

FOR LOVE OF A FEMINIST:

Jane Grant, William Harris, and the “Fund for the Study of Women”

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In 1975, retired financial analyst and *Fortune* editor William B. Harris willed most of his estate to establish the “University of Oregon Fund for the Study of Women.” By the end of 1984, the sum of his endowment amounted to just over \$4 million, the largest single gift the university had ever received.¹ At a time when women’s studies was struggling to gain ground in the academy, what led Harris to fund research on women? The story of the Center for the Study of Women in Society’s greatest benefactor begins and ends with his love of a feminist, Jane C. Grant.

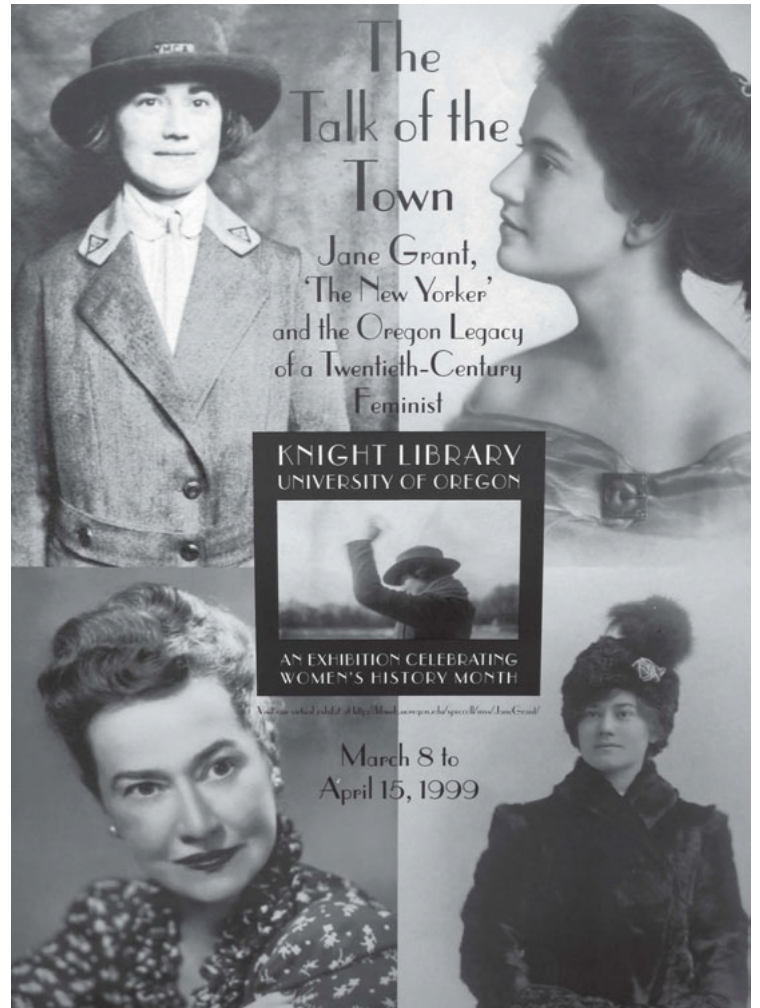
EARLY YEARS

Jane Grant learned early how to handle herself in the domains of men. Raised in a family with lots of males, she successfully navigated pressrooms, poker games, and variety shows in early twentieth-century New York City and wartime Paris. As she would write in 1943, “Adjusting myself to their world is one of the things at which I have been rather competent.”²

Born in 1892, Grant was raised in rural Missouri and Kansas. While the women in her family were expected to marry or become schoolteachers, Grant wanted neither. At 17 she moved to New York to study voice, where new friends introduced her to a sophisticated society life she grew to love. As a performer, however, she struggled to make ends meet. A steady job was the only way she could stay in her beloved New York.

So like growing numbers of young women seeking independence in progressive-era New York, Grant took a business course and got a stenography job at the *New York Times* in 1914. “[T]he Fourth Estate glowered at women in those days,” she later would write, “and despite warnings . . . that there would never be advancement for a woman at the *Times*, I began my career.”³

Grant learned the publishing world from the bottom up, working her way from the stenography pool to the society desk to hotel reporter after the First World War. By 1923, she was writing several syndicated weekly columns and had become the first woman promoted to general-assignment reporter at the *Times*. Married in 1920 to editor Harold Ross, the couple shared a publishing dream and cofounded *The New Yorker* magazine in 1925. Thanks to her keen financial sense and social aplomb in a business world domi-



This poster was produced for the 1999 UO Knight Library exhibit “Talk of the Town: Jane Grant, ‘The New Yorker,’ and the Oregon Legacy of a Twentieth-Century Feminist.” / Photographs are from the Jane Grant Photograph Collection, PH141, UO Libraries Special Collection.

nated by men, Grant saved the magazine from ruin twice, once in its early days and once during the Second World War.⁴

While Grant had learned early to use male power to her advantage, it was only after her first marriage to Ross that she began to understand the price that women paid for that power. On the day of her wedding, when called “Mrs. Ross” by a witness, “I was jolted out of my apathy,” she wrote. “My heart stood still at the realization that my own little name had dissolved.”⁵

So she worked hard to keep it. In 1921, Grant and friend Ruth Hale founded the Lucy Stone League to fight for a woman’s right to her name in marriage. From property ownership to passport renewals, the roadblocks she tackled by maintaining her birth name awakened Grant to the larger problems of pervasive sex discrimination. But her growing feminism also irritated her husband. By 1929, even as *The New Yorker* succeeded, their marriage failed. “My marriage to Miss Grant split largely on the reefs of women’s rights,” Ross later wrote.⁶

ROMANCE

When William Harris met the divorced Grant at a cocktail party in 1934, her feminism was in full view. Having just returned from a seven-month trip around the world, her journalistic forays in China, Manchuria, Russia, and Europe included, among other stories, interviewing the director of the Nazi Foreign Press Bureau

about restrictions on women in Hitler-occupied Germany.⁷

Harris fell in love with the independent-minded Miss Grant. For nearly five years, he ardently wooed her in New York, penning her many love letters when she traveled.

But Harris was married to another woman, so while his affair with Grant was passionate, it was hidden from public view. In September 1935 he told her, "Not that I even dare to hope that you'll ever marry me—but at least I should like to be in a position to be seen with you on the street."⁸

Grant had little financial incentive to marry again. As a journalist and *New Yorker* shareholder, she was assured of her ability to live as an independent woman. Her 1936 and 1937 letters to Harris describe not her feelings but her travels abroad and the people whose company she was enjoying, including good-looking men.⁹

The scales tipped in his favor in 1938. Sometime that year, Harris began divorce proceedings, having secured a stable position as literary editor at *Fortune* magazine. Also, Grant purchased acreage in Litchfield, Connecticut, including an old barn that she planned to renovate as a weekend and vacation retreat, accompanied by Harris. But when Grant told the woman who had owned the property of her plans, the woman said that neighbors would not take kindly to an unmarried couple living there.

Grant and Harris wed in 1939, before the renovations were complete. Splitting time between New York and their Connecticut retreat, which later became White Flower Farm, Grant and Harris lived their lives together until her death in 1972.¹⁰

THE CAUSE

Grant's feminism began with the Lucy Stone League's fight for women's names in the 1920s, but in the following decades she



Jane Grant and William Harris in their later years together / courtesy of the Jane Grant Photograph Collection, PH141, UO Libraries Special Collection.

became well versed in problems of women's civil and social rights. "Beginning mildly with names," she wrote, "I soon worked up indignation over other feminine taboos."¹¹

Though the League ceased activities in the late 1920s, Grant continued to write about women's rights in news columns and letters. She joined the Connecticut Committee for the Equal Rights Amendment when it was founded in 1943 and was active in the National Woman's Party, which was devoted to passage of the ERA. In 1956, Grant joined the national advisory committee of the Massachusetts Committee for the Equal Rights Amendment, the most successful

state committee in the 1960s.¹²

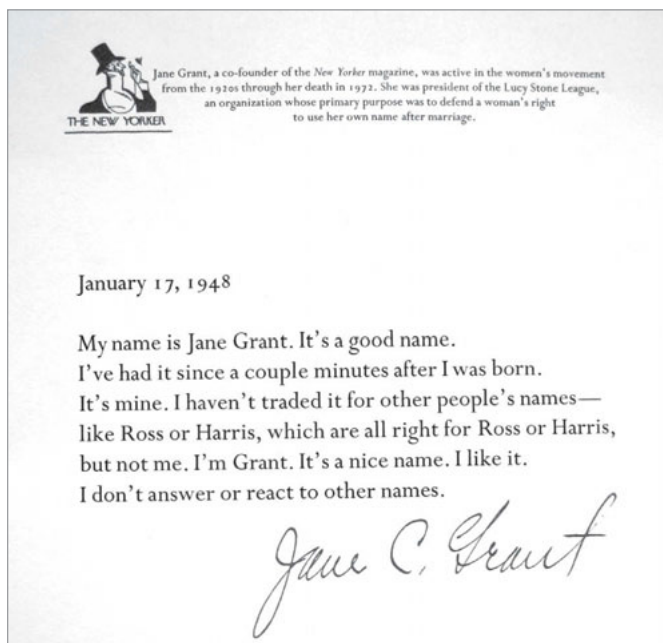
Harris joined her quest, becoming a feminist advocate in his own right. He was a member of the Connecticut group's national advisory committee and later was a member of the same committee of the Massachusetts ERA group. In 1955, he prepared a written brief countering an anti-ERA argument, which Grant then used at an American Civil Liberties Union debate to argue in favor of the ERA. And of course Harris joined the Lucy Stone League's advisory committee after Grant revived the organization in 1950.¹³

As president, Grant initially guided the league toward what she knew best—a woman's right to her own name. But times had changed, and new members were more troubled by widespread sex discrimination in postwar America. In 1951, members approved changing the organization's scope to include "activities to safeguard and extend all civil, legal, social and political rights of women" and to serve as "a center for research and for information on the status of women."¹⁴

In the 1950s, Lucy Stoners made a practical difference by establishing small libraries honoring women's contributions to society and by funding scholarships for women studying in male-dominated fields. Grant also took to heart the League's new function as a research center. She wrote to countless authors and organizations to gather data and studies, drawing on this information in her many speeches and letters protesting sex discrimination. Her work helped the League become known as a useful feminist resource, and she was asked to consult with the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor in 1961 and the President's Commission on the Status of Women in 1962.¹⁵

While Grant saw many of the requests for information the League received and personally collected much of the material it distributed, she also realized more research was needed if the problems of women were to be addressed. In 1964, Grant and League vice president Doris Stevens established the Harvard-Radcliffe Fund for the Study of Women to finance and promote "research and instruction in the problems of women in present and past societies anywhere."¹⁶

Harris and Grant plunged into raising money for the fund, eventually collecting about \$35,000 at a time when women's studies was not yet an academic discipline. In addition, Grant assigned to the fund all the income from publishing her memoir *Ross, "The New Yorker" and Me*. The couple also planned to will their estates as an endowment for a chair for the study of women.





Acknowledging founders and friends: librarian Ed Kemp; then CSWS director Sandra Morgen; president emeritus Robert Clark; and professors emeriti Marilyn Farwell, Joan Acker, and Don Van Houten / circa 1997.

But Harvard “dragged its feet” on the fund and objected to their independent fundraising. Harris said later, so in the early 1970s, “we finished up with that institution.”¹⁷

THE LEGACY

Grant’s death in 1972 left Harris to decide what would become of her papers and their unfinished dream to fund the study of women. He found a solution to both in a letter from Ed Kemp, the acquisitions librarian for what was then called the University of Oregon Library Special Collections Department.

As a man who valued women’s accomplishments, Kemp had long been searching out the papers of women whom larger institutions had overlooked. After seeing Grant’s obituary in the *Times*, a little research told him that she was special. A year later when his travel schedule permitted, Kemp sent Harris a letter asking to see Grant’s papers. Harris agreed to a visit but had more on his mind, mentioning in his letter the couple’s attempt “to get some of the Eastern universities interested in a chair for the study of women.”¹⁸

In November 1974, Kemp met Harris in New York, looked over Grant’s papers, and gladly told him that they were valuable. Harris then asked if the University of Oregon had a women’s studies program, to which Kemp replied that it had just started a very small one. Harris said he would donate the papers, but as the two men continued talking over a long lunch, Kemp gradually realized that Harris also expected him to ask for the funds originally earmarked for Harvard, perhaps for Oregon’s women’s studies program. Stunned at the opportunity but knowing nothing of fundraising, Kemp returned to Eugene and went straight to president Robert D. Clark. “He jumped,” Kemp said later. “There was no persuasion needed.”¹⁹

Conditions at Oregon were ripe for the fund Harris wanted to establish. In 1970, an interdisciplinary research group reported that women were woefully underrepresented among faculty tenure-track and staff positions. A year later, students organized the University Feminists (later becoming the ASUO Women’s Center) to fight for women’s services and the institutionalization of women’s studies on campus. Meanwhile, the research group had established a small center to encourage research on women across disciplines. By 1973, Center for the Sociological Study of Women (CSSW) had received a three-year funding commitment from the university, and the State Board of Higher Education had approved the formation of a women’s studies program, the first of its kind in Oregon.

As a dean in the 1950s, Clark had tried and failed to create a program addressing women’s issues at Oregon. But the 1970s were different. “Because of the courage and foresight of feminists and their supporters,” he wrote to Harris, “we have a new perception of the role of women in our society.”²⁰

Harris’s past dealings with Eastern universities made him wary, but his talks and letters with Clark and Kemp, as well as a visit with CSSW faculty affiliates in Eugene, convinced him that Grant’s wishes would be fulfilled at Oregon. In May 1975, Clark received a letter from Harris’s attorney announcing a new will had been prepared in which “Mr. Harris intends to bequeath a very substantial portion of his estate to the ‘University of Oregon Fund for the Study of Women.’”²¹

Harris died in 1981, and CSSW worked to develop a women’s research center with a vision befitting the legacy of Jane Grant and the Lucy Stone League. After two years of planning, the renamed Center for the Study of Women in Society (CSWS) launched an expanded program of generating, supporting, and disseminating research on women through faculty and student grants, conferences and visiting scholar support, institutional collaborations, publications, the Jane Grant Dissertation Fellowship, and more.

While women have been leaders in feminist research and activism, it remains important also to remember the advocacy of men such as Harris, Kemp, and Clark. For love of a feminist, CSWS became possible. Its mission continues today through women and men who love equality for all. ■

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Jenée Wilde

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Memorandum to John Mosely, Dec. 4, 1984, box 4, folder “UO Foundation (1984-85),” Center for the Study of Women in Society, UA 106, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries.
- 2 Jane Grant, “Confession of a Feminist,” *American Mercury*, Dec. 1943, 685.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Susan Henry, “We Must Not Forget That We Are Dealing with a Woman’: Jane Grant’s Return to a Magazine and a Cause,” *Journalism History* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2007).
- 5 Grant, “Confession of a Feminist,” 687.
- 6 Henry, “We Must Not Forget That We Are Dealing with a Woman’: Jane Grant’s Return to a Magazine and a Cause,” 151.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 152.
- 8 William Harris to Jane Grant, Sept. 6, 1935, box 1, folder 8, Jane C. Grant papers, Coll 041, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries.
- 9 Susan Henry, *Anonymous in Their Own Names: Doris E. Fleischman, Ruth Hale, and Jane Grant* (Nashville, Tenn: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 2012), 194.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Grant, “Confession of a Feminist,” 688.
- 12 Henry, *Anonymous in Their Own Names*, 207.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*, 205.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 206.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 214.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 215.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 227.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*, 228.