



Virginia Hanson with doll Poor Pitiful Pearl used in storytelling. Photographs courtesy of author.

Warmth, Friendship, and Scholarship: The Life and Times of Virginia Hanson

BY KENNETH W. GODFREY

Dr. Godfrey, a former president of the Mormon History Association, is director of the Logan Institute of Religion.

SHE FAVORED FREEDOM OF SPEECH UP TO a maximum of ten minutes. Having been a schoolteacher, she thought people who wrote on walls beneath contempt in spite of the fact that Biblical study reveals that once some fairly important handwriting was found on the side of a building. A gourmet of note, she preferred dining on canned salmon and Mormon tea. Believing her life blighted because of an inability to understand transitive and intransitive verbs, crocheting, and square roots, she assumed a spartan indifference for adornment, going about with plain edges on her underwear. Highlights in her life included passing algebra, being a Dodger guest at Ebbets Field, and riding in a caboose from Cache Junction to Logan. Sympathizing with those who had wayward loved ones, she bled for mates of stingy spouses. She believed the most interesting faces were those of Gregory Peck, Jimmy Durante, Katharine Hepburn, Grace Kelly, David O. McKay, Hoagie Carmichael, John C. Carlisle, and Jawaharlal Nehru. Though an avid Democrat, she resolved to eat eggs when the Republican secretary of agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson, requested she do so—but only for a month. Her name was Virginia Hanson, and she served as Cache County librarian for almost thirty years. Moreover, she was the Cornish cultural catalyst and extolled the community's virtues while naming her homestead "Dreary Acres." She always wrung out washcloths and hung them up neatly. If her own words can be believed, she never told off-color stories.

Unique, one of a kind, a character, a breaker of the mold were words used to describe her. She knew everyone and everyone knew her, or so it seemed, and almost everything about her was different. Convalescing from an appendectomy in a Logan hospital, she began her diary keeping with the sentence, "If what we're doing when the New Year begins is indicative of a year's activities, I shall lie in a hospital bed and read murder mysteries all of 1933." Her second entry again reveals an extraordinary sense of humor, "Scalloped cabbage for dinner, my idea of the world's champion nausea promoter. I turned to avert my gaze and concentrate on the beauty of nature."¹

Born laughing, she came comfortably into this world possessing a love for movies, plays, baseball, wrestling, writing, bridge, books, people, and travel. The fourth child of William Otto Hanson and Hilma

¹ Virginia Hanson Diaries, 1933–78, January 1 and 2, 1933, Special Collections, Utah State University Library, Logan. Except as noted otherwise, information regarding Hanson comes from her diaries.



Byron, Mae, and Virginia Hanson.

Fredrika Anderson, Virginia was born February 19, 1907, in Logan, Utah. She had an older sister, Helvie, two older brothers, Carl and Byron, and two younger sisters, Mae and Inis. Carl, Virginia, and Mae never married, residing most of their lives on the family farm in Cornish, a small Utah town near the Idaho border. Virginia was seven years old when the Hansons moved there. After attending elementary school in her home town she went to Logan and residing with an aunt, her mother's sister, enrolled and subsequently graduated from Brigham Young Academy. Registering at Utah State Agricultural College (USAC, now Utah State University), she in one year received a certificate and began a career as a public schoolteacher.

Her summer vacations were often spent traveling. Upon receiving her 1933 hospital bill which totaled \$188, she thought of how far she could have "gone on the railroad with that amount." Before her life came to a tragic end in an accident at age seventy-one she had traversed most of the United States and a huge chunk of the world as well. College educated, a schoolteacher, librarian, lover of books, she could never satisfy her affection for learning and languages, taking classes right up to the time of her death.

This biographical essay will focus on the life of this remarkable woman and the contributions she made to Utah's northernmost

county. Her life story illuminates how people lived during the Great Depression, through a world war, and on to an age of space travel. She brought, moreover, culture and a degree of sophistication to a small rural, largely Mormon, community just "1453 steps from the Idaho border," and influenced in significant ways life in Utah's Cache Valley. Endowed with a remarkable sense of humor, often used to escape boredom, she frequently turned it upon herself. Packed and ready to leave after her hospital stay, she wrote that "the doctor insists on having a farewell glance at his embroidery. So I went back to bed and disrobed again. Where is my maidenly modesty? I am so used to lying unclad that I shall be ready to display my operation to the casual passerby." Suffering from a headache on New Year's Day, she noted, "It's tough to have a hangover with no pleasurable provocation." When Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wed in the spring of 1974 she crisply wrote, "Kissinger wedding, but I wasn't invited." Remembering her performances on the Cornish stage, she told a *Cache Citizen* reporter that she usually played the part of "the half-witted sister or the hired girl."² Because her plans for retirement as county librarian had been public knowledge for such a long time, she declared that she "felt like a guest who bids farewell, promises to write, and finds her car won't start."³ After reading the report of the death of Calvin Coolidge she wrote, "Calvin Coolidge died and the nation was stunned, so said the paper. It was an exaggerated report, I wasn't."

Her finest wit may have been reserved for her diary. Having been in the hospital for a week, she wrote on January 6, "I read '*All's Well That Ends Well*,' before the nurse appeared with the inevitable wash basin. I get tired of this endless washing. When I get home, I won't touch water for two years, maybe." When three youths suppered at her table, she wrote "Victor's respiration is a marvel. He can be heard for miles. I wonder how much he can eat. Apparently his capacity has never been reached." A neighbor visited Dreary Acres bearing "an atrocity she call[ed] a cushion" and promised to make one for Virginia and her sister, Mae. "I appreciate her good intentions," Virginia wrote, "but not her handiwork." "So I'll grin and say thanks and she will never know how hypocritical and ungrateful I am." Following another neighbor's visit, she noted, "Phebe Goodwin came to tell us how

² *Cache Citizen*, July 7, 1973.

³ *Ibid.*

dumb we are and how smart she is." Another short diary entry reads, "I am writing in the bathroom to escape Noah Potter." At Sunday School one December day she counted 500 coughs and then quit; and when Dan Buttars passed away she wrote, "Dan Buttars died. Income tax worries over." On another occasion she recalled, "Grandmother Anderson would be 110 today, good thing she's dead."

She displayed her humor again when the family purchased an Essex automobile and promptly denominated it Margorilla. For diary purposes she treated the car as if it were a living thing: "Last year Margorilla killed the dog. This morning she got a pheasant." A second auto was christened Arabella, and when it was sold she wrote, "Decided to sacrifice Arabella." When she took still another car in for repairs, she penned this entry, "Took the car to Denny to be cured of smoking."

Virginia's dislike, as a single woman, for Mother's Day bordered on contempt. At age thirty-five, having barely tolerated another Sunday devoted to the praise of maternity, she wrote, "Mother's Day and the inevitable nausea at Sunday School."

Possessed of a fine sense of humor, she was not merely a humorist but a sophisticated woman with eclectic and highly idiosyncratic likes and dislikes. She enjoyed opera, Broadway plays, movies, classical literature, detective stories, popular fiction, biography, gossip, whooping cough parties for fifth grade girls, card playing, children's games, poker and fan-tan clubs, evaluating sex in Mother Goose books, baseball, basketball, hockey, wrestling, football, collecting postmarks and newspapers, to mention only a few of the activities that engaged her.

She had that rare ability praised by Kipling of being able to talk with kings without losing the common touch and to walk with crowds while maintaining her virtue.

She could speak with savants, note the hatching of a robin, or converse kindly with the "bum" who sometimes requested food at the Hanson door. Children were as at home in her presence as the intellectual elite who dined at Dreary Acres and rowed boats on the man-made lake adjacent to her home.

Not totally immune to displeasure, she disliked teaching teenage girls, coughing in church, annual reports, clutching "nit wits from Richmond," missing championship baseball games, Dennis Jackson ruining her new Sunday School class, bad colds, "Al Jolson suffering to music," long talks, twenty-four-hour fasts, and strange Portland,

Oregon, men in bed with her and Mae.⁴ Long winter evenings with no company aroused her wrath and generated boredom, causing her to write, "This family is going nuts. Mom reads cowboy stories, Dad designs quilts, and the boys do puzzles. Drifts coming and a lot of heavy snow." Dismally dull Bible classes were high on her list of things to be avoided, as were homesickness and dining alone. In fact, Virginia was twenty-nine years old when she wrote, "Our family had a meal together for the first time in history with no others." Though she often hitchhiked, she disliked "riding with cave men."

Virginia filled her life with people, causes, conversation, games, and, like the Apostle Paul, doing good to all men. She shared that life and enriched the small valley and the smaller community she called home.

Juanita Brooks, a historian whom Virginia knew well—though they resided at opposite ends of the state—was described by Levi Peterson as "belonging to both the folk and the intelligentsia, associating with equal sincerity with villagers and university professors."⁵ Like Brooks, Virginia loved books, ideas, and discussions. The study of Swedish, Greek, French, Latin, Portuguese, Spanish, and German also attracted her agile mind. These languages were not learned entirely for their own sake but rather so she could help foreign students who attended Utah State University. It was Virginia, not the college, that first organized English classes for these young foreign scholars, enabling them to pass their courses successfully. Not only did they learn English from her, they also visited the Hanson farm, dined at her table, signed the autograph book, and, after returning to their native country, received for years newsy, witty letters that flowed from her pen by the dozens. Sometimes she visited their homes on her travels, as lifelong friendships were forged in the furnace of her love. Over the years hundreds of students from India, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Israel, and Germany, to name only a few countries, walked the sandy paths surrounding the Hanson home and learned that not all Americans were self-serving, autocratic, overbearing, and confrontive. In Virginia they found a friend who cared about people on their own terms and according to their own rules, not hers.

⁴ Hanson Diaries, October 23, 1943. This must have been a mistake because Mae screamed and jumped from the bed. That is all Virginia wrote about the matter in her diary.

⁵ Levi S. Peterson, *Juanita Brooks, Mormon Woman Historian* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), p. 6.

As early as 1951, in her forty-fourth year, she began proofreading theses written by foreign students, correcting their English and providing helpful insights and encouragement for these often frustrated, timid authors. Many students would not have achieved advanced degrees without her help. She and her sister, Mae, chaperoned these scholars on excursions to Saltair and Brigham City, marveling at the diversity of what they called the "Latin American Delegation." With some students from Turkey, she dined them, danced with them, and sang their folk songs far into a spring night. She was a one-woman embassy who won foreign friends and influenced for good hundreds of the world's future leaders. Still, when she learned of a tribute to her aired over the local radio station, she wrote, "Embarrassment is almost too much."

At least once each week she walked to Sunshine Terrace, Logan's home for seniors, and read to those with mental and physical handicaps. That she kept track of how many times she made the trek to Second West and Third North perhaps discloses that she expected some reward for her efforts. The final count, just before her death, approximated one thousand and represented nearly three full years of her life. Still, she found time to record, as well, the number of pelicans she saw on her way home from work and her attendance at karate demonstrations.

While Virginia may have been born laughing, she must, soon after birth, have grasped her first book. A founding member of the Northern Utah Literary Club, she was as at home with books as she was with humor, foreign students and friends. She became the guild's president at age twenty-seven. At least once each month the women of the club met, heard books reviewed, then lunched together. The books they discussed included Will Durrant's *On the Meaning of Life*, Rudolph Bessie's *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, Elizabeth Roberts's *The Great Meadow*, William Bennett's *Riptide*, and Paul Hogan's *The Fault of Angels*. Her diary reflects attendance at, and participation in, this club for more than three decades.

Not only did Virginia Hanson hear books reviewed monthly, she also read hundreds of volumes in the privacy of her domicile. She consumed everything Willa Cather authored, beginning as early as 1933 when she finished *My Antonia*. A fan of detective stories and murder mysteries, she also read the Communist Emma Goldman's *My Life*, Hasty Carroll's *The Earth Turns*, many novels by Dostoyevsky and



Virginia Hanson called the family home in Cornish Dreary Acres.

Tolstoy, the *Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Virginia's diary is peppered with notations of the good books she read, but books were not the only things she perused. Alone on one October evening, she devoured *Sunset Magazine*, *Hoard's Dairyman*, and the *Reader's Digest*. She sometimes read the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, the *New Yorker*, and the *New York Review of Books*. As she grew older *Life*, *Look*, *Time*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* became a part of her literary diet perused each week. Thus, her reading habits were as diverse and eclectic as her other interests.

In December 1969 Virginia was elected president of the Cache Valley Historical Society. While serving in this office her friendship with the state's leading historians bore fruit. Each month the society met, listened to speakers, adopted resolutions, passed measures that saved historical buildings from being razed and preserved artifacts, and discussed matters of historical import. Such luminaries as Leonard J. Arrington, Gustive O. Larson, Juanita Brooks, S. George Ellsworth, Stanford Cazier, Jan Shipps, and Glen M. Leonard graced the society's lecture halls.

Her interest in the past, tempered with a healthy regard for the present, seemed ubiquitous. One day, in her sixty-eighth year, she

spent her time cleaning "the attic closet." "Lots of interesting stuff," she wrote. "No one who can read should ever try to clean the attic." Late in life she transformed Dreary Acres into a museum that was visited by common folk, the intelligentsia, and not a few power brokers. She and a quartet of friends even made "a Dreary Acres historical trail." When Salt Laker Florence Griffin traveled to the Hanson homestead, Virginia lunched with her and some other friends in the park and then "had a museum experience" with them and some local people. In the family museum she displayed, among other things, more than eleven hundred postmarks and two hundred and one newspapers she had gathered from all over the world. Her historical activities also included collecting the names of all of Lewiston's schoolteachers, writing a history of the Cornish post office, and encouraging A. J. Simmonds to author a history of Cornish. Moreover, she served on the Cache County Bicentennial Commission and at the Logan Library rendered constant aid to researchers. Cache Valley's history would be less well known had Virginia not lived.

In November 1951 she received a 94 on her French examination and was elected president of her university drama group. She found time, too, to help a timid farmer prepare a talk on "pins" that he delivered to a junior high school audience. An excellent speaker, Virginia was often invited to address university, community, and church groups. According to her diary, the Delta Kappa fraternity heard her talk "People Are Fun" in 1956; five years earlier she had given a "two and a half minute sermon in a minute and a half."

Though she was college educated, having received her diploma in 1940, she attempted to work Ouija boards and played "Run, Sheepy, Run" long after she reached maturity. Her diaries, kept during 1933–78, disclose other unique aspects of her personality. Writing in October 1947, she declared, "My head is queer. Agreed by all." She saw *Charlotte's Web* with forty million kids and only twenty parents on a Saturday afternoon in April. In 1953 a diary entry reads, "Saw the Blue Veil, didn't sob." She was subject to laughing spells while eating ice cream. She listened to communists speak in Pittsburgh, after which she spent the night sleeping on the ground in a Lutheran cemetery. On one occasion while teaching school, she smiled upon learning that some of her students had, during recess, "milked a dead cow and drunk some of the milk." Though a faithful, practicing Mormon, she sometimes drank tea and coffee, and on occasion tasted

beer, which she found disgusting. Often the valley's movie houses found her watching the picture show on Sunday evenings, an activity frowned upon by church leaders, and it was not against *her* religion to miss meetings in order to play cards or visit with friends or entertain authors. She also enjoyed "moonlight weinie roasts," making "candy at midnight," and hitchhiking to Logan, the county seat. Suffering from a dreadful cold, she wrote, "I am like an adolescent boy, never knowing what sound I'll emit when I try to speak." A number of years later she penned, "The dam broke . . . ,

power off and the calf died." Still another short diary entry reveals the unique way she viewed life: "Horrible winds . . . one of our ducks was lifted to the top of the shed and dropped." Thus, her life displayed an incongruity and complexity that was hardly ordinary. She seemed to find a degree of joy in doing things others thought unusual. She had the rare ability to make the ordinary extraordinary, the usual unusual, and to find uniqueness in those things some thought quite common.

Politically active throughout her life, Virginia worked on behalf of state and national Democrats and met many of the party's most illustrious candidates. In 1934 she served as the party's community vice chairman. She lost a bet when Eisenhower secured the Republican presidential nomination on the first ballot. After paying off her wager she campaigned for Adlai Stevenson in a losing effort. Since she lived in an area that was heavily Republican, the candidates she favored lost more elections than they won. Her diary reveals, though, that she voted for Republicans from time to time, including J. Bracken Lee.

While still in her twenties Virginia began a decade-long teaching career. There is ample diary evidence that instructing young people, though enjoyable, brought with it a lot of tension. Publicly expressing



Virginia Hanson in her late teens or early twenties.

a love of teaching, she privately wrote of the stress that accompanied life in the classroom. Early in her teaching career she wrote, "I don't like the first [grade] at all. I am mad." And two Fridays in succession she wrote, "Blessed day, I love thee." "School out. Hooray." In a 1939 entry she wrote, "Mae and I are counting the days. Only 168 left." She expressed gratitude when the Beehive girls she taught at church failed to attend Mutual. After what must have been an exceptionally difficult day in the classroom she penned, "I certainly had a hell of a day." When school was dismissed each fall for a two-week "Beet Vacation" (to harvest sugar beets), Virginia would again write, "School out. Hooray." The stress that teaching caused is evidenced by the fact that shortly after commencing her work in the classroom she began to suffer occasionally from colitis. One October she wrote, "Have colitis to celebrate last year's attack." These attacks decreased substantially after she became a librarian.

Though teaching may not have been entirely pleasant for her and may also have significantly added to the tension in her life, she was nonetheless an extraordinary instructor, as the writer can personally attest. She was witty, interesting, always prepared, and demanding. She maintained discipline and order in her classroom, even after she had "mutilated her face" in a sleigh riding accident and went to school the next day looking "like Scar Face and Frankenstein"—evidenced by the fact that the children only laughed respectfully. She sometimes referred to her students in the Heber Elementary School as "Little Hellions" and was somewhat relieved in 1939 when her administrator suggested she become a librarian.

Virginia's love of books, her affection for people, and her helpful attitude all contributed to her success as Cache County's librarian. Books made her comfortable, and she enjoyed sharing her love for the printed page with those who entered the doors of the building that became her second home. Having never married, however, she returned home to Cornish almost every Sunday and after the roads were paved moved back to Dreary Acres, commuting to her work in Logan for the remainder of her career. She began working in the library on August 1, 1941, and within four days had "all the fiction straightened." Within two weeks the biographies were alphabetically arranged. After three years as assistant librarian she replaced Dora Wright as librarian, a position she held for almost three decades.

As librarian she organized a lecture series emphasizing the hu-

manities and arts. University professors were invited to discourse to appreciative audiences. USAC liberal arts dean Carlton Culmsee spoke on "Utah Arts at Mid-Century;" George S. Eccles, an Ogden banker, led a discussion on the world's financial status; Dr. N. W. Christiansen directed a string quartet; and Professor Don W. Pittman reviewed a book on Mao Tse-tung.⁶ In 1953 large audiences heard history professor Joel E. Ricks review the William O. Douglas book *Beyond the High Himalayas* and economist Leonard J. Arrington discuss the United Order. Music professor Walter Welti came to the library with members of his opera cast and previewed *Romeo and Juliet*. Virginia organized an art appreciation class for library patrons and was deeply disappointed one evening when only one person attended. In the winter of 1939 she was instrumental in securing novelist Vardis Fisher as the speaker in the Cornish Ward sacrament meeting, perhaps the only Mormon service he ever addressed. Thus she sought to lift the quality of life and increase a rural citizenry's appreciation for things of the mind and heart.

As a member of the Utah Library Association she attended their conventions, participated on panels, and met many intellectuals, including author Rodello Hunter, historian Juanita Brooks, and Newberry Award winner Virginia Sorensen, all three of whom later visited the Hanson domicile and were introduced to Cornish citizens. Some of the town's young people still remember those visits as highlights in their lives. Virginia Hanson reviewed books for the *Utah Humanities Review* and the Utah Library Association bulletin, and she wrote a highly acclaimed article chronicling her experiences teaching school in Hiawatha, Utah.⁷ She prepared the history of the Cornish post office and had several articles published in the *Herald Journal* and the *Cache Valley Citizen*. Cache County's radio station KVNU frequently interviewed her regarding books and authors.

As the county librarian she often addressed public gatherings. Her wit, charm, and unique way of looking at things enthralled her listeners. Speaking before the American Association of University Women's chapter at Utah State University she observed that hers was the best talk "because it was only three minutes and twenty seconds long."

⁶ Cache County Library Minutes, Logan Library Archives.

⁷ Virginia Hanson, "I Remember Hiawatha," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 40 (1972): 265-74.



Cache County Library in Logan.

Although she wished at times that more of her friends, neighbors, and fellow Mormons had a greater interest in matters of the mind, yet she displayed intellectual incongruities of her own. She could stay home from Sunday School to avoid teaching class, attend evening wrestling matches, watch boxing on TV, and skip the Utah State University opera to watch Groucho Marx. One evening she wrote, "There was no dire need for us to go abroad into the world, so I wrote a bit, read a bit, watched a bit of television and wasn't very useful."

She accompanied foreign students to lectures on Van Gogh and attended a program on Toulouse-Lautrec. When asked to serve as vice-president of the American Association of University Women she refused. She played hearts to see "who would get supper" and listened to the Mormon church's general conference and the World Series simultaneously. Like Leibnitz, she embraced life fully, feeling at home in the world of ideas surrounded by college professors, artists, poets and writers, yet equally domesticated among those who played cards, drank beer, booed umpires, and shouted foul language at villainous grapplers. She found solace in walking the sandy soil of Dreary Acres, watching a sunset, and remembering the land. She was, it appears, a woman for all seasons.

Over the years, on the pages of a small black book, Virginia composed some rules for library employees. They reflect her administrative style and provide insights into her personality. Many are common-

sense admonitions—such as keep busy, avoid unnecessary talking, and become familiar with the library holdings. Others display her wit and wisdom: “Write down your promises; they are easier to remember. We are here to help people. This library belongs to the public. Be pleasant if it kills you. And sometimes you think it will.” Finally, she penned a sort of litmus test of a person’s aptitude for library work: “If all this seems to be complicated and backbreaking, if you hate to put away books and magazines, if foolish questions bother, then it is best to look elsewhere for a job. We don’t all like the same kind of work, and if you’ve given this a trial and it seems deadly, dull and monotonous, don’t waste your time in a library.”

Though she enjoyed being Cache County’s librarian, she too found the public exasperating on those occasions when a telephone caller inquired, “Have you got any good books?” Books, she sometimes thought, were all she did have, a multitude of which could be classified as good. One day a lady called asking the elevation of Beaver, Utah. Virginia replied immediately with the correct information, flabbergasting the caller with her erudition. Hanging up, she verified the accuracy of her answer. Then laughing, she told her employees that Beaver was the only community in the state whose elevation she knew. When the book *Fascinating Womanhood*—a work that suggested the use of feminine wiles to manipulate men—appeared in the mail, Virginia asked staff members whether it should be catalogued under hunting, fishing, or trapping. At least once a year Virginia read her favorite children’s story, “Stone Doll of Sister Brute,” to the valley’s children, using a doll she had made from a rock as a visual aid.

Like all of us she was bored at times, but the variety of her activities, the extent of her community service, and the company she kept seldom allowed her to be bored for long. For example, for the duration of World War II she authored a monthly newsletter that kept the community’s servicemen abreast of Cache Valley news and the soldiering activities of one another. She also wrote as many as fifteen missives a night to former Cornish citizens, foreign students, and friends all over the world. Her letters, if collected, would run into the thousands.

For a number of years Newell Hart published a mimeographed newsletter called the *Cache Valley Newsletter* in Preston, Idaho. Virginia, a subscriber, read an article in the October 1977 issue that prompted her to write to Hart. Her interest was aroused by “History of Preston’s ‘Golden Hour Club.’” Organized in 1913 the club stood for “Good people and Good times.” The members met monthly, sponsored par-

ties and commercial dances, reviewed books, and spent long winter afternoons playing cards.⁸ The article included a letter of resignation “for various reasons,” dated October 9, 1920, from Amy Houck.⁹ Virginia wrote,

Could you discover the reason for Mrs. Houck’s terse letter of resignation? There should be a good story behind that. Maybe it was because she was assigned Ella Wheeler Wilcox for her literary assignment.

One must give Ella credit for her poems. They have supplied inspiration for countless sermons. However, when she did a novel in verse she went too far. Have you ever read *Maurine*? This is the ultimate in sentimentality, an antidote for the realism of today. In this story of emotions, always rapture or despair, the characters don’t have to labor. The chaste and faithful *Maurine* entertains guests in the arbor, where it’s always at least 79 degrees F. Tea is served at any hour by invisible hands. Vivian Dangerfield, in his Sunday suit and hair parted in the middle, drops in to discuss philosophy or painting or music. Sweet Helen complicated the plot. I hope you can read this; it will make your day!¹⁰

This letter reveals Virginia as a literary critic and illuminates her knowledge of American literature. It also displays her clever way of getting to the heart of a matter.

Earlier Virginia had written to Hart regarding his book on Cache Valley’s dance halls. In that missive she was not only clever but also revealed some history of her home town.

Many of our patrons have enjoyed the book on Cache Valley dance halls. My oldest brother was one of the *Persiana* faithfuls, although he did not find his spouse in Preston. Most of the hometown (Cornish) boys met their wives up there. I suppose that the ward at home seemed like one big happy family, and there’d be something almost incestuous about a wedding in the neighborhood. On the other hand some of the mothers were a bit anxious about marriage with foreigners from over the state line. Here was a suggestion of slight miscegenation! Have you thought of doing research on the probability of successful marriages contracted by partners who met at public dances, with little else in common except a facility for a peppy fox trot? I hope your proposed project is a tremendous success. Virginia Hanson.¹¹

It is indeed unfortunate that more of her letters seem not to have survived.

⁸ *Cache Valley Newsletter*, No. 108, October 1977, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁰ Virginia Hansen to Newell Hart, fall 1977, original in Special Collections, USU Library.

¹¹ *Cache Valley Newsletter*, No. 2, December 1968, pp 4–5.



Birthday guests Susan Sanada, Sadie Sorensen, and Mae Hanson surround Virginia Hanson.

For relaxation Virginia enjoyed movies and the theater. Seldom did more than a few days pass without finding her in one of Utah's movie houses watching a Hollywood production. During the depression year 1933 she listed thirty-seven movies she had seen, including *State Fair*, *The Warrior's Husband*, *The Kid from Spain*, *College Humor*, and *Tugboat Annie*. In all, she recorded more than twelve hundred movie titles in her diary. She attended high school operettas, too, sometimes describing them as "lousy" and traveled in heavy snow to Salt Lake City to see stage shows. She also crashed the Cache LDS Stake high priests party to witness Logan's own Broadway actress, Leora Thatcher, in *Joint Owners in Spain* and *Little Darling*.

Virginia authored a radio script and a play titled *Touch of Destiny*, saw the premiere of the movie *Brigham Young*, and sent a mimeographed newspaper called the *Tribune of Trivia* to local citizens and friends around the world. Still, she found time to watch the robins hatch one spring day in 1938 and to count the steps from the library to her Logan home—they numbered 1,264.

Filling any spare time she might have had, Virginia studied world religions with Dr. Heber Snell, the Bible as literature, and philosophy; and she wrote papers on Joseph Smith and studied German history

under the tutelage of a Dr. Whipple. She also became a member of the Cosmo Club. This group heard lectures on Japanese theater by Dr. King Hendricks and a talk by Dr. George Ellsworth on the Latter-day Saint religion. She frequently attended lectures sponsored by the college where she heard such luminaries as historian Henry Steele Commager and philosopher-historian Will Durrant (twice). She also saw an exhibit of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Virginia deliberated all one evening whether to name her pig "Gladys, Jonathan, or Obesity." For what she called "Relief Entertainment," she played "Marjory, alias Lady Valona" in the stage production *Be a Little Cuckoo*. For more than twenty years she was the official scorekeeper for the Cornish baseball team her brother managed, and she listened to the World Series every fall, dutifully entering the score of each game in her diary. There seems to have been hardly anything in life that did not captivate her interest, even "Frozen Charlotte" dolls,¹² one of which she named Poor Pitiful Pearl.

Upon her retirement as Cache County librarian in 1973 about one hundred friends and admirers gathered in Logan's Blue Bird Cafe. A surprised Virginia listened as the library board chairman read a tribute from the board of trustees that stated in part:

Thank you for your years of service to our community. Thank you for your gracious manner, your quiet nature. Thank you for the friendships you have made for the library, and for the several decades of Cache residents you have introduced to good books. Thank you for your patience with reticent library boards, your tact in dealing with commissioners, your skill in fixing leaking pipes, cranky furnaces, dangling banisters, not to mention over-due books, insufficient budgets [and] poor shelf space. But mostly, thank you for being yourself and making our library a place of warmth, friendship and scholarship.¹³

Warmth, friendship, scholarship, three words that pleased the woman who loved Cache Valley as have few others.¹⁴

¹² *Logan Herald Journal*, January 25, 1973.

¹³ *Logan Herald Journal*, July 6, 1973.

¹⁴ Virginia Hanson's friendship was an important part of my life. Not only did she tutor me in grammar school; she remained significant in my life in other ways, such as encouraging me to acquire a college education and go on to graduate school. When I returned to Cornish for visits she made an effort to engage me in conversation. I learned that she had read all of the articles I had authored and was aware of contemporary intellectual currents in the Latter-day Saint church, which she often asked about and commented on. When I gave Brigham Young University Education Week lectures she was often in the audience looking appreciative and somewhat proud, as if one of her own had done something worth noting. Her interest in my activities spurred me on because I knew at least one person who appreciated the mind and intellectual pursuits. She seemed to value my own love of books and my friendships with many authors. I am certain that she treated all the former residents of Cornish with the same care, the same understanding, and the same love as she did me. We all believed that she believed we were special. But really she was the unique one, the extraordinary one, the one we looked up to and admired.

Only five years after her retirement, on a foggy January morning, Virginia and Mae Hanson left Dreary Acres to attend a meeting of the Cornish Ward Relief Society. More than fifty thousand times she had traversed the dirt road and crossed the railroad tracks before coming to the pavement of State Highway 34. As it approached ten o'clock, Virginia, who was driving, failed to observe a heavy freight train traveling nearly fifty miles per hour. Within seconds the sisters were dead and a whole valley mourned as word spread of this terrible accident.

Virginia left behind no children to bear her name, no husband to cry in the night. Yet her legacy affected a small community and a larger valley. Eulogized in a large funeral by a farmer, a college professor, and others, she was buried in Logan's cemetery in the shadow of Utah State University, and the Logan Library remained closed in her honor.

Life had ended for Virginia Hanson. Yet in many ways she lives on. Every time a book is reviewed, a language studied, a piece of art appreciated, a humorous story told, an old person read to, or a sporting event observed, the shadow of Virginia Hanson will be there too. Her life brought warmth into a sometimes cold world, friendship to those discouraged and distraught, and love of scholarship to an area often thought to be a desert of culture as well as climate. The Nobel Prize-winning Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in a short story titled "Matrona's House" wrote, "None of us who lived close to her perceived that she was that one righteous person without whom, as the saying goes, no city can stand. Neither can the whole world."¹⁵ Virginia Hanson was like that too.

¹⁵ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Stories and Prose Poems* (New York: Farrar, 1970), p. 52.