the club's yearly schedule. In most cases, the proceeds from these events went to the club's scholarship fund, from which awards would be given to deserving potential students within the community who otherwise could not afford to attend college.²¹

For a Good Cause

While the social cause that consistently remained at the center of the club's ambitions was always the importance of education and children's welfare, the Library Club always donated their time and energy to the various causes that sprang up throughout the nation's history. The club ladies joined the numbers of many women across the country who helped graciously with the efforts of the home front during both world wars. There is repeated mention within the minutes of various causes that the club helped support during the years of and following the Great War. In 1917, the earliest mentions of the club's contributions begin with a concert being put on for the benefit of the Belgian Relief Fund, and the Library Club was specifically asked to help with ticket distribution.²² Other entries from this year include descriptions of a committee put in charge of securing books and magazines for soldiers, a "Treasure and Trinket fund" for the donation of metal jewelry and the like, the buying and selling of liberty bonds, and a Victrola record drive for Camp Funston. They also took part in hosting a series of events known as silver teas, tea parties in which people in attendance donated their silver and other precious metals. These tea parties effectively doubled as metal drives. In 1918, the club donated to the furnishing of a recreation for Kansas soldiers, but even more impressively took the steps necessary to

²¹ Harkness, "Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1898" (Dec. 1, 1898).

²² E.M. Ross, "Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1917" (Mar. 8, 1917).

adopt a French orphan by the name of Marcel Drouch as a collective effort. The letter of thanks received by the club was more than indicative that the child was most grateful for their aid.²³ Efforts for the reconstruction of war-torn France also included an additional drive that drew \$100 for the purpose of French rehabilitation, \$50 of which went to the establishment of a tiny school library building in the countryside, which was reportedly to be named the Clay Center Memorial Library.²⁴

In 1924 the club wrote to urge Congress to establish an industrial farm for women prisoners, a reformatory for young men and first offenders, and they expressed their concern about employment of federal prisoners. Locally, the club worked to organize their Junior Auxiliary Club in January of 1926, according to the minutes of Jan. 14 "The membership consisting of daughter and friends of club women or those interested in club work."²⁵ Aside from a few programs dedicated to financial maintenance, frugality and employment, the Great Depression had very little effect on the club's productivity. By all accounts the fund continued to garner financial support, but outside efforts pertaining to large political movements did cease for the club during this time, likely due to the limited funds of the individual members. The club did continue to contribute, however, mostly around the holidays and usually to veteran drives and health associations. Thereafter, as World War II progressed, the club continued its track record of support in many of the same ways. During these years the club both bought and sold war bonds²⁶. They again hosted silver teas and held drives for various materials. It should also be noted that in 1945 the club also participated in the famous March of Dimes both in asking for donations and by donating themselves.²⁷

²³ E.M. Ross, "Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1918" (Oct. 3, 1918).

²⁴ Allie D. Hartford, "Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1922" (Mar. 9, 1922).

²⁵ W.L. Jennings, "Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1926" (Jan. 14, 1926).

²⁶ Peckham, "Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1917" (Nov. 8, 1917).

²⁷ Josephine Emerson, "Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1945" (Jan. 25, 1945).

Hearts of Gold

On November 11, 1948, the Library Club of Clay Center celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with a golden tea. The entry for this date contains this sentiment about the club that originally began as such a small group in 1898: "Many changes have taken place since then and the club has truly lived up to its motto."²⁸ There is certainly truth to this statement, as it is clear from a simple investigation of their records that the club made every effort possible to advance as the world advanced. The sentiments of self-improvement, education and an appreciation and support of the fine arts carried throughout the earliest years of the club history and extended well beyond the fulfillment of their original goal of the Carnegie Library. The charity work that they conducted revealed their sincerity and compassion, and they joined in with the nationwide chorus of activist women to help improve the conditions of public schooling both in their own community and elsewhere. What truly made these library ladies especially extraordinary in what was arguably a time of extraordinary women in general, is what they managed to leave behind and preserve for the sake of history. Many clubs likely accomplished similar goals but there are few that can boast of such a complete and cohesive collection of records as the Clay Center Library club. Their story remains in such an excellent condition that over a century later their goals, interests, passions and comradery remain as clear, impressive and enlightening as ever. Those early members were truly a remarkable sisterhood and Clay Center certainly owes a debt of gratitude to the efforts of Mrs. Scott, Mrs. Miller, Mrs. Nichols, Miss Harkness, Mrs. Helene Peckham, Mrs. F.B. Fullington, Mrs. W.L. Jennings and the countless other members who made the dreams and visions of the club possible with their dedication. For these women, the love of learning ran deep, but the bonds they shared with each other, the commitment to help others, and the motivation for improvement in all matters of life in Clay Center ran even deeper.

²⁸ Catherine Berry, "Clay Center Library Club Minutes: 1948" (Nov. 11, 1948).



Figure 8: A modern photograph of the Clay Center Carnegie Library which continues to retain a great value in the community of Clay Center. Photograph taken Nov. 30, 2016, by Dr. M.J. Morgan.

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