

CHAPTER II

THE BEGINNINGS OF A LIBRARY MOVEMENT

Early rudiments of a library movement in the Laurens community found their origin in a group of women belonging to an organization known first as the "Mother's Club . . . to enlarge our interest in the welfare of all children and the laws governing their conditions,"¹ then as the "Laurens Woman's Club and Library Board Association" in early 1900, and eventually the "Laurens Woman's Club" in the same year.²

A special committee of this organization, appointed by the President of the "Woman's Club," met at the home of Mrs. L. W. Wheeler to confer concerning the acquisition of a reading room, according to the minutes taken for the committee meeting of February 11, 1901, and signed by H.C. Gilchrist. This committee, with Mrs. Wheeler as chairman, received some letters from Miss. Alice Tyler of Des Moines in which the latter proposed to come to the city and address the citizens concerning the workings of reading rooms in Iowa towns, and reveal possible usage of the Iowa State Traveling Library.³

According to the minutes of the committee meeting previously quoted, it was announced that a Mr. Moore expected to have a reading room under the Racket Store ready for April usage, which he would rent for twelve dollars per monthly. Mr. Moore would subscribe ten dollars towards defraying general expenses for the year. These same minutes also indicate that Mrs. W.E. Crowder was appointed as a committee, to choose her helper, to solicit subscriptions to pay expenses.

This committee later became the nucleus of the "Library Commission," as indicated in the succeeding, undated committee minutes. The members of this commission are listed in Appendix A of this paper.

The new name for this organization, "The Laurens Public Library and Reading Room Association," was derived for the Association meeting of June 4, 1901, as given in the

minutes. At this same meeting it was decided to meet on the first Tuesday of each month, with the meeting place not determined.

“In 1901 the ladies of the Mother’s Club [Library Commission] secured the loan of 100 volumes from the State Library—50 for adults and 50 for young people.”⁴ These groups of books which were loaned were called “libraries” and were numbered 57 and 88, were obtained in the middle of April, 1901, and returned on July 16 or 17, as reported in the Association minutes dated August 31, 1903. In the minutes just alluded to, more “libraries” came on July 20 and July 23 via railroad with the term “library” given to these groups of books, actually the number of the box of books so designated by the Iowa State Traveling Library.

Beginning on April 20th, the books were in the Stacy & Weaver Store where books were checked-out from 3 to 5 o’clock on Saturday afternoon.⁵ Later, concerning the boxes of books from the State Traveling Library, “it is found that the com. appointed to secure quarters for Nos. 57 and 88 place our little book-case in his implements building and give out books to readers on Sat. P.M.’s as formerly we have done from Messrs. W’s and St’y’s.”⁶ The usage of this location was short-lived because the minutes from the Association’s July 2, 1901, meeting indicate that the books were moved to a room above the First National Bank, rented from Dr. Hovenden for three dollars per month, with Dr. Hovendon subscribing one of the three dollars for the rent each month.

The first formidable attempt to encourage country residents to use the reading room was also discussed by the Association at its July 2, 1901, meeting according to the minutes.

A joint meeting of the Woman’s Club and the Association was held on September 3, 1901, and according to the minutes of this meeting, it was decided to obtain Mrs. Flora McCaslin’s services as a worker for the reading room at twenty-five cents per evening, and to

order \$13.65 magazines. The magazines were ordered, and according to the Treasurer's Report at the October meeting the cost was \$14.40.

Mrs. McCaslin was hired in October and lived in part of the living room. This not being the best arrangement, three rooms were secured over Brimm's Barber Shop, in the Lange building. According to an agreement, Mrs. McCaslin was to use the back two rooms, and pay one third of the rent as stated in the January 21, 1902, minutes. According to this arrangement, the reading room would be open six evenings each week.

Friction had obviously developed between the Association and Mrs. McCaslin, the first indication being that a bill for matting for the floor purchased by Mrs. McCaslin was not allowed in the minutes of the February 25, 1902, meeting. At that meeting, because of a diphtheria quarantine, it was decided to close the reading room for the summer at that time, rather than wait until May 1, 1902

No meeting was held in March, the next meeting of the Association being held in April of 1902. The minutes of that meeting explain the friction between the Association and Mrs. McCaslin as follows:

President and Mrs. Crowder met with Mrs. McCaslin and was not altogether satisfactory. Errors reported by the Secretary in bills presented for services in reading room—Motion made and carried to have the auditing committee wait upon Mrs. McC. and inform her of the mistake, thus giving her the opportunity to refund if she thinks proper.⁷

Then, according to the minutes of the June 10, 1902, meeting, "Mrs. McCaslin will look over the bills to satisfy herself. She felt that the Assoc. had not paid her enough for her furniture used in the Hovenden room, etc." The minutes also contain the statement that Mrs. Crowder had returned from Des Moines and reported on a conversation with Miss. Tyler and Miss. Brown at the State Library concerning library matters. Likewise, Mrs. McCombs acted as librarian on Saturday, and Mrs. McCaslin's name is not mentioned in the documents checked from the time onward. From that date, members of the Association are listed as the librarians

for future dates. On January 6, 1903, a gift was given the Miss. Reda Erickson for caring for the library, as reported in the Secretary's minutes of that meeting.

Selection of books now became an aim of the Association as they wished to purchase books with the money at hand in the treasury, so each member of the Association was asked to bring lists of books to the meetings.

Officers were elected on September 2, 1902, at a regular Association meeting. As reported in the minutes for this meeting, Mrs. Anderson was named President; Mrs. R.N. McCombs, Vice-Presidents; Mrs. J.R. Hakes, Corresponding Secretary; Mrs. E. Strain, Recording Secretary; Mrs. L.W. Wheeler, Treasurer; and Mrs. O.M. Murphy, Librarian of Supply, and Finance.

In December of 1903, communication was received from Miss. Tyler, informing the Association that she would visit the reading room the latter part of March.

Careful attention was paid to the reading room during the closed summer months as indicated by the information in the minutes of the Association of June 3, 1903. The room was leased to Mrs. Cruso and Miss. Alcock for four months, as long as the room was used only for storing goods.

The Association had taken care of the reading room now for over two years, paying the expenses, buying books, and taking care of all matters. After Miss. Tyler's visit it was agreed that a tax levy for a public library was needed, and it was reported in the June 3, 1903, minutes of the Association that a petition was being circulated for a levy to be presented to the City Council. In that same year, two more moves of the reading room took place. Mention of the moves was made in the October 5th minutes, when it was decided to pay White and Harper for the use of their room, and when it was stated that Mr. Dean's music room was used.

As a final decision of the December 30, 1903, meeting, a motion was carried that the Association give some type of entertainment in order to raise money to purchase books for the reading room.

In January of 1904, the Association became publicity conscious and Mrs. Wheeler was appointed "to see that suitable facts concerning the library be published."⁸ As is indicated by the previous quotation, the terminology for "reading room" now became "library."

Now that the petition had been circulated, it was necessary to influence the voters to vote in favor of the "two-mill tax to be used in establishing a public library."⁹ In order to accomplish this, as recorded in the Association minutes of March 14, 1904, the Association was divided into committees to canvas the city in the hopes of securing votes in favor of their proposition.

The city election was held in March of 1904, and the Pocahontas County Sun of March 31, 1904, gave a synopsis of the voting as follows: ". . . on the proposition 'Shall a free public library be established?' 96 votes were cast, 57 voting for and 47 against. Fifty-seven women voted on this question, 54 voting for the library, 2 against it and one defective ballot." Some evidence to the contrary is given in 1915, by Mrs. R.N. McCombs; "paper before Women's Club April 12, 1915 . . . and later when we asked for a tax levy the men as ever generously voted it. True the women voted too, but the result showed that the result would have been in favor of the tax even though we had not voted."¹⁰ The thing to bear in mind however, is that the paper was later printed in the Pocahontas County Sun as an appeal to help the Woman's Club with some of the future goals, one of which was to see the ground around the library building purchased for a public park. Then too, the election had taken place eleven years before this address.

The minutes of the April 5, 1904, meeting indicated that Miss. Tyler sent her congratulations concerning the election, and asked in what way she had benefited the Association.

¹ Mrs. R. N. McCombs, "Some Aims of Our Club and Library" (paper read before the Laurens Woman's Club, Laurens, Iowa, April 12, 1915).

² Minutes of the Special Committee of the Woman's Club, February 11, 1901.

³ Article in the Pocahontas County Sun, September 17, 1931.

⁴ George Sanborn, Period of Growth and Development, 1883-1904 (Vol. III of Pioneer History of Pocahontas County, Iowa. 3 vols.; Fonda, Iowa: Times Print, 1904), p. 759.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Minutes of the Laurens Public Library and Reading Room Association, June 4, 1901.

⁷ Minutes of the Laurens Public Library and Reading Room Association, April 29, 1902.

⁸ Minutes of the Laurens Public Library and Reading Room Association, January 26, 1904.

⁹ Ibid., February 23, 1904. ¹⁰ McCombs, op. cit.

¹⁰ McCombs, op. cit.