

# The Lady Librarians of the 1930s

by RV Staff Writer J.C.

Nan Collins shivered, wrapping her wool scarf around her neck more tightly. She adjusted the angle of her brimmed hat, tilting it to better protect her against the misty rain that seems to hover this morning in the cold mountain air.

With a cluck of her tongue and a gentle nudge with her boots, she urged the horse forward. He snorted as if in protest, but Sunny Jim was a stalwart fellow who knew their route had many miles yet in front of them before they reached their destination.

Nan had been traveling this route, back and forth through the Appalachians, since she first joined the Pack Horse Library Initiative in 1936, just a year earlier. Nan loved being a librarian, and in Kentucky, where roughly a third of the population was illiterate, she felt it her duty to help as many folks as possible get access to books and reading materials.

She loved reading and wanted to spread that enthusiasm to others. She especially wanted to reach the young children who would be impatiently waiting for her visits. They were as hungry for the books she carried as they often were for a square meal.

Nan was one of roughly two hundred librarians, mostly women, who traveled by horseback with their packs full of books and magazines from town to town, stopping at homes, schools, post offices and general stores along the way. There they'd swap the library materials out and collect the returned books, often keeping a small "library" in the local post office or wherever there was a safe, dry place.

Her next stop was the elementary school in the Pine Mountain region, where the rural residents sent their children. The school didn't have much of a library, so it was up to Nan to provide the kinds of materials that would entertain and educate a range of students.

But first she had to make it across the stream and over the next embankment. Nan raised up her long skirts and petticoat to keep them dry and gritted her teeth as the freezing water from the stream soaked her feet in the stirrups. Sunny Jim whinnied in discomfort as the cold water hit him under his chest and belly. Nan wondered if he'd refuse to continue. But the horse held steadfast and did not waiver, surging forward through the icy currents.

She patted him gently on the side of his neck as they reached the other side.

"There's a good fellow, Sunny Jim. Nobody could ask for a better partner than you."

The horse nickered softly, agreeing with her assessment. Together they followed the worn path through the hills for several miles in companionable silence. The horse picked his steps carefully so as not to trip and

falter on the uneven, rocky terrain.

From the woods Nan heard the low moan that meant a bobcat was likely not too far off. They didn't normally come out of the brush, but all the same, she urged her horse to go a little faster. Sunny Jim twitched his ears and complied.

Finally, they reached their destination. The school was a modest one room, one-story building with a flagpole out front, the Stars and Stripes waving in the breeze. The school children were outside, eating their lunches and playing tag when they spotted her. They came running up to her and could barely wait for her to dismount before peppering her with questions.

"Miss Collins, what took so long? We've been waiting for you!"

"Miss, what have you brought for us? I finished the last book already!"

"Have you got any more of those Nancy Drew stories? They're my favorite!"

Nan laughed as she reached into her deep saddlebags. The children gathered closely, eager to see what treasures she had to offer.

"You'll have to give me some room to breathe, children! And poor Jim here is tired; can one of you fetch him a pail of water please? I could use some myself." She wiped her brow and removed her hat, tired but happy. She looked upon the smiling faces surrounding her.

"All right, let's see what I've got. First, you must turn in the books you've finished from my last visit, and I'll give you something new to read. Why don't you line up?"

The children noisily obeyed. Boys and girls jostled for position, and when they were as calm as they were likely to get, Nan called each child up to her.

"So, you enjoyed the first Nancy Drew mystery, did you, Gracie?" She asked the girl with blue ribbons in her blonde hair. The child nodded vigorously.

"Well, if you liked *The Secret of the Old Clock*, you'll love *The Hidden Staircase*."

Gracie bounced off, delighted to have another story about the girl detective. Nan turned to the next child in line. A young boy with big green eyes looked hopefully at her.

"Hello again, Henry. I found this book about a train. You can practice your reading, and it has lots of pictures."

Nan handed the small boy *The Little Engine That Could*. Henry grinned, his two front teeth missing. He dashed off, and the next student stepped up.

Red-headed Ginny dearly loved to read. She returned *Mary Poppins* to Nan, which she had read three

times since the librarian's last visit.

"Ginny, I've saved this for you. It's about a girl with a great imagination and a headful of beautiful red hair, just like you." She handed the girl *Anne of Green Gables*. Ginny's eyes lit up.

"Oh, I've heard about these books! I've been dying to read one," exclaimed Ginny.

"Yes, and there's a whole series of them as she grows up. I think you'll enjoy them."

Nan continued to give out books until the line was nearly gone. Hovering at the back was the oldest student in the school, a shy and awkward boy names Miles. Nan beckoned him over. He handed her one of the Hardy Boys books he had read since her last visit.

"Did you like it, Miles?" she asked.

Miles shrugged.

"Not that much, to be honest, Miss," said Milo in a quiet voice.

Nan furrowed her eyebrows. What would appeal to this boy, almost a man, who looked like he was often lost in his own daydreams? An Agatha Christie mystery, perhaps? Or maybe Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*?

"Do you like mysteries?" Nan asked. Again, the young man shrugged his shoulders.

"No? Hmm," thought Nan aloud. Then she smiled. "I have just the thing!" She reached deep into the horse's pack and drew out a book wrapped in cloth. Carefully she unwrapped it and held it out to the lad. He looked at it, then looked at Nan.

"It's just been published! I bought it yesterday," Nan explained. "I was going to read it myself, but I think perhaps you should read it first."

Miles read the title. "*The Hobbit*. What is it, Miss?"

"It's an adventure unlike anything else, they say. There's wizards, and elves, and dwarves and a dragon ..."  
Nan continued, watching the quiet boy's face light up with curiosity and delight.

"Thank you, Miss. I don't know what to say," whispered Miles. He stroked the book's cover, already engaged with the possibilities inside.

"Just take good care of it. And tell me what you think on my next visit." Nan patted the boy on the shoulder. He nodded.

"All right then, time for Sunny Jim and me to be off! We've got miles to go before we can lay our sleepy heads to rest. Goodbye, children!"

Nan mounted her horse and set her hat atop her head once again. As the school children waved farewell, Nan and Jim rode off into the sunset.

**Questions**

1. What does *stalwart* mean here: "Sunny Jim was a stalwart fellow who knew their route had many miles yet in front of them"?
2. What was the purpose of taking books to the schools and towns in Kentucky?
3. Why did Nan love being a librarian?
4. If you were a librarian, what book would you recommend?

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**Vocabulary List**

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. stalwart
2. illiterate
3. awkward
4. rural
5. modest
6. jostle

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**Context Clues**

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) “He snorted as if in protest, but Sunny Jim was a **stalwart** fellow who knew their route had many miles yet in front of them before they reached their destination.”

- a. lazy    b. worried    c. loyal    d. friendly

2) “Nan loved being a librarian, and in Kentucky, where roughly a third of the population was **illiterate**, she felt it her duty to help as many folks as possible get access to books and reading materials.”

- a. unable to read or write    b. ill or sick    c. unable to sew    d. not talented

3) “Hovering at the back was the oldest student in the school, a shy and **awkward** boy names Miles.”

- a. skinny    b. popular    c. clumsy    d. talkative

4) “Her next stop was the elementary school in the Pine Mountain region, where the **rural** residents sent their children.”

- a. city    b. country    c. oldest    d. needy

5. “The school was a **modest** one room, one-story building with a flagpole out front...”

- a. dark    b. narrow    c. huge    d. simple

6. “Boys and girls **jostled** for position, and when they were as calm as they were likely to get, Nan called each child up to her.”

- a. forced by pushing    b. yelled loudly    c. shared space    d. ran quickly