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# Introduction

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With very few exceptions (Bergquist, 2006; Marcum, 1994), we know little about the histories of small town public libraries. To help correct this deficiency, I determined in the early 1990s to launch a book-length analysis of the institution. To contain the study chronologically, I decided to begin coverage when the federal government issued its first published report on public libraries in the United States in 1876, and end with the passage of the Library Services Act in 1956, which for the first time made federal funds available for public library services through state library agencies. To contain the study geographically, I elected to focus on five small public libraries in five rural Midwest communities: the Bryant Library in Sauk Centre, Minnesota; the Sage Library in Osage, Iowa; the Rhinelander Public Library in Rhinelander, Wisconsin; the Morris Public Library in Morris, Illinois; and the Moore Library in Lexington, Michigan. In October 2011, the University of Iowa Press published *Main Street Public Library: Community Places and Reading Spaces in the Rural Heartland, 1876–1956* (Wiegand, 2011). Because space constraints forced me to pare one of the five libraries from the larger work, however, I published a separate essay on the Morris Public Library in the *Journal of Illinois History* (Wiegand, 2010).

One reason I chose these five libraries was because all had saved their accessions books. In the 1880s the Library Bureau, a library supplies company started by Melvil Dewey of Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) fame, developed a common form for systematically recording every book acquired by a library. The vast majority of small-to-medium-sized American public libraries began using Library Bureau accessions books by the turn of the century, my five small public libraries included. Accessions books effectively standardized the recording of bibliographical information, including title, author, publisher, place of publication, date acquired (and often when and why withdrawn), source of acquisition

(e.g., purchased directly from publisher or book-distribution agency, or obtained by donation), and sometimes the broad DDC number—those three digits to the left of the decimal that automatically classify each title into broad groups by subject.

In 1991 all five small public libraries graciously loaned me their accessions books, which listed all their acquisitions from about 1900 when they got their first Library Bureau accessions books through the early 1970s. Beginning in 1992 I had research assistants at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (where I was teaching at the time) key this information into a relational database that would allow me to search the contents of the collections of all five libraries collectively or individually over the decades. For six years I employed scores of college work-study students paid with money from rent I charged residents of an apartment attached to my lake-front cottage. By 1998 they had transferred all the information in the accessions books of these five libraries into the database. At the time, I had hopes we could expand its potential to search by subject by adding DDC numbers to each of the titles (perhaps 95 percent of the entries in the accessions books lacked the DDC number), but unfortunately I ran out money; in 1999 I moved to another house without an available apartment to generate the necessary college work-study funds for research assistants. For help with this database, I especially want to thank former students Bria Rewey, Toni Samek, and particularly and especially Kendall Larson (who prepared a set of instructions so others could use the database, and travelled with me to several conferences to demonstrate its potential).

Although I used the database to construct a chapter in *Main Street Public Library* specifically analyzing the collections against a larger universe of print from a variety of political and literary perspectives, I quickly realized the database had much more potential than I could tap. I decided to ask fifteen friends and colleagues in and out of library history whose work I knew and respected to look at the contents of these five libraries over time from their own unique research perspectives. Eleven accepted; seven are included in this issue of *Library Trends*. The remaining four are still in progress, and these authors intend to publish the results of their findings in research journals in their own disciplines.

Other than general background information about the communities in which these five libraries existed, I gave authors no advance notice of the conclusions to which I was coming in my own research. As I approach the study of library history, I do not automatically assume that the public library has been an essential good, or that it has functioned in the same ways for all people. In the professional rhetoric, these ubiquitous institutions are seen as neutral agencies whose primary responsibility is to make accessible the kinds of information thought essential to democracy—itsself a legacy of the Enlightenment's faith in the power of knowledge. But is that perception justified? Merely asking these kinds of questions

runs contrary to the “library faith”—a conviction in the library profession, which assumes with Thomas Jefferson that without an informed and educated citizenry, democracy cannot exist, and then extends this Jeffersonian principle by arguing that without libraries available to all citizens, Americans cannot be fully educated or informed (Ditzion, 1947; Garceau, 1949, pp. 50–51). Library professionals besides me have now questioned the validity of the library faith (Lewis, 2008).

As a library historian, I also recognized that the politics of a public library are writ in the collections it acquires and the services it offers its patrons who do not have to use it. I concluded that the purpose and mission of the five Main Street public libraries I studied were not primarily to supplement formal education, fight censorship, or provide information considered essential for the marketplace or the politics of democracy (Weigand, 2011). In fact, those were secondary, and because of the public library’s position as a civic institution that local citizens did not have to patronize, these goals were regularly and necessarily compromised, despite professional rhetoric. Rather, their primary purpose and mission (as designed over the generations by local leaders and users) was to foster the kinds of social harmony that community spaces and stories (shared and experienced) provide.

I will leave it up to readers to judge whether conclusions in *Main Street Public Library* are validated by the seven essays in this issue, each of which analyzes the database from a unique perspective. I also invite anyone interested in doing additional research in the database who further wants to test my findings (and particularly graduate students in seminar settings, for which *Main Street Public Library* could serve as the central seminar text) to access the database (Ball State University, n.d.). The seven essays fall into three subject categories: Part 1: “Children in Main Street Public Libraries”; Part 2: “Providing Information, Main Street Public Libraries, 1900–1950”; and Part 3: “Providing Literature and Inspiration of Many Kinds: Main Street Public Libraries, 1900–1960.”

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