
From Refuge to Risk: Public Libraries and Children in World War I

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ABSTRACT

During World War I public libraries in the United States functioned in multiple ways as civic spaces. This was particularly true of libraries in large, urban centers with diverse ethnic populations, many from countries involved in the conflict. For children, the library was a refuge that provided story hours, reading material, and space dedicated to their needs. Just before the end of the war, the influenza pandemic broke out and children were not allowed in the library building. In a few short months, the library went from being a refuge to being a health risk for children.

INTRODUCTION

In the early twentieth century public libraries in the United States functioned in multiple ways as civic spaces. In addition to furnishing reading and viewing material, libraries offered free meeting space for large and small groups, presented free public lectures, and provided reference and other kinds of assistance to patrons. During World War I, even before the United States formally entered the war, public libraries were a source of reading material for people wanting information about the conflict in Europe. This was particularly true of libraries in large, urban centers with diverse ethnic populations, many from countries involved in the war. Children, far from being unaware of current events, were just as concerned as their parents with the war and its effects on both Europe and the United States. Public libraries were a refuge that provided both information and a meeting space for children and adults alike, though the types of activities held in this public arena changed over the course of the war.¹ Before the war ended, however, a new threat emerged. The influenza pandemic

of 1918 had a far more direct and devastating impact on public libraries when public spaces where people gathered in large numbers were declared a health risk. The St. Louis Public Library (SLPL) provides an example of one such urban library that served a diverse community and provided a variety of services to children and adults throughout the war, both before and after the United States entered the fight.

THE LIBRARY AS A CIVIC SPACE

On January 8, 1912, the St. Louis Public Library opened its new central library building.² The imposing edifice, designed by Cass Gilbert, was the culmination of a twelve-year-long project to construct new purpose-built library buildings throughout the city. The project was funded, in part, by Andrew Carnegie, who gave St. Louis \$1,000,000 with the understanding that half that sum would go toward branch buildings and the other half to the central building. The Central Branch building was symbolic of the significance of the public library to the civic life of the city. The massive columns at the entrance to the library, the huge staircase leading up to the door, the names of important writers inscribed along the proscenium around the circumference of the building, the marble floors and columns inside the entryway, the elaborate lighting fixtures, and the high ceilings were all reminiscent of a cathedral. It was, as noted by architectural historian Abigail Van Slyke, part of a “City Beautiful cultural center built apart from the actual central commercial part of the city and reinforcing Victorian ideas of culture as its own special realm” (Van Slyke, 1995, p. 82).³

Prior to the construction of the Central Branch, six smaller, neighborhood library buildings had been built, scattered throughout the city. The first, Barr Branch, was opened in 1906, and the last, Divoll, opened in 1910.⁴ The importance of these new branches was not only that they visually symbolized the commitment that St. Louis made to support a public library, but also that the buildings enabled St. Louis librarians to expand their work to reach a larger population by bringing the library closer to the neighborhoods where people resided instead of making people come to the library. In addition, each branch, including the large Central Branch, had a purpose-built children’s room separated from the adult reading room. For the first time, the library had space dedicated solely to children. New space allowed the library to house collections specifically for children, and in turn this necessitated the presence in each branch of librarians dedicated to working with children. In 1906 the St. Louis Public Library hired, for the first time, librarians trained specifically to work with children.

By 1910, when Arthur Bostwick became head of the library, the six new buildings were open with only the Central Branch building remaining to be constructed from the Carnegie endowment. Bostwick had previously worked in New York City as head of the Circulating Libraries, and one of his first decisions in St. Louis was to reorganize the library’s work with

children in accordance to the way it was done at the New York Public Library. He hired a supervisor of children's work, a newly created position, to oversee and coordinate children's work in all the branches. With the completion of the Central Branch building, the children's department was an established, organized entity. Each branch, including Central, had one or more children's librarians. They met on a monthly basis to coordinate their work. In addition to working inside the library buildings in the children's room, they went out to the public. They worked with public and private schools (there were no school libraries in St. Louis in the early twentieth century); they distributed books and told stories on municipal playgrounds in the summer; they met with parent and teacher organizations to discuss children's literature; and they told stories to organizations such as the Society for Ethical Culture, the Missouri School for the Blind, and the House of Detention.⁵ In the period immediately preceding the war, St. Louis children's librarians achieved a cherished goal: they had at once adequate space and trained personnel to reach out to children all over the city and connect them with good literature.

SERVING A DIVERSE POPULATION

St. Louis, like many other cities in the early twentieth century, had a significant immigrant population, largely from Eastern Europe, but also from Italy and Ireland. Some immigrants were second generation. Some were newer immigrants whose children had been born outside of the United States. In addition, there was a large African American population, as well as people descended from the French settlers who founded the city and a large German-American population from pre-Civil War German immigrants. Children's librarians (and other librarians as well) catered to this diverse population, with each branch attempting to understand their particular population and meet its special needs, though "tailored within acceptable limits" (Wiegand, 1989, p. 3). In a 1915 article, Josephine McPike noted:

When we think of many foreigners of different nationality together, there comes to most of us from habit the idea first suggested by Mr. Zangwill of amalgamation. I think most of us at Crunden do not like to feel that our branch and others like it are melting pots; at any rate of a heat so fierce that it will melt away the national characteristics of each little stranger, so fierce that it will level all picturesqueness into deadly sameness. Rather, just of a glow so warm that it melts almost imperceptibly the racial hate and antagonism. (McPike, 1915, p. 855)

Though she expresses an aversion to the concept of amalgamation, McPike and other St. Louis children's librarians tended—like many of their counterparts throughout the country—to generalize the characteristics of their young patrons based on their ethnic background. However, they also made clear distinctions between the personalities and tastes of individual children.⁶

EARLY YEARS OF THE WAR, 1914–1916

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, the library reacted by “making a special effort to secure a large and well-rounded collection of literature about the war, in all languages and in all forms—books, pamphlets, broadsides, posters, series and periodicals of all kinds. All sides and all points of view are represented.” The war was problematic for St. Louis because of the large and influential German population. German-language books about the war were shelved separately with other German-language books, “as the German readers consult only the books in that collection and the war books in German are lost to them if kept with those in English.”⁷

The branches had varying experiences in the early war years. Some, like Cabanne Branch, found that war books were in demand for adult readers. Popular titles included *Pan-Germanism* by Roland Greene Usher, *The Secrets of the German War Office* by Armgaard Karl Graves, *Germany and England* by John Adam Cramb, and Fredrich von Bernhardt’s *Germany and the Next War*. Other branches, such as Barr Branch, did not have unusually heavy demand for books about the war, despite the fact that it was located in the “German South Side” of the city. The Central Branch reference room had an upsurge in clipping activities due to the interest in articles about the war. Librarians added maps of countries involved in the conflict and exhibited them. Increasing numbers of books, articles, and postings on bulletin boards were defaced. If patrons disagreed with an article, they wrote on it. Portraits of royals and generals “are especially liable to defacement with opprobrious epithets . . . the Library has received strenuous protests against the display of portraits and other material relating to one of the contesting parties without similar material on the other side to offset it.” Librarians were caught in the middle. Patrons protested if they felt that their side was not being adequately represented, but librarians found that their efforts to remain neutral were made more difficult because “some of our readers apparently [regard] neutrality as synonymous with suppression of everything favorable to the other side.” In some cases, librarians simply took down all displays to avoid conflict.⁸

Divoll Branch children’s librarian Anna Mason tried to think ahead to what might be needed when school started in the fall. On August 10, 1914, she wrote: “the general European war will result in a large amount of reference work on history as soon as the schools open next month. Have been looking over what material we have on Napoleon, Franco-German war, etc. . . . worked on our books of European history indexing material likely to be called for in connection with the present war.”⁹

Other librarians noticed that children were not as interested in the war as they had expected. “I have been greatly interested by the fact that the high school boys and girls never ask for anything about the war. Not once during the winter have I seen in one of them a spark of interest in the subject. It seems so strange that it should be necessary to keep them offi-

cially ignorant of this great war [*sic*] because the grandfather of one spoke French and of another German." At the Soulard Branch adult patrons were more interested in books on crochet, cookery, poultry, and automobiles than materials about the war. The librarian found it to be "surprising in a neighborhood where representatives of the various nations at war rub elbows and express their feelings freely. As one small boy reported: A fellow, he says, 'Delmer, do you root for the Germans?' and I says, 'No, I don't. I'm a Serbian, and I root for the Russians. Now what are you goin' to do about it? Then we had a fight.'" Supervisor of work with children, Alice Hazeltine, saw the war as an opportunity to "rightly [direct] the reading and thinking of the younger readers. . . . new complex problems presented by these new conditions should make the children's librarian pause and take heed. Can we do our part toward using the boy's loyalty to his gang or his nine, his love of our country, his respect for our flag, his devotion to our heroes, in developing a sense of human brotherhood which alone can prevent or delay in the next generation another such catastrophe as the one we face today?"¹⁰

For children's librarians on the "front lines," daily life before the United States entered the war revolved more around the routine work of reference, shelvesting, storytelling, and lecturing to mother's clubs and teacher's groups on children's literature. The work diaries for the Central Branch rarely mention the war as it is simply not part of their daily round. The few exceptions usually involve specific children such as Esther Morris, an English girl who moved to St. Louis in early 1914 and had a difficult time adjusting to life in an urban center instead of the English countryside. She explained her understanding of the causes of the war to a sympathetic librarian:

You know England did not want to go to war. But Germany said to little Belgium "I must go through your country." Little Belgium said "No, you cannot for you might hurt me." And Germany went right on. Now you know Belgium is just like a child to England. So old mother England could not stand by and see her child hurt and England had to fight for her child. Any mother would do that you know. That's what my mother says.¹¹

Though children may have been "officially ignorant" about the war, they tended to reflect and express the attitudes of adults. For some, such as Delmer, this was a matter of pride in one's heritage. Other children may have been influenced by adults like Alice Hazeltine, who found in the war another opportunity to influence children in "right thinking," which meant in reading materials deemed worthy by librarians. Still others, such as Esther Morris, repeated what they were told about the war by their parents.

Between 1914 and 1917, children's librarians in St. Louis went about their work largely undisturbed by the war in Europe. At Divoll Branch, a new initiative began as librarians partnered with schools to give systematic bibliographic instruction (they called it library instruction) to students.

Children's librarian Anna Mason was in charge of the initiative, and as the program expanded and became more and more successful, she wrote articles for library journals on the partnership between the library and the school and presented papers to state and local professional organizations on the topic. At Carondelet Branch, which opened in June 1908, a new story hour in which stories were told in German was so successful that it was expanded to Barr and Divoll Branches in 1915 and 1916. The German story hour was established not because there were great numbers of new German immigrants but because children of German descent still spoke the language at home and were taught to speak it in the German parochial schools, of which there were many in St. Louis. To accommodate this desire for German-language material, the library began purchasing some children's books in German as well as French (DeLaughter, 1916, p. 225).¹²

AMERICA IN THE WAR, 1917–1918

Once the U.S. became engaged in the conflict in April 1917, things changed. Although the *Annual Report* for 1917 implies that patrons lost interest in reading pro-German literature, several newspaper accounts reveal that in fact the library fell in with the practice, advocated by the American Library Association beginning in May 1918, of removing pro-German materials from the shelves (Wiegand, 1989, p. 157). In St. Louis the offending books were stored in Arthur Bostwick's office. In the 1917–18 *Annual Report*, librarians noted in the adult open shelf room: "in the issue of non-fiction a casualty list might read as follows: Dead—Pro-German literature; Missing Since April, 1917—Books on neutrality; Seriously Wounded in Action—Books on socialism; Disabled Through Shell Shock—Books on pacifism." The library itself was transformed by war work. Fifteen members of the library staff went into service with the military. Children's librarian Frances Eunice Bowman went on a leave of absence in August 1918 to be hospital librarian at Camp Meade and eventually left her position at St. Louis to continue at the hospital library. This was a blow to the storytelling program at the St. Louis Public Library as Bowman was one of the primary storytellers in the library system and was in demand both for library story hours and for private engagements (Kimball, 2003). There were drives to collect books to send to soldiers, with the Central Branch serving as the holding place for the books. The Draft Board of the Fourth Ward was located in the Crunden Branch building, the Red Cross used library facilities to hold meetings, and other "social" groups met as well. Barr Branch became a center of "social and educational work . . . these phenomena result apparently from the increasing amount of war work. Even the children spend their leisure time after school collecting papers and magazines for the soldiers, and knitting."¹³ And Crunden Branch librarian Sarah Bailey quoted a teacher from a neighborhood school who noted: "With Red Cross work, Thrift Stamps and Liberty Bonds, there is very little time left for

the three R's in the schoolroom nowadays." Bailey said they felt that way about library work as well "for knitting, begun in the school, is continued in the library, and there are sometimes as many children knitting in the Children's Room as are reading. Apparently 'Young America' is carrying the war work in this district."¹⁴

Meanwhile, in the children's rooms, much greater interest in the war ensued. Before the United States entrance to the war, bulletin boards advertised "books for girls" and had beautiful illustrations of folk and fairy tales to encourage reading. But once the United States became part of the war, the bulletin board in the Central Branch children's room changed to reflect the new status: "We have posted on the bulletin board Kipling's poem from 'Puck of Pook's Hill' surrounded by the flags of the United States, England, France, Belgium, Russia and Italy. Both the flags and the poem have attracted much attention. Children have read the poem and some of them have copied it." Although the specific name of the poem is not mentioned in the day book entry, it is probably "The Children's Song," in which children pledge their "love and toil in the years to be" and ends:

Land of our Birth, our faith, our pride,
For whose dear sake our fathers died;
O Motherland, we pledge to thee,
Head, heart, and hand through the years to be! (Kipling, 1906)

Another bulletin board displayed sixty-five "thrift stamp letters"—letters telling the children how money was being earned or saved to buy thrift stamps, which were sold in the library. There was also a demand for "patriotic plays" as the schools presented benefits for the Junior Red Cross. "The plays written for the American School Peace League are very satisfactory. 'Where War Comes' by Buelah Marie Dix was received immediately with much enthusiasm. 'A Pageant of Peace' also seems very good." And children also began to ask for material about the causes of the war for school compositions.¹⁵

Librarians noted that children increasingly wanted books about "war heroes and books about the flag." Children also raised money for soldiers' camp libraries both in the library and in school. In some schools the children contributed more than the teachers did. Story hours were disrupted by war activities, but librarians had new initiatives. The boys and girls of Eliot School organized debate clubs with the help of a librarian and two teachers. The first meeting of the boys club "held a debate on the following question: 'Resolved that France has a right to claim Alsace Lorraine at end of the present war.' The negatives put up the best argument and won the debate."¹⁶

"SPANISH INFLUENZA"

On October 7, 1918, a new children's librarian, Edith Williams, arrived at the Central Branch children's room to replace Frances Bowman. She

spent the day getting acquainted with the room and its collection, then worked with the children who came in after school and noted "The room was crowded all afternoon as the school work is in full sway. It still being wonderful out of doors, the room was well filled all evening."¹⁷ The next day, public schools in St. Louis were closed due to what was then called the "Spanish Influenza" epidemic.

Although the war affected the library both because of its participation in the war effort and through the loss of many staff members who engaged in war work, the influenza epidemic at the end of 1918 had a more immediate and lasting impact on the library.¹⁸ Schools were closed indefinitely on October 8, and librarians were overwhelmed by large numbers of children constantly demanding attention, their routine of quiet mornings and busy afternoons shattered. A few days after the schools closed, the reading and assembly rooms of the library and branches were also closed to the public with the exception of working meetings of Red Cross units. Children were allowed to check out books, but not to remain in the rooms. No more than ten people were allowed in the room at one time. In the Central Branch children's room, librarians removed the chairs so as not to encourage children to stay. By the last two weeks of October, librarians found that more and more children were coming to the library. They could not keep up with reshelving and had trouble keeping out the "surplus public" of "small brothers and sisters and hangers on."

The fact that there were no chairs in the room in no way disturbed the children. They perched upon the tables or sat on the floor. There is one sunny spot in the little children's corner where the colored children were often found basking. One day I found a little colored boy lying full length in the sunshine lazily turning the leaves of a picture book. The room was almost empty and I didn't disturb him.

Schools reopened on November 14 and for two weeks things went back to normal. Then, on December 4, schools closed again and for a few days librarians were

snowed under when the Board of Health came to our rescue by closing the Children's Room to all persons under 16 . . . We receive books or renew them, asking the children to wait outside for their cards. The first day was very busy—now only an occasional child comes. Some of them stand outside asking the adults who come in to get them a book. Some of them get furious at being kept out—even to the point of tears and all are disappointed. The older boys are enjoying the full shelves. "A fellow can find a book these days now that the kids can't get in." Many distracted mothers and fathers are coming for their children. So many of the men seem helpless and embarrassed when they come in.

On December 21 the ban was lifted and children allowed to return to the library. The Central Room work diary entry says simply: "It is good to have them back again."¹⁹

CONCLUSION

During World War I, the public library in St. Louis moved from being a refuge for children to being a public health risk. Librarians were required to adapt to changing situations and to cope with the sometimes negative results of those changes. Once the influenza pandemic ended, the library once more warmly welcomed children and provided much desired reading material. But the difficulties for librarians had a longer lasting impact. The overall drop in circulation because of the absence of children was significant in most branches. The routine of story hours, once broken, was not completely reinstated at all branches until 1925, largely as a result of a shortage of staff, including trained librarians. Postwar St. Louis librarians found themselves barely able to keep up with necessary daily activities, let alone establishing new initiatives. One librarian summed it up: "A year ago all indications pointed toward a culmination of the results of ten years of effort. The enforced closing of the children's room and the consequent loss of circulation . . . made us feel a little like *Alice in Wonderland* when she had been running very fast with the Red Queen and found herself still at her starting point. 'Here, you see,' said the Red Queen, 'it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.'"

NOTES

1. For an in-depth look at how public libraries went from a largely neutral stance to actively promoting the agenda of the national government during the war, see Wiegand (1989). For a treatment of the activities of the American Library Association see Young (1981).
2. *Annual Report of the St. Louis Public Library, 1912-13*. St. Louis: St. Louis Public Library.
3. She goes on to suggest that this was also an attempt to separate the library from the lower classes because the central library building was not usually near public transportation. This was not true of the Central Library in St. Louis, which, though not close to the Mississippi River and the commercial district, was located near several economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, especially areas in which a concentration of African Americans lived.
4. *Annual Report of the St. Louis Public Library, 1911-12*. St. Louis: St. Louis Public Library.
5. For a fuller treatment of the growth of youth service in the St. Louis Public Library, see Kimball (2003).
6. Effie Louise Power, supervisor of work with children, wrote an essay detailing the various activities of children's librarians at the St. Louis Public Library. She described the children largely in terms of their ethnic background, a common convention of children's librarians, who tended to generalize by race or ethnicity. Thus, Jewish children had "active minds." Slavs, due to their economic difficulties, "seem stupefied and have no desire to better their condition." African Americans "like fairy tales, simple poetry and history," and Italians "want easy reading books, bright picture books, fairytales, poetry and imaginative stories" (Power, 1914).
7. *Annual Report of the St. Louis Public Library, 1914-15*. St. Louis: St. Louis Public Library, p. 63. Generally, non-English language books in the St. Louis Public Library were purchased for adult readers. Librarians assumed that children of immigrant parents might speak English in the home but needed to learn to speak and read English as part of their "Americanization" process.
8. *Ibid.*, quotations from p. 66.
9. Divoll Branch Day Book 2, 1914, p. 4, 9.
10. *Annual Report of the St. Louis Public Library, 1914-15*. St. Louis: St. Louis Public Library, pp. 64, 66.
11. Central Branch Day Book 1, p. 110.
12. Central Branch Day Book 2, 1916, p. 40.

13. *Annual Report of the St. Louis Public Library, 1917–18*. St. Louis: St. Louis Public Library, pp. 44, 50–51.
14. *Annual Report of the St. Louis Public Library, 1918–19*. St. Louis: St. Louis Public Library, p. 54.
15. Central Day Book 2, 1916, quotations are from pp. 40, 53.
16. Divoll Day Book 3, 1915, p. 71. The girls of Eliot School also had a debating club. They debated: "Resolved that the white settlers had a right to supplant the Indians." The affirmatives won in the discussion (quotations from pp. 60, 64, 71).
17. Central Branch Day Book 2, 1918, p. 61.
18. The influenza pandemic of 1918 has recently resurfaced in the news because of fears of a bird flu pandemic similar to the flu of 1918. However, from a socio-historical view, it is still a relatively understudied event. There are still questions about how it started, why it spread so quickly and seemingly began simultaneously throughout the world, and why so little is known about it. Estimates of the death toll worldwide are anywhere from 20 million to 100 million dead. More U.S. servicemen died in the flu epidemic than lost their lives fighting in World War I. Two good sources of information are Kolata (1999) and Bary (2004).
19. Central Branch Day Book 2, 1918, quotations from pp. 63, 68.

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