

# Yolo County Historical Society



**JULY 2012**

## **PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE**

By now you will have received your membership renewal notice in the mail. On that notice I have included information for events we are planning so far, for the coming year.

Docents for Spring Lake School house are needed during the Fair next month, as well as docenting at the Gable Mansion on the day of the Stroll Through History.

Participating docents at the Gable Mansion will receive a free tour booklet to view the other open homes. If we have one person, whose responsibility is lining up volunteers, they can spend hours and hours on the phone. Let's "cut them some slack" this year. Please call me or Mary Aulman to sign up to docent at the Gable Mansion. To schedule a shift for the School House, please call me.

Board member Reva Barzo and I spent a lovely day at the Jack London State Park this past week setting up a Society Trip for the 20th of September.

Remember, the monthly programs, special events, book publications are all supported by your membership dues. We hope that you will continue with your support of YCHS.

Peace,

BJ Ford, President  
Yolo County Historical Society

## **Hattie Hits the Road**



The Hattie Weber Museum of Davis had a booth at the Celebrate Davis in May and one at the Gibson House Spring Fair early this month. Both were well received thanks to the hard work of Merrily Dupree, Dennis Dingemans, Adrian Gabriel, Stella Dingers and Joe and Mary Lee Thomson. The history quiz John Lofland put together years ago was a big hit, especially in Davis, and we actually sold a few books and bears. We also learned a lot.

Meanwhile, we have a stunningly beautiful large ceramic tile to place in the middle of the Hattie Weber Rose Garden, thanks to the talent and generosity of Susan Shelton. The bricks this year were more problematic; we have most of them, but are waiting for the final ones. We'll have to celebrate Mother's Day in July!

New exhibits include some interesting photographs of the 1890 Pena house, scheduled for demolition unless someone

comes forward to move it to another location. We also have display of 1948 wedding finery donated by Theresa Gyorke. Her mother, Clara Sue Chiles Gyorke, wore a full length white gown of “tissue taffeta”, which is the center of the display. Coming exhibits include a display of “Treasures of the Hattie Weber” and one on neighborhoods in Davis. John Lofland has given us a wonderful multifaceted time line of Davis history which will also soon be on display.

**The Hattie Weber Museum**, located at 445 C Street, Davis, Ca. is open to the public on **Mon. & Wed.** from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

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### **Lola Jean Simpson, Woodland’s Sinclair Lewis**

By Merrily DuPree

When Sinclair Lewis muckraked the American small town in his novel *Main Street*, published in 1920, his home town’s reaction was decidedly ambivalent. On the one hand, Sauk Centre, Minnesota, population about 1500, was proud to be associated with a famous and popular writer, but on the other they resented being the inspiration for the narrow-minded fictional community Lewis satirically named Gopher Prairie. Therefore, in print, citizens adopted what Lewis biographer Richard Lingeman calls “the local-boy-makes-good mode” while on Main Street itself, they expressed disappointment and even anger at Lewis’s unflattering depiction of the town. When word of these conversations reached Lewis,

he wrote a conciliatory letter to the *Sauk Centre Herald*, stating that the novel’s characters were not portraits of actual townspeople but merely “composites.” And when, in July of 1922, he visited Sauk Centre for the first time after the novel’s appearance, a *Herald* reporter commented that “The usual equilibrium of the community was not disturbed by the arrival of the famous author nor were the dogs of war unchained.”

Dennis Dingemans, Board Member of the Yolo County Historical Society and Director of Davis’s Hattie Weber Museum, has recently rediscovered two novels that suggest Woodlanders found themselves in a similar situation less than a decade later. Lola Jean Simpson, the daughter of Woodlanders John and Gertrude Pendegast Simpson and granddaughter of J. N. Pendegast, first minister of the town’s Christian Church and a founder of Hesperian College, published *Back Fire* in 1927 and *Treadmill* in 1929. She was born in 1878 in the two-story Victorian house with an imposing bay window that still stands at 720 College Street. Although her father’s death when she was thirteen left the family struggling financially, she was encouraged by her mother to attend both Woodland High School and the University of California. In 1899 she received a Bachelor’s degree in English and returned to her home town to begin what would be an eighteen-year career as a high-school English teacher. She would leave Woodland in 1927 to accept a position with the University Extension Division in Berkeley; later, she worked as an editor for several newspapers and magazines, both on the

West Coast and in New York, before launching a third career as a professional writer of journalistic essays and fiction.



Childhood home of Lola Jean Simpson

Simpson's front-page obituary in the *Woodland Daily Democrat* of February 26, 1934, began by praising the "talented Woodland girl who won fame, first as an educator, and later as a novelist and writer." After providing the details of her death at age 56 from cancer and of the funeral arrangements, it turned to the novels themselves; subtitles in bold type informed the reader that "Books Created Sensation" and that Simpson "Found [fictional] Material Here." These statements would have been news to very few townspeople as local readers had quickly identified "Oakleyville," the setting of both novels, as Woodland. In *Back Fire*, "many Woodlanders thought they recognized some of the early day characters-about-town," but, like Lewis, Simpson let it be known that "she did not intend to give the impression that the story of her heroine was really the story of her own career and no reflections were intended." After making clear that Simpson had been fully appreciated by high

school administrators and townspeople, the obituary ended with a short discussion of the controversial *Treadmill*, in which Simpson "wrote of her career as an educator in a small town," focusing on the problems experienced by teachers. "She had encountered the difficulties of which she wrote and she knew whereof she spoke," it concluded. A week later, Florence McGehee expressed her appreciation of Simpson in her *Daily Democrat* column, "Onions and Roses," commenting that as a newcomer in town, she had been "a little surprised to learn that there were Woodlanders who objected to the content of one of her books [*Treadmill*] and had "[found] personalities in it."

*Back Fire* is what today would be called a female Bildungsroman (a novel presenting significant events of a young woman's maturation). The young woman in this case is Marais Plover, granddaughter of an Oakleyville pioneer. More than a few Woodlanders undoubtedly would have objected to Simpson's Oakleyville characters because until the final chapter she uses them to represent what she sees as the nineteenth century's repressive social mores, which threaten Marais's happiness by limiting her freedom. As a result, most of the townspeople are shown to be committed to the values of conformity, propriety, and social hierarchy. Marais's long rebellion against the town ends, however, when she chooses an Oakleyville man she has known all her life, Dan Stillman, over a San Francisco writer, who tries to convince her that marriage is a bourgeois concept to be discarded. When Dan, a talented engineer, proposes to Marais, he tells her that he plans

to buy a farm just outside the town, which will be the couple's vacation home, "a place to run away to. To renew life--" (398). But some Woodlanders understandably may not have been entirely satisfied with the ending, wishing that Simpson had made Marais's and Dan's commitment to Oakleyville stronger.

It was Simpson's second Bildungsroman, the artistically superior *Treadmill*, however, that seemingly shocked Woodland when it appeared in 1929. The novel exposes the unhappy treadmill-existence of women teachers in a small town and particularly targets the local school board. Importantly, as one reviewer pointed out, *Treadmill's* criticisms applied not to only one American high school, but to most of them; it contained "all the charges often brought against our public schools: the interference by politics and prejudice, the over-emphasis on athletics, the heart-breakingly small pay, the impertinent restrictions upon a teacher's private life." Another reviewer observed Lewis's influence at work, commenting that "The time is more than ripe for some disciple of Sinclair Lewis to give us the low-down on the teaching profession. *Treadmill* is an attempt in this direction." In fact, Simpson explicitly acknowledges Lewis's influence when she describes the decrees of Oakleyville's school board as "Babbitry" (275) a popular term that referred to his satire of middle-class Americans in the novel *Babbitt* (1922).

*Treadmill's* protagonist, Leslie Burleson, is a young woman who after graduating from the University of California returns to her home town to support her grandmother, stepmother, and herself by teaching in the local high school. Although Leslie

approaches her job in the history department with enthusiasm, she quickly confronts numerous obstacles to effective teaching: the daily routine is mentally and physically exhausting, grading papers and directing extracurricular activities take up most of her time outside the classroom, students are sometimes disrespectful, the townspeople scrutinize and gossip about her social life, the school board quickly squelches her belief that she has academic freedom, and the married principal shows her unwanted attention.

Like Marais, Leslie falls in love, with a young Berkeley professor who arrives at Oakleyville High School to conduct research on its students' perceptions of their education. David Havener represents new, liberal theories of education, and he provides the supportive mentoring Leslie lacks at the school. But in the end, the university intellectual is incapable of solving the problems of the ordinary teacher. The high school is only "a tiny slice out of a life filled with adventurous and interesting happenings with people as thrilling and unusual as himself" (175), and he spends little time there, especially after he decides to apply for the position of president of a recently established progressive college in Oregon. So he remains distant from the realities of Leslie's life. When he does return for the school's Thanksgiving Dance, it results in serious trouble for her: at his suggestion, they share a dance in the moonlight, and the town's gossip network is soon buzzing about it. Accusations that she has flirted with both her principal and David cause the school board to fire her.

Unlike *Back Fire*, *Treadmill* does not end with a marriage, although David does

propose, asking Leslie to share his life in the appealing intellectual environment of the Oregon college he will lead. This time, however, Simpson gives her novel a realist,

rather than a romantic, ending: Leslie informs him that she intends to find another teaching job in California, where, “in spite of my loss of illusions (381),” she will continue to strive to become an excellent teacher. Rather than removing herself from the problems of the profession, as he has, she will work to solve them. Although she expresses confidence that their friendship will continue, a future marriage is not a certainty.

Florence W. McGehee’s *Daily Democrat* column of March 3, 1934, ends with her view that Simpson showed extraordinary “courage” in writing about her teaching experiences realistically, and “we didn’t like it because it rang true.” Unfortunately, Simpson had to learn that “you’d better not be the fellow who does the resurrecting [of the truth] if you want to get along with the home folks.” But if she had lived to write more novels, she “might well have told us many things that are good for our souls—and maybe, in time, have made us like it.” Today, more than eighty years after her novels appeared, it would be extremely difficult to evaluate Simpson’s criticisms of Woodland’s high school and school board. What we can know, through the novels themselves, is that she was a fascinating female version of “the rebel from Main Street” with a tremendous determination to make America’s schools better, for both students and teachers.

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## NEWSLETTER ARTICLES

**DEADLINE:** Articles for the newsletter will be accepted until the **20<sup>th</sup> of each month**. Please either email B J Ford at: [bjford@pacbell.net](mailto:bjford@pacbell.net) or mail to the YCHS at P.O. Box 1447 Woodland, CA 95776

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**Society publications** available for sale at a variety of locations. For more information on book sales, contact Mary Aulman at 666-0743.

## YOLO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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**Searching** for a past article from our newsletter? Go to Yolo County Historical Society web address: <http://ychs.org/>

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**DON'T FORGET!! SIGN UP NOW AS A DOCENT FOR SPRING LAKE SCHOOL HOUSE DURING THE FAIR...OR AS A DOCENT AT THE GABLE MANSION DURING STROLL THROUGH HISTORY.....**

**School House shifts in August are**

Wednesday the 15<sup>th</sup>; 6 to 8:30p.m. and 8:30p.m. to 11 p.m.; Thursday the 16<sup>th</sup> through Saturday the 18<sup>th</sup> docents are needed from 12 to 2, 2 to 4; 4 to 6, 6 to 8:30 and 8:30 to 11 p.m. Call BJ @662-0952

**Stroll Shifts on Sept 8<sup>th</sup> are thirty (30)**

volunteers needed for this one day event; 15 people for the 11:00 – 1:30 time slot and another 15 people for the 1:30 – 4:00.

Participating docents will be given, at no charge, a Tour Ticket to view the other open homes. Call Mary @ 666-0743 or BJ @ 662-0952

**INVITE A FRIEND TO JOIN**

Membership in the Yolo County Historical Society is open to all who wish to join in supporting the research, preservation and designation of the county historical resources, maintaining the Springlake Schoolhouse Museum on the Fairgrounds, and publishing mini-histories of Yolo County communities. Please make check payable to Yolo County Historical Society.

Individual	\$20	NAME	_____
Family	\$25		
Senior 65+	\$15	ADDRESS	_____
Family 65+	\$20		
Business	\$50	CITY	_____ ZIP _____
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**Vision Statement** *The Yolo County Historical Society strives to preserve, protect and acknowledge the diverse history of Yolo County through education, communication, and advocacy*