

History of the Belleville Library

by Velma Hoesly, Librarian 1918 to 1963
(on her retirement in 1964)

We are indebted to Miss Myrtie Harmon for the facts and figures of this history which are direct quotes from a letter that Mrs. Mable Story Johnson had written for the Belleville Recorder some years ago.

On Nov. 23, 1878, Mr. H. E. Story called a meeting of the Belleville Citizens to organize a library association. The following officers were named:

President H. E. Story; 1st Vice President S. A. Barker; 2nd Vice President W. N. Caldwell; Secretary J. M. Williams; Treasurer Robert Turner; Directors: W. S. Wheelwright, T. B. Withers and J. F. Prindle, and Mrs. F. W. Warner as Librarian. The name chosen for the library was Belleville Lyceum Library Association. On December 4th the first regular meeting was held in H. E. Story's store to mark books.

33 volumes from the old school library and donations from H. E. Story and J. W. Parks, 26 and 16 books respectively, along with others donating one or two books making a total of 133 books. These were presented to the library and it opened to the public on December 14, 1878.

The room for the exchange for books was at Dr. W. S. Wheelwright's office and was later transferred to the old drying shed which stood south of where Lehnherr's store now stands.

New books were purchased from time to time as they had money in the treasury. The library received its financial support from fines and assessments of \$1.00 each member per each year. One became a life member by paying \$25.00 or by donating books of equal value. H.E. Story and Mr. Parks were the only life members.

In 1882, it was voted to strike the word Lyceum, making the name Belleville Library. The first constitution and catalogue of books were printed in 1894.

Mrs. Mable Story Johnson, granddaughter of H. E. Story, recalls that she was delegated to get the signature of each voter in the village on a petition to forever after have a small tax levied for the upkeep of the library. The first tax from the village was received in 1894. At that time the library contained 1000 books.

In 1895 the library was moved to it's present location, the new village hall which had just been built.

Some of the sets of books such as Dickens, Scott and Thackery came to the library through the efforts of Mr. Story writing the publisher, telling what he was attempting to do (found a library for the village), and asking for a donation.

The list of librarians is as follows: Mrs. F. H. Warner; Mrs. Mable Story Johnson; Mrs. Grace Knox; Miss Mina Oliver; Mrs. Hobert Luchsinger; Mrs. V. F. Wanke; Miss Georgia Allen; Miss Golda De Witt (Mrs. Al Borman); Miss Bernice Oliver (Mrs. C. J. Mc Clellan); Miss Jessie Laughead (Mrs. A. L. Schmetter); Velma Ross (Mrs. H.S. Hoesly); and the present librarian, Mrs. Philomene Armstrong (1964).

There are copies of that first catalogue published in 1894 still on file at the library. The first record of an annual report being sent to the Wisconsin Library Commission, as now being subscribed by law, was in 1900.

The village appropriation in 1964 was \$1200. The building is furnished rent free. All other expenses must be met with the above appropriation.

The past year (1963), Mrs. C.O. Scott, president of the library board, met with members of Montrose and Exeter Townships and explained the services rendered to their constituents by the Belleville library and suggested that any financial help that they might offer would be welcome. As a result of this exchange of ideas Montrose township voted \$200.00 and Exeter township \$100.00 to the treasury of the Belleville library.

The Library is presently occupying 2 rooms with a total of 4826 books. A systematic weeding process employed every year or so is employed so that the number of books does not exceed the shelf room.

Perhaps the most notable change over the years is that, first, the library is serving a much larger territory. No individual pays a fee. The cost is free to each individual. That is why both Montrose and Exeter townships were asked to help to contribute to the upkeep of the library. Secondly, the summer reading program for young people for the first 8 grades has catapulted into a tremendous undertaking. All children from all the school districts, as well as the children from the village, are welcome to take part in the program for June. The circulation for the month of June is almost 10 times as great as for any other month in the year.

The future promises even better service as there is a new Dane County-wide service being promoted.

The present 1964 board members are President Mrs. C. O. Scott; Vice President Mrs. Richard Francois; Directors: Mrs. Paul Ziehli; Mrs. Jacob Voegli; Mrs. Herman Diedrich Sr.

I was always interested in reading and so I suppose it was natural that my thoughts gravitated to the library at an early age.

The library occupied the room at the west for many years. The first room at the head of the stairs was used by the village board for its meetings. The floor was always littered with stale cigar butts and other debris, and if it was ever cleaned up, it was the librarian who did it.

It was to this room that I came when I first approached the opening in the wall between the 2 rooms. There was a counter which let down so that the patron might ask the librarian for a book. No one was allowed to enter the library room itself but the librarian. I thought of that room as the "Holy of Holies" reigned over by the "Omnipotent One Herself." The librarian at that time was Mrs. Grace Knox. She seemed to me as being very stern with a "no nonsense attitude." She selected the book she thought suitable for the person who was seeking something to read. I cannot recollect any of we children finding fault with her selection to Mrs. Knox, but there may have been some grumbling among ourselves.

The library continued to function in this one room for a good many years, although it did change the rule of the public being allowed in the library itself.

I was substituting for Mrs. Ina Wanke while attending high school. I really felt it an honor to finally be chosen to act as librarian. This was in 1918 and I was hired to work 8 hours a week for \$25.00 a year. After 43 years of service, my salary was gradually raised to \$350.00 a year.

The library at that time was heated with a small coal burning stove. I had to build my own fires and so I brought my own kindling from home. I also had to empty the ashes and transport the coal by buckets from the first floor to the second floor. The fire would just nicely get under way and the chill would begin to leave the room when it was time to leave.

The years passed on and there were bigger and more efficient coal stoves but the librarian still did all the janitorial work.

The local jail as well as the coal bin was located on the first floor. It was always with a fast beating heart that I opened the door, always taking a quick glance at the cell block before gathering the coal. Sometimes there

would be someone locked up there who had probably been slammed in the cooler to sleep off a night on the town. It didn't happen often but just enough to keep me wary of what I might expect when I opened the door. In those days someone could be locked up without a constant attendant.

Finally the great day arrived when the village fathers moved to more spacious quarters and the library could spread its wings and occupy 2 full rooms. There was an arch cut in the wall between the 2 rooms. The ceiling and walls were redecorated, the floors covered with inlaid linoleum and book stacks placed so that they ran through the center of the 2nd room. There were also bookshelves placed against all available wall space.

As time progressed, we could see that some systematic weeding was needed. We called on professional help from the members of the Wisconsin Library Commission. Some books were chosen to be donated to the Wisconsin Historical Library. A collection of some of the first books donated to our library was kept as a historical memento for our own library. We were told at this time that it was far better to have a systematic weeding than to keep outdated books on the shelves.

It was about this time that the coal stove gave way to an oil burning space heater. It was also in this era that the rooms below the library were occupied by the so called "Knights of the Road." This was the Depression and many there were who roamed the highways going from one town to another seeking lodging and food where they could find it.

The word seemed to pass quickly among them that there were facilities available for both lodging and cooking in Belleville. So it came to pass that we had company "down below" almost every evening. It seemed they were there every time the library had its doors open to the public in the evening. I suppose they would pool their assets and would go over to the store and purchase a couple of onions and 2 or 3 potatoes and then fry them in some rancid grease left from a previous group. The odor of that rancid grease permeated every corner of the library, even to my clothes. The village board finally built a guest house on the river bank for frequent visitors and the odiferous fumes finally left the library.

Only once was I frightened by a visit from the so called "guests." Two of them came up rather late one evening. I thought they had perhaps come up for some reading material, but it seemed to me that it was growing into a little something more sinister as the moments ticked away. I wished with all my heart that some patron would appear, but no one did. I imagine that my imagination was working overtime as one man would appear around one stack of books and meet the other man coming the other way. I was sure they had X-Ray eyes and were boring a hole right through the desk to the drawer which held the canvass

sack that held my fine money. I tried to nonchalantly put myself between the desk and the book stacks and busy myself with something on the desk, all the time eyeing the poker, a hold over from coal burning days, and wondering if I would dare to use it if they demanded the money! Eventually they left without incident and when my time came to close the library, I made short work of getting home.

Another incident which shook me up was when an escaped mental patient from the Dane County Home was locked up in the jail. He was very violent, shaking the bars and making a terrible racket. He finally sawed the bars and escaped. I don't know where he found a saw! I imagine I was really in the safest place in town for the poor man was only interested in getting as far away from where he was as he could.

The mouse problem might be mentioned. Now, I don't like mice dead or alive! They give me goose pimples all over. Whenever the mouse population arrived, I would seek out a trapper to take over. I believe the going rate was 20 cents per every mouse that was trapped. It was not until some years later when my trapper was a student at the U.W. that his mother told me that he hated mice as much as I did. That trapping season proved a real trial for both of us. I certainly felt that no greater love could be shown than for a boy to hide his own fears to help another!

Then another problem to try my soul was bats! You have heard of bats in the belfry. Well, we had them in the attic over the library. Worse than anything were the bats who made their home on the ledge at the bottom of the stairs. Every time the lights were turned on, the bats would follow the lights up to the library. There were times when both patrons and myself would chase them around with brooms, but I can never remember that we ever had very good aim.

Some of the serious memories that I cherish are of the children who attended the Story Hour held Saturday afternoons. There is nothing more rewarding than the rapt gaze of a child utterly enthralled by the story you are telling. The last 4 summers that I was librarian the reading programs were strenuous but rewarding. It entailed a lot of preparation but it was a labor of love on my part.

Another memory that I treasure was the issuing of my son's first library card and a good many years later that of my 2 grandsons. And so the circle was about to become completed for me.

I shared this same joy with the other children when they started their first adventure in reading. It is a precious heritage, that of being able to read one's first book for himself.

I would like to mention some of the gifts that were presented to the library as I remember them. One of the very worthwhile customs the public had done for its library was that of presenting books as memorials for a friend or loved one.

The library provided book plates which were placed in the front of the book presented giving the name of the person to be honored as well as the donor. Many people have been kind enough to donate various books at different times.

Mr. R. G. Bross presented a portrait of George Washington that he had painted. The Misses Claudia and Georgia Allen presented a beautiful frame for the print of "The Signing of the Declaration of Independence." They also purchased the stand for the dictionary. They presented these gifts as a memorial for their mother, Mrs. G. D. Allen.

I feel that it would be appropriate that I mention the Board members under whom I served for 43 years that I was librarian. These good civic-minded people served their community without remuneration with only the thought of promoting the interest of the library. There are many who are no longer with us. It would be nice if they could review the gains that have been made over the years.

It was probably fitting that the old furnace and I should expire at the same time. There was a brand new gas furnace installed by the beginning of 1964. As for myself I was glad to turn my duties over to a younger and more energetic woman, Mrs. Philomene Armstrong.

I shall always be interested in the library and wish it well.

A fitting way for me to close my part of the library service is to borrow a phrase from Bob Hope. "Thanks for the Memories !"

Velma Hoesly 1918-thru 1963