

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

THEIR STORIES
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LUTIE EUGENIA STEARNS

1866-1943

City: Madison, Milwaukee

County: Dane, Milwaukee

Lutie Stearns, “the Johnny Appleseed of books,” started free libraries all over Wisconsin and was an outspoken advocate for social justice.

Lutie Stearns, the youngest of eleven children, was born in Massachusetts in 1866, but moved with her family a few years later to the Milwaukee area in Wisconsin. Although she had a stuttering problem that made her early school years difficult, she eventually succeeded and became a teacher herself. There were hardly any books for students at her first teaching job, so Stearns brought baskets full of books from the public library to her classroom every week.

In a speech to the American Library Association in 1894, Stearns argued that children under age 12 should be able to check out books from libraries—something not usually allowed in those times. Even though she had trouble speaking because of her stutter, she received a standing ovation when she finished.

Stearns is best known for helping found the Wisconsin Free Library Commission and running its Department of Traveling Libraries. From 1895 to 1914, she traveled around Wisconsin, bringing about 1,400 portable libraries to Wisconsin communities where books were scarce, and helping to start many permanent libraries as well. In later years, Stearns was known as a champion of world peace, women’s equality, and other Progressive causes. She traveled and lectured in many states, was a member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, and even saw the signing of the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact in 1928. From 1932 until 1935, she wrote a column called “As a Woman Sees It” for the Milwaukee Journal.

Stearns died in 1943. She was inducted into the American Library Association’s Library Hall of Fame in 1951 and was among the first honorees in the Wisconsin Library Hall of Fame in 2008.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/lutie-eugenia-stearns