

Librarian Recalls Literary Choice of Long-Ago Reno as Institution Grew Popular

(EDITOR'S NOTE: John Hamlin, journalist and author who was instrumental in founding of the Washoe county library, reveals some of the literary tastes of Renolites at the turn of the century in today's article.)

By JOHN HAMLIN

And I didn't write any more stories for months. I became engrossed with my job. The article which appeared in The Journal met with good response. Especially among the public school teachers. Several of them were "going abroad" in the summer, were eager to read about the countries they planned to visit. Yes, they had the names of particular books they wished to read. No, they weren't in stock but I would send for them immediately. In cases like that I found the American Library Association's catalog invaluable. Our funds were in good shape, so I didn't hesitate to add volumes to fill out subject headings now woefully deficient.

It was encouraging to have the cooperation of the public. To keep it up I wrote weekly articles for both local papers. The public schools closed for the summer vacation late in June and it was about that time that the books donated by the Twentieth Century Club arrived.

I rushed through the janitor work and devoted extra hours, for several mornings, getting the books ready. There were many of the Alger books. He was still turning them off, "Finding a Fortune," his latest. They were popular, the average boy reading one after another with relish. Henty's historical and adventure stories were liked. The Rover Boys, a newcomer in juvenile circles, had a wide appeal. "Two Little Savages," by Ernest Seton Thompson, delighted the average boy. School and athletic tales by Ralph Henry Barbour met with favorable reception. George Bird Grinnell created a likeable hero in "Jack," featuring him in "Jack Among the Indians," "Jack in the Rockies," and several other adventure tales. Many of the books in that initial shipment held their popularity for years with each successive group of young readers.

"Five Little Peppers"

The girls, too, favored certain authors—Louisa May Alcott's series were greatly beloved; also "The Five Little Peppers" by Margaret Sidney. Fairy tales, Anderson's, Grimm's, and the more recent type of fantasy, "Wizard of Oz," rolled up a goodly following. Interesting, from a librarian's standpoint, to note how faithful the children were to a favorite author. If they enjoyed one of his books, they asked for others and recommended them to their companions. As a rule the boys refused to read books written for the girls, but not so with the girls when it came to a good adventure story. And such books as "Treasure Island," "Tom Sawyer," "Huck Finn" soon had to be duplicated because of a steady demand for them, by both girls and boys.

A happy coincidence, for me, the juvenile books coming at the vacation season. It gave me an opportunity to become acquainted with the young folk, advise them how to take care of the borrowed books and, to the best of my ability, direct their reading tastes. Although there was but one large main room in the library, I fitted up a special corner for the juveniles. There they could read "St. Nicholas," "American Boy," "Youth's Companion," and in lieu of present day comics, they had their own copies of "Puck," "Judge" and "Life."

Competition

Their interest in books was gratifying, also puzzling when some of the choice volumes began to disappear. After considerable detective work on my part the mystery was uncovered. Two lads conceived the idea to operate a library of their own, but not on a free basis. To borrow a book from this underground cache, charges were made, ranging from sacks, bottles, a rabbit, a pigeon to anything else which could be converted into cash. A peculiar slant to their defense. Was it stealing to take books from a free library? I convinced them that doing it in their way was. They admitted that they were needing money to buy bicycles on which to deliver papers. The cause, if not the method, seemed not too bad. We struck a bargain—they were to return all the books and I would find them jobs mowing lawns throughout the vacation. I didn't report them to their parents. The boys did that, resulting in the mothers calling on me. They appreciated my tactics and I gathered from their remarks that they believed a librarian should be the "custodian of the public morals."

By degrees I widened the scope of the juvenile department, consulting the American Library Association's catalog frequently. Mythology, legends, fairy tales were added. Volumes on nature

and science, physics and electricity—each subject heading attracting the active minds of the young folk. Animal life, described by such authors as Charles G. D. Roberts, John Burroughs and the Champlin's Cyclopaedia of Natural History, aroused much interest. Stories of inventions, engineering and mechanical trades had their adherents.

The "Vassar Girl"

In line with that "custodian of the public morals" issue, I find a note in my diary, the facts of which created somewhat of a sensation when they leaked out. An attractive young woman came to the desk one afternoon and inquired if she could obtain a membership card. I handed her an application blank, explaining that it must be signed by a property owner. The next day she returned, with the signature of a woman widely known in the community as the "Madame" of a notorious parlor house.

My surprise was not too well concealed, for the applicant quietly declared: "She pays taxes on that property."

I nodded and slid the card across the desk: "Write your name and address on this side," I said.

She did so, the address the same as that of her sponsor.

"Could I take out books now?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "I will write out your card while you look through the stacks."

Soon she brought to the desk "Lady Rose's Daughter," by Mrs. Humphry Ward, and a volume of Tennyson's poems. She became a regular patron, always taking out a novel and a book of verse. One afternoon two young blades of the town, browsing among the shelves, chanced to see her. After she had gone, they came to the desk, grinning wisely.

"Know who she is?" one of them asked.

"Must be a divorcee," I said, with discretion.

"Not that one," I was advised. "She's the classy new girl working at Madame 'So-and-So's'. And can she spout poetry! Knows Browning, Keats and Kipling by heart. That's why we call her the 'Vassar Girl'."

Six months later a divorce was granted to this same party. The dates on her library card were sufficient proof to establish her residence. After that she borrowed no more books.

Bookishly occupied as I was during those first few months of my library career I didn't ignore Reno's more dynamic matters. The mining camps of Tonopah and Goldfield were producing richly. Stocks were soaring, speculating rife in everything listed on the boards, from the bonanzas to "wild cat" claims. Money was plentiful, real estate in demand. A new courthouse was soon to be built, also a postoffice. The local papers were printing bigger editions. In my diary I find an entry copied from The Journal, that paper indignant because Reno had not been mentioned as a community which supported musical organizations:

"The blooming muse has apparently skipped us, just when we were beginning to sit up and clamor for a little attention. To think of the blow, when we have a full fledged orchestra in every other business house in two of our main city blocks! More professional musicians are employed here than in any other city of three times our population."

Bright Lights

The business houses referred to were the saloons and gambling "palaces" now conspicuous in a white blaze of electric signs. A glow of light hovered over the town every night, including Sunday. Music blared from doors ceaselessly swinging in and out. Garishly illuminated letters spelled out "Oberon," "Palcae," "Owl," "Sagebrush," "Arcade," and a score of other equally significant names.

Reno wasn't backward in advertising this era of prosperity. Frequently strangers, now numerous upon our streets, came into the library. Usually they were seeking information about mines, those recently discovered, the Comstock Lode, the sheep and cattle industry, anything pertaining to Nevada. The books recommended by the head of the mining department at the university were widely read. I had located a reprint of Dan DeQuille's "Big Bonanza"; beside that there was a copy of Shinn's "Story of the Mine," treating of the mines of Virginia City, and Bancroft's "History of Nevada." That comprised the literature dealing with our own state. Up to that time Nevada had figured only in sensational newspaper stories, no local author launching a book until Miriam Michelson hit the best selling list with her "In the Bishop's Carriage. Miss Michelson was a native of Virginia City. She was of the famous Michelson family

and for years a star reporter on the San Francisco Bulletin.

The first indication that Nevada's original law, requiring only a six months' residence to become a citizen, was to be utilized in sensational fashion, broke when William B. Corey, steel magnate, leased a home in Reno. But few knew he was there nor why until he filed suit for divorce. Even then the publicity would have been tempered had he not married, on the heels of his divorce, the musical comedy star, Mabel Gilman. Then, in a manner not deemed ethical, W. H. Schnitzer, a new comer in Reno's legal circles, who later changed his name to Sheldon, broadcast by mail alluring notices about Reno's picturesque, frontier atmosphere. He stressed the fact that in six months a residence could be established and a divorce easily and promptly secured.

Effect on Library

My purpose in introducing this blatantly publicized topic is to relate, briefly, what effect this divorce law had upon our library while still in its pin feathers. A different type of strangers soon mingled with prospectors, stock-brokers, cattlemen and our own bonafide citizens. Smartly dressed, widely travelled, sophisticated women overflowed the hotels and apartment houses and found lodgings in private homes. While becoming acclimated to our roosting little town they frequented the library. Due to repeated requests, I subscribed to such papers as the New York Times, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune and Atlanta Constitution. These were read avidly and from the newspaper racks interested spread to the book shelves. Did we carry the plays of Percy Mackaye, Clyde Fitch, Bernard Shaw? Of course we had Ibsen, Suderman and Maeterlinck somewhere on the shelves? And how about the latest by Sir Arthur Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones?

Inquiries were made for fiction, books of travel, essays and art popular in the cities from which they had but recently come. And why weren't our local women interested in current issues of Vogue, Smart Set, Delineator, Harper's Bazaar? Eventually these books and magazines were obtainable in our library. Glancing through my diary I find this entry: "Sent in subscriptions to 'Le Figaro,' 'Revue des Deux Mondes' and 'Ober Land Und Mer.'" Did this because a New York divorcee said it would offset the provincial tone of our newspaper racks?

Another entry at a later date reads: "Sent for list of books in the original French and German. Hope they circulate after I shelve them. Divorcee from Philadelphia wrote out the titles for me."

Only once, according to my diary, was I called to account for an unauthorized order for books. One of the trustees, meeting me on the street, said that he had heard there was a set of Ingersol in the library. "Why yes," I replied. "You signed the bill for it, if you remember." He was baffled by this, but continued: "Several taxpayers object. They claim Ingersol contaminates those who read his books." "But many who pay taxes call for his books. What shall I do about it?" "Soon as I find time I'll read one of his books. I'll let you know then what to do."

(To Be Continued)

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