



**Western Washington University Libraries**  
**Special Collections**  
**Leading Lady: Miss Wilson Makes a Library**

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**Leading Lady: Miss Wilson Makes a Library**

By Marian Alexander, Head of Special Collections, WWU Libraries

It's hard to imagine Western without the Mabel Zoe Wilson Library. Its elegant, Italianate brick façade has graced the south end of the green swathe in front of Old Main since 1928. But when the famously feisty, determined woman for whom the building is now named first set foot on campus, there was no separate structure serving as a library, and there was barely a library collection at all.

"There just wasn't a library," Mabel Zoe Wilson was to exclaim many years later, recalling her reaction on February 1, 1902, her first day on the job. On the uppermost floor of the institution's only building at the time (now Old Main), she saw a few reference books, a great pile of disorganized magazines shoved into a corner, and perhaps 400 to 500 additional books. A sheaf of bills from book firms and some lists of items to be ordered constituted the official records.

For the next 43 years, Mabel Zoe Wilson made it her life's work to wrest a functioning, well stocked, superbly organized academic library from virtually nothing. "Her dedication to one library was total," remarked a colleague, and her leadership nothing short of remarkable in the face of significant challenges as Western grew and as its mission and purpose evolved throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Born in 1878 in Athens, Ohio, Mabel Zoe Wilson was not trained as a librarian; rather, her degree from Athens' Ohio University, earned in 1900, resulted from a course of study that included Greek, political economy, and rhetoric. How she came to apply for the position of librarian at the State Normal School at New Whatcom—as Western was then called—in the isolated reaches of the Pacific Northwest remains unknown. Her application, however, was championed by Edward T. Mathes, head of the school, who brought her West at a salary of \$600 per year.

Slender and petit, even by the standards of the time, with a mass of dark hair and a penetrating gaze from deep-set dark brown eyes, Mabel Zoe Wilson set to work immediately to make a library. Within a year, there were 4600 books, properly organized and indexed by a card catalog whose entries she wrote by hand. More acquisitions followed steadily and staff was added as Miss Wilson's burdens grew. In 1909, she was able to leave to obtain a professional librarian degree at the Albany (N.Y.) Library School founded by Melvil Dewey himself.

Success followed success, the collections grew apace and by 1920, the library had completely outgrown its allotted space. As early as 1916, the Board of Trustees had acknowledged the exigent need for a separate library building, but it wasn't until 1924, following the arrival of President Charles H. Fisher, that the effort moved into high gear. Miss Wilson's devotion to the library met its match in Fisher's; it was he who propelled forward her dream of building a proper library to serve as "the student's workshop" where students could "double and magnify their creative work."

Designed by Charles H. Bebb and Carl Gould, who had created the University of Washington's "Collegiate Gothic-style" Suzzallo Library shortly before this time, the new library was dedicated on June 5, 1928. The main reading room (still extant), with its wonderfully painted ceiling and tall, mullioned windows featuring stain glass panels, was

the building's glory. Its built-in oak book cases held 25,000 volumes, testimony, along with thousands more housed in nearby multi-level stacks, to Miss Wilson's two-plus decades of vigorous collection building.

The new building was acclaimed by all, but Mabel Zoe Wilson's work was not yet done. She continued to develop the library's holdings; secured additional professional and clerical staff; and expanded the library's instructional services to including credit courses in library and research skills. She also found the time to actively serve professional library organizations in the state and region. An avid traveler, she made regular trips across the country and abroad, usually visiting libraries along the way and often reporting on her adventures in the campus newspaper. She was famed for the extravagant parties and dinners she hosted for students and staff at downtown Bellingham hotels and for flashes of sentiment ranging from anonymously acknowledging staff birthdays with flowers to creating part-time jobs for war widows.

Mabel Zoe Wilson retired in September 1945. On April 15, 1964, Western's library was officially named for her, following a campaign initiated by retired faculty members who enlisted the support of legions of Miss Wilson's friends, former students, and colleagues. To the many encomia addressed to her at the dedication ceremony, she replied, in typical fashion, "I do not recognize myself." She died a few weeks later, on June 1, 1964, at the age of eighty-six.

Visitors to today's Mabel Zoe Wilson Library who pass through the north foyer sometimes pause to note the portrait hanging there, of a dreamy, almost wistful-seeming Mabel Zoe Wilson. The look belies the woman of steel within, who created the library that now stretches up and outward in ways and directions she could not have imagined. Many legends circle around her, in part because she left so little of a personal nature—no letters, diaries, or reminiscences. We must understand her as she wished to be understood and remembered, as the creator of a truly wondrous thing—a library, Western's library, our library.