

## V

### Librarian

**Among** my mother's surviving homework from the 6th grade in Prairie du Chien is a poem written out in longhand which reads:

#### *Books*

*Suppose there were no books!  
No books to read in cozy nooks!  
No books to fill the hungry mind  
And teach the art of being kind.*

*No books to while an hour away,  
To link today with yesterday;  
No books to charm you for awhile  
To bring a tear or lure a smile.*

*But there are books, praise God above!  
If we have books and we have love  
We can dispense with other things  
'Tis books, not crowns that make men kings.*

The poem is unsigned, but as much as I would love to believe that it was an original composition on the part of my mother, its vocabulary and construction are too sophisticated for even the most precocious of sixth graders. In fact the homework assignment in question was for her penmanship class rather than for either a composition or literature class, and it is among several other surviving assignments for the same subject, each also consisting of a poem written out in longhand but with its author explicitly acknowledged. Apparently the teacher would give the students printed copies of various poems, some attributed and others anonymous, and assign them the task of writing

*My Mother*

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Figure 5.1. Circa 1990. A somewhat atypical snapshot of my mother (age 62) posing in the living room of her upstairs apartment on Lincoln Avenue. The wall of built-in book cases is visible in the background. Similar built-in book cases were also in the downstairs living room.

them out longhand in their best cursive. Nevertheless, I would still like to believe that this poem somehow became lodged in the back of my mother's brain where it would play a role, however marginal or subconscious, in influencing her future choice of profession.

Despite her outstanding academic record, my mother was neither an intellectual nor an avid reader of great literature as that term is usually understood. Though she had a basic knowledge of 19th and early 20th century American and British literature from her high school courses and even taught lessons on the subject in Relief Society, she did not as a rule read such classic authors as Charles Dickens or Jane Austin on her own initiative. Rather as an adult she most often read books dealing with health and nutrition, "how-to" books dealing with art and handicraft projects, or else novels and

biographical memoirs dealing with family life and pets, such as *The Friendly Persuasion*, *Mama's Bank Account* (the basis of the movie *I Remember Mama*), *Papa Married a Mormon*, and James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small* and its various sequels. Her later fascination with the cat detective novels of Lillian Jackson Braun has already been commented on in the previous chapter, and in old age she also developed an interest in rereading the classics of her childhood, such as *Black Beauty* and *The Railway Children*.

Nor did my mother collect books in the usual sense of the word, though her house was filled with them (figure 5.1). Rather, as befitted her calling as a librarian, she preserved and shelved them, be they books inherited from other family members, the hundreds of books that I would drag home throughout my high school and college years from used book stores and the Salvation Army, or the hundreds of "how-to" art and handicraft books and tattered children's books that were discarded on a regular basis by the Wausau Public Library. And, of course, there were also dozens of books published by the Mormon Church, though I am uncertain whether she ever seriously read most of them.

### **The Library Club**

My mother's first encounter with the world of libraries and librarians occurred in high school when she joined the school's "Library Club" (figure 5.2). What this meant in practical terms was that she volunteered, along with several other girls in her class, to work as an assistant in the school library during one of her free periods. I can recall her telling only one story about this experience. This concerned the decision of the club members to enter a float on behalf of the library in the annual homecoming parade. The only problem with this ill-conceived burst of school spirit was that no one in the club had access to either a trailer on which to construct such a float or a tractor/



Figure 5.2. An extremely stippled photo of the members of The Library Club taken from the 1946 high school yearbook. My mother (age 17) is on the extreme right standing slightly apart from the others. Her friend Delores Barron is immediately in front of her.

truck with which to pull it in the parade.

It was Montie and Larry who eventually came to the rescue. They and several of their friends had taken to hanging out after school in a local funeral parlor located across from the 4th Street side of Purdy Junior High that was owned by a man named Baxter. This was little more than a converted, moderately-sized, conventional brick house (figure 5.3). Baxter lived in the upstairs apartment and there was both a morgue and an embalming room in the basement that were connected to the first floor by means of a counterweighted hand-pulled elevator. As if these were not a sufficient attraction to a group of rambunctious young boys, there was also a ping-pong table and dart board – the latter explained by the fact that the local funeral parlors in Marshfield held an annual dart competition with one another. Apparently business was none too prosperous as there were at





Figure 5.3. The Baxter-Ritger funeral home at 108 W. 4th Street opposite Purdy Junior High as it appeared in 1941. The road to the left was actually an alley.

least two more funeral parlors within a block or so of his own and Baxter was both bored and lonely sitting alone all day waiting for potential customers to appear. As a result he apparently welcomed their company and the boys were literally given the run of the place, including his apartment. Indeed both of my uncles began working for Baxter soon after the move to Marshfield, initially doing odd jobs, such as sweeping up, and later, as teenagers, driving the hearse on various errands between funerals.

In any case, at some point they mentioned my mother's dilemma to Baxter who, in turn, offered the Library Club the loan of one of his casket gurneys. This was duly decorated by the members of the club and, with my mother dressed to the hilt and posing on top of it (though she never mentioned what she was suppose to symbolize), several of them dutifully pushed both the gurney and my mother down Central Avenue as part of the parade. But they soon discovered that

they were falling further and further behind the motorized floats and, upon encountering the railroad tracks at the south end of town, things went from bad to worse when one of the wheels of the gurney became wedged in the tracks. At this point my mother concluded that it was best to save face by abandoning ship, so she hopped off the gurney and walked home still dressed in her full regalia.

### **The Marshfield Free Library**

During her high school years my mother had worked during the summers at a variety of temporary jobs in order to earn spending money for the school year. These included stints at the local A&W Root Beer stand, which at the time was located across from the 3rd Street entrance to Purdy Junior High, and at an ice cream parlor on Central Avenue known as “The Sweet Shop.” I don’t recall her saying anything in particular about the job at the A&W, but she often told of how much she hated working at the Sweet Shop as she disapproved of the owner’s lack of business ethics. This had revealed itself when she discovered that her sole job training consisted of learning how to dispense hollow scoops of ice cream so that the owner could increase his profit margin.

Apparently, however, my mother had enjoyed her time working in the school library and so the year after her graduation from high school in June of 1946 she abandoned hollow scoops of ice cream and instead applied for a job as an assistant in the children’s wing of the Marshfield Free Library – a job which she would hold until her marriage a year later in June of 1947. This library (figure 5.4), which dated from 1901, was rather unattractively attached – almost as an afterthought or annex – to the left rear corner of the City Hall building, which had been built at the same time but in a totally different architectural style, and which originally housed both the police and fire departments as well. The children’s wing was located in

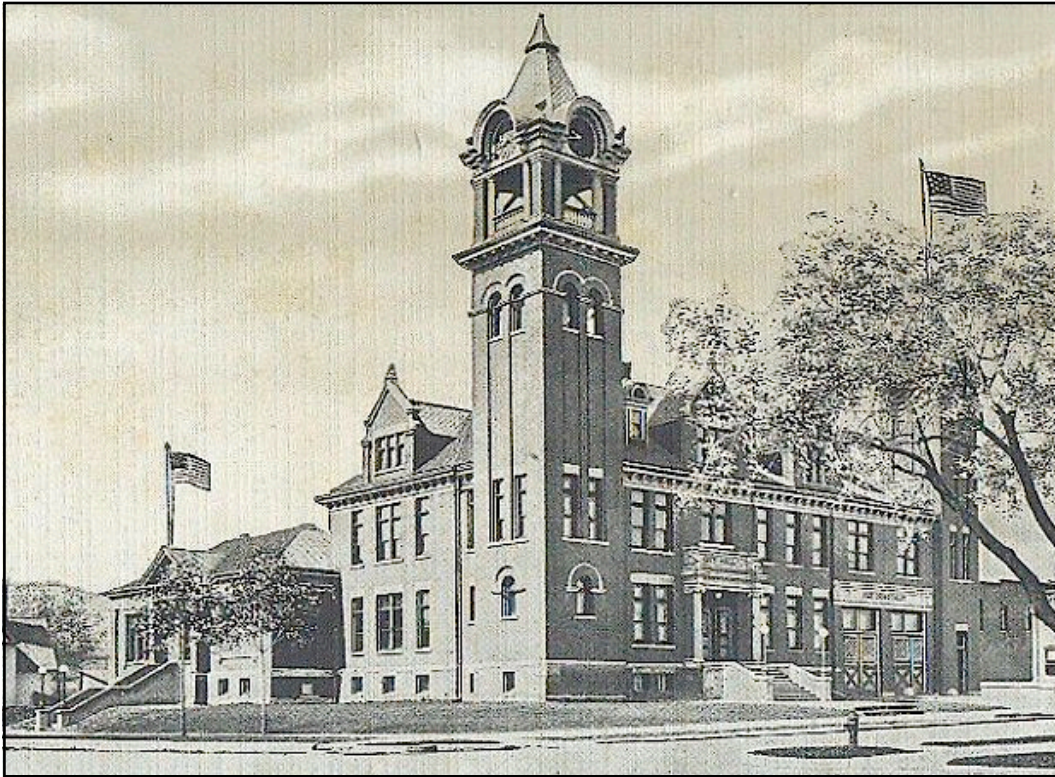


Figure 5.4. A circa 1910 picture postcard of Marshfield City Hall at the corner of East 2nd Street and South Maple Avenue with the attached public library annex on the far left. The entrance to the children's wing was in the basement to the left of the front steps and so is not visible in this view.

the basement of the library annex and had its own external entrance to the left of the front steps.

Like my mother, my aunt Kathy also worked in this library after graduating from high school and I can recall being taken to visit her on a regular basis during the summer of 1955 after I had completed first grade. By then I was learning to read and my mother had enrolled me in a summer reading program for children sponsored by the library. My graduation certificate (figure 5.5) still exists, as well as a list of the ten books I supposedly read that summer, though I have absolutely no memory of any of them. But what I do remember is several futile visits for the explicit purpose of checking out the latest Dr. Seuss book

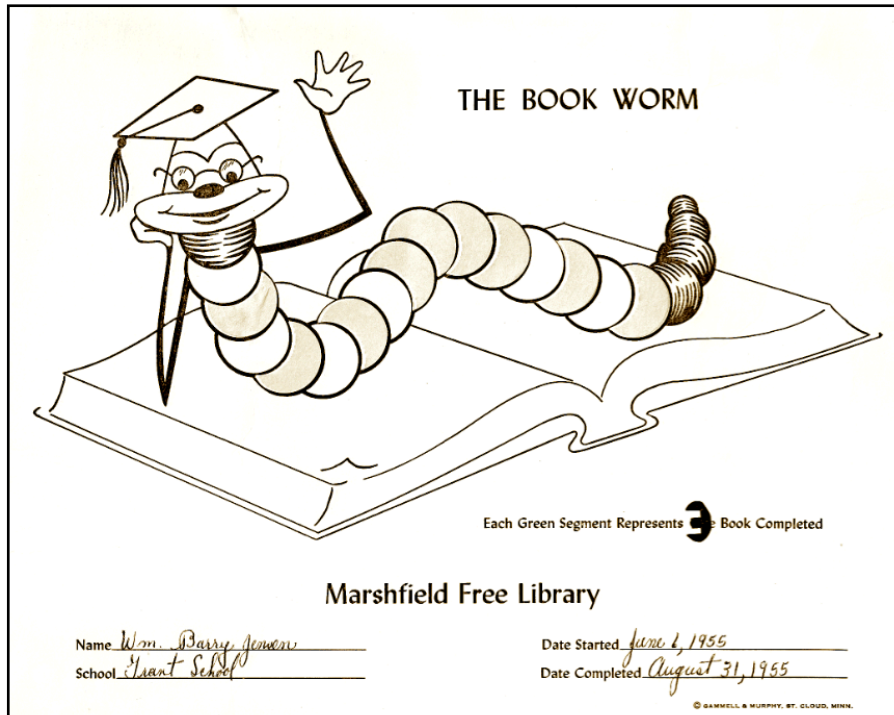


Figure 5.5. My graduation certificate from the children's reading program at the Marshfield Library for the summer of 1955.

(I believe this was *Horton Hears a Who*). It is difficult to imagine how wildly popular the Dr. Seuss books were when they first appeared and how radically different and imaginative in comparison with other children's books of the time.

However, the waiting list for Seuss was long and on several occasions we found that it had already been checked out by others. This continuous deferment of gratification gradually worked me into a frenzy of anticipation and, though my mother attempted to placate me with the assorted adventures of *Babar the Elephant*, these were, to say the least, quite tepid in comparison with Seuss. Our quest was finally successful when the library, in response to the great demand, purchased several additional copies of the book, and my aunt Kathy took the initiative of setting one of them aside for us to check out on our next visit.

## **The Wausau Public Library**

Following her marriage, some 18 years would pass before my mother would once again enter the world of libraries and librarians. How it came to be that she was forced to reenter the work force has been described in Chapter 2, though I do not know the details of how she finally ended up at the Wausau Public Library. As already related in that chapter, she was very unhappy with the first few jobs she tried and, perhaps remembering how much she had enjoyed working at the Marshfield Free Library all those many years ago, she may have simply walked into the library and asked if there were any positions available.

The Wausau Public Library, as I knew it growing up, was dominated by two memorable librarians – Miss Dorothea Krause and Miss Florence Hensey, though of course I would never have dared to address either by their first names. To me, and indeed to all of the children and teenagers of Wausau – and I suspect to most of its adults as well – they were always known simply as Miss Krause and Miss Hensey. They were typical spinster librarians who had entered the profession at a time when either spinsterhood or widowhood were considered a necessary prerequisite, as was also the case for most of the women teachers I had in both grade school and high school. The attitude at the time was basically that, if you also had a husband and children of your own to care for, you could not possibly be doing your professional job properly.

Miss Krause was short and rotund, whereas Miss Hensey was tall and thin. Both wore their glasses on a chain, which in Miss Krause's case would dangle, when not in use, over the edge of the massive ski slope that was her bosom, whereas in the case of Miss Hensey – well let's just say that there was no ski slope to worry about. Both women ruled over their respective domains with a firm and determined hand (recall this was when there were no cell phones, when no food or



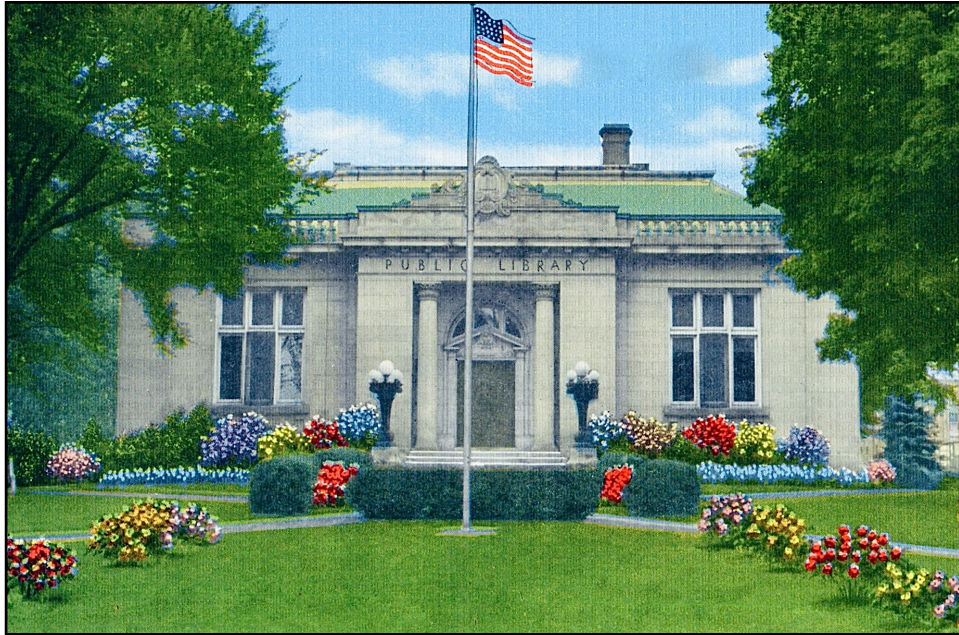


Figure 5.6. A circa 1915 colorized postcard of the original Carnegie building that housed the Wausau Public Library from 1907 to 1968.

drink were allowed, and when one was required to speak in whispers).

In the case of Miss Krause, this domain was the adult wing of the library, which was housed in the original 1907 Carnegie library building (figure 5.6) located on First Street in Alexander Park across from the old Post Office. This was a wonderful structure with large stone fireplaces at either end of the reading room, a massive central desk of oak, and large deep leather chairs in which one could doze while intermittently attempting to read the latest issue of the *Illustrated London News*.

In the case of Miss Hensey, this domain was the children's wing that was housed on the second floor of the 1929 Parcher addition on the backside of the Carnegie building, and which – by some unexplained miracle never to be repeated again in the history of American civic architecture – had actually been built in the same style and from the same materials as the earlier Carnegie building. I might further add that Krause and Hensey were close friends, who, in order to conserve

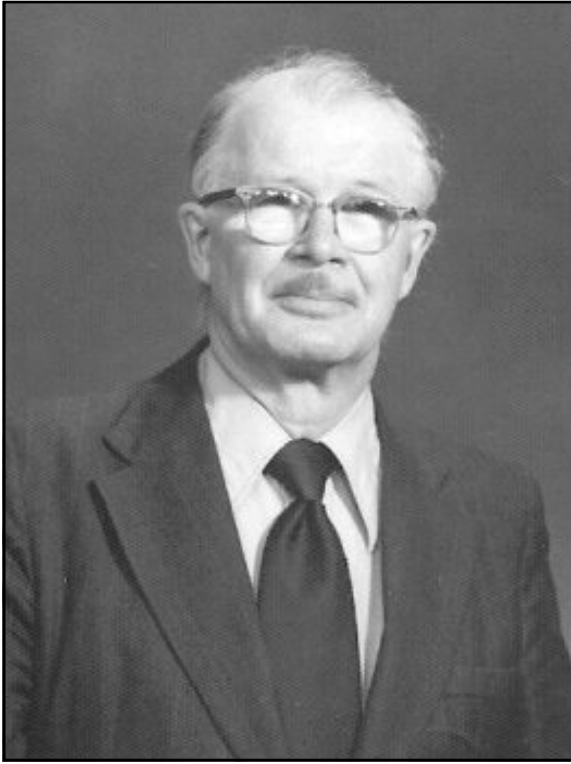


Figure 5.7. Wayne Bassett  
(1915-1988)

their meager salaries, shared a modest house on 6th Avenue, and I can recall often biking past their home when we lived at Laffines and I attended Lincoln School. I also believe that they frequently took vacations together and co-owned, like many Wisconsinites of their generation, a small cabin somewhere “up north.”

#### **Mr. Bassett**

My mother was hired by the library in February of 1965 and, according to my sister, Linda, this was largely due to

the fact that the library had acquired a new director the previous month in the person of one Wayne Bassett (figure 5.7). With Bassett’s arrival Miss Krause became Head of Technical Services while Miss Hensey continued in her previous position. Both would finally retire sometime in the mid 1970s. Like many new appointees, I suspect that Bassett coupled his acceptance of the position with a request for additional staff and found my mother’s name on the waiting list of interested applicants. Linda recalls being later told that, in the subsequent discussions, Bassett had strongly supported hiring my mother despite the fact that she had neither a college degree nor formal training in library science.

And he was also willing to accommodate her special circumstances with regard to my sister. As already mentioned in Chapter 2, I

was within a month of turning 17 when my mother went to work at the library and Stephen was 14, so we were both old enough to fend for ourselves after school, but Linda was only 10 and still in grade school. This meant that she was about to become what was later known as a “latchkey kid.” She recalls that my mother’s anxiety over this resulted, for safety reasons, in “lots of rules.” Thus, for example, she was not to linger after school but was required instead to come directly home and lock herself in the house, and she was neither to leave the house again nor let others in until my mother arrived home from work around 6:00 pm. If she could not attend school because of sickness she would stay next door with Mrs. Baumann.

This situation was further complicated by my mother’s refusal her entire life to either own or drive a car. This meant that she walked the mile and a half distance between the house on 10th Avenue and the library (and later a similar distance after the move to Lincoln Avenue). This she did twice a day, five days a week, year round, in all kinds of weather, and often in high heels (which would later result in severe foot problems). It also meant that, in order to arrive at the library at the usual starting time, she had to leave home well before my sister was up and ready to leave for school. Bassett was sympathetic and allowed my mother to start work a half hour later so she could at least see my sister off to school each morning, though this, of course, also meant that her work day ended a half hour later than most.

### **From the Basement to the Front Desk**

In keeping with her limited qualifications, my mother was initially consigned to the basement of the Carnegie building and given the task of repairing books. She also taught me how to do the same – a skill that would serve me well, since, among the thousands of used books I have acquired over the years, there were many that required repair of one sort or another. Using vendor catalogs from the library, we were

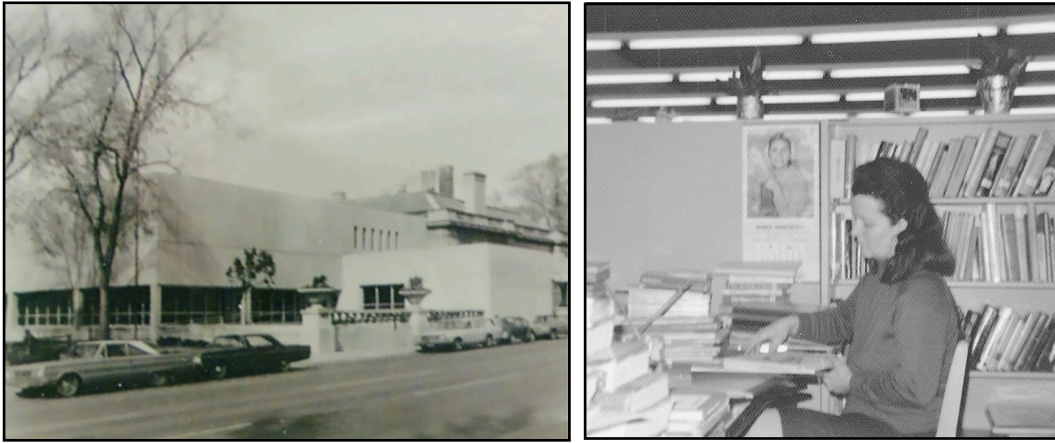


Figure 5.8. *Left:* The new 1968 library building which replaced the original Carnegie building. The roof line of the 1929 Parcher addition is just visible on the far right. *Right:* Circa 1972. My mother (age 44) repairing books in the basement of the new library building. Both images are unfortunately based on tiny washed-out, low resolution colored snapshots.

able to purchase the necessary professional binding supplies for use at home, though I eventually discovered that many of these materials deteriorated over time and actually defaced the books they were intended to preserve. This was in large part because they were designed as a temporary fix for the heavy damage often inflicted by the public on library books that it was assumed would eventually either be discarded or replaced. Later, after I became a professor at the University of Cincinnati, I would learn of more appropriate binding materials for my personal library – including the many virtues of Japanese mulberry paper – from a woman who ran a book binding service in the basement of one of the used book stores near campus.

As already mentioned, when my mother began work in 1965 the adult wing of the library was still housed in the original 1907 Carnegie building. All of this changed three years later in 1968 when this building was torn down and replaced by a much larger hypermodern structure that was totally out of keeping with the architectural style of the original 1929 Parcher addition, which





Figure 5.9. My mother posing with some of her library co-workers, circa 1976. *Front, left to right:* Elizabeth Scully, my mother (age 48). *Back, left to right:* Pat Schoonover, Faye Maas, Beth Drees, and Gary Gisselman.

continued to be used for the children's wing (figure 5.8, left). Here my mother's book repair activities were once again housed in the basement, as testified to by a blurry polaroid snapshot of her at her work table taken several years later by one of her fellow employees (figure 5.8, right).

The loss of the Carnegie building was a sad day for the architectural heritage of Wausau, but was typical of a time when many other cities and towns were doing the same with their original Carnegie libraries, most of which dated from the first two decades of the century. Ironically, those few that managed to survive this architectural slaughter are today considered to be historical landmarks and are the pride of their respective communities.

In the early years in the Carnegie building, it was occasionally





Figure 5.10. Circa 1966. My mother (age 38) attending a library training workshop.

necessary during the summers, when there was no school, for my mother to bring my sister to work and Linda would usually occupy herself in the children's wing reading. She also recalls that my mother would take her to various staff parties. In this way she became well known to many of my mother's coworkers (figure 5.9), such as Margaret Spindler, Pat Schoonover, Heidi Berg (for whom she would later babysit), H. Barbara Schmoeckel (who did graphic design for the library and shared my mother's basement abode), and especially Elizabeth Scully, who was Head of the Reference Department. As a consequence, when of high school age, Linda was hired by Elizabeth to work in the library's reference department, which she did until the spring of her senior year (1973), when she took a job with a local television station.

Though my mother continued to be in charge of book repair until her retirement in 1990, her responsibilities in the library gradually began to expand. As early as 1966 she had begun to attend various library training programs (figure 5.10) and even an occasional library



Figure 5.11. My mother (age 44, far right) and her teenage pages posing in front of the main entrance to the new library. They are dressed in period costumes as part of the 1972 Wausau centennial celebrations.

conference. She would also eventually meet, largely through the good graces of Miss Krause, other public librarians throughout the state. By 1972 she was supervising the teenage girls in the library's page program (figure 5.11), some of whom she trained to help with the day to day grunt work of book repair.

However, the job of supervision became increasingly challenging with the passage of time, largely because of the library's decision to avail itself of a federal program designed to promote the employment of persons with either mild mental or physical disabilities. Some of the teenage girls hired under this program came from rather dubious family backgrounds and, in one case at least, it was necessary for my mother to have a conversation with one of them on the subject of personal hygiene.

Far worse, however, was an older woman hired under this program who took a violent dislike to my mother and managed to



Figure 5.12. A publicity photo showing my mother (age 40) and fellow coworker, Pat Schoonover, working at the front desk of the new library. This was taken to accompany an article on the library that appeared in the *Wausau Record-Herald* in April of 1968.

make her life such a misery that she actually considered resigning. Initially my mother responded by going out of her way to be friendly with the woman and lavish attention on her, but this seemed to make the situation even worse. Finally, she gave up and chose instead to totally ignore her. Surprisingly, this resolved the matter since, once the woman discovered that she could not provoke a response from my mother, she found other victims to provoke instead – disruptive

behavior that eventually led to her dismissal.

With time my mother was also increasingly assigned to duty behind the front desk of the new library (figure 5.12) where she soon became a well-known figure to library patrons. In those years, if I encountered a stranger in or from Wausau, I had only to mention that I was the son of the Mrs. Jensen who worked at the public library and I would be greeted with a response of instant recognition. During college, whenever friends from my high school days returned to Wausau and wanted an update on my whereabouts, they would immediately make a beeline for the library to talk with my mother.

Like the supervision of the pages, interacting with the public at the front desk also had its challenges. Starting in the 1970s politicians, in order to save money, began closing more and more state-run mental facilities and dumping their less violent occupants on the streets where they quickly became part of the homeless population. Soon public parks and other facilities, such as public libraries, were overrun by these unfortunates – a situation that was further exasperated by various highly vocal, self-appointed, advocates of their civil rights who violently opposed any police enforcement of vagrancy laws. When coupled with the usual unemployed eccentrics who chose to while away their days in the library, these circumstances made for some unsettling confrontations.

From her time working in the reference department, my sister can recall at least two such incidents. One involved a character who brought a small mirror to the library each day and who would spend his time trying to use it to look up the skirts of the librarians – and especially those of my mother's teenage pages – whenever they had to climb a ladder to fetch something from a high shelf. The second involved a man with Tourette's Syndrome who would have seizures in front of the main desk during which he would shout – much to the distress of the other patrons – profanities at the top of his lungs.

## **Changes Both Good and Bad**

The replacement of the Carnegie building was not the only change to occur during my mother's tenure at the library. When the new building was opened in 1968, the library owned close to 87,000 books and served more than 23,000 patrons. In fact, for a brief period after its completion, it was the largest public library in the state. However, in 1974 the library's vital statistics more than doubled overnight when it was merged with the County Library to become the Marathon County Library, with Mr. Bassett as its overall director. The County Library had previously been housed in the basement of the County Courthouse and had dealt largely with the operation of the bookmobiles that served the smaller rural communities of the county. Over time this merger would also lead to the establishment of eight branch libraries located in the nearby towns of Athens, Edgar, Hatley, Mosinee, Marathon, Spencer, Rothschild, and Stratford, as well as branches in Schofield, Brokow and Colby that were eventually discontinued.

In 1983 Mr. Bassett would finally retire at age 68. After his departure my mother felt that the working conditions at the library began to progressively deteriorate. Bassett was known for his personal managerial style and a sense of each employee's individuality and needs, but, in keeping with the ever-increasing size and complexity of the library, the newer administration became increasingly impersonal and adversarial in dealing with its employees. This unfortunate situation was further aggravated by the continuing failure of the County Board to properly fund the library and the resulting necessity of reducing the staff through dismissals.

Though, as we will see in the next chapter, my mother would retire in 1990 at age 62 largely for reasons related to her private life, she was, I think, also to a certain extent tired of a job that had become increasingly stressful and demoralizing. In this regard it is of interest to note that, within a few years of her retirement, several of her





Figure 5.14. Current building for the Marathon County Library.

coworkers would elect to take early retirement as well. Indeed, by the early 1990s not only were most of her close coworkers gone, but the library itself had once again outgrown its home. Consequently in 1995 both the 1968 building in which my mother had spent most of her career and the original 1929 Parcher addition were torn down and replaced by the current structure (figure 5.14). Nevertheless, her journals reveal that, as late as 2008, she continued to collect newspaper clippings related to the library. Most of these dealt with budget cuts, staff layoffs and salary reductions, and perhaps served to justify her decision to bail out before things really began to go down hill.

### **Memorabilia**

Though all public reminders of her 25 year career at the public library would disappear within five years of her retirement, there were many



Figure 5.15. The oak library table and chairs as they looked in the dining room of the upstairs apartment on Lincoln Avenue.

private reminders scattered about my mother's final home on Lincoln Avenue in addition to her official retirement plaque, which hung on the wall in the upstairs apartment. Shortly after the move to the new library building in 1968, she had noticed, thanks to her basement abode, that a large amount of oak furniture from the old Carnegie building was also being stored there. Curious, she asked what was going to happen to these discards and, on being told that they were slated for disposal, she further asked if she could buy some of the items. She was told yes and she purchased one of the circular oak library tables, along with a half dozen expansion leaves, and twelve oak chairs. These became the family's dining room set for the next 47 years – first on 10th Avenue, then in the upstairs apartment on Lincoln Avenue (figure 5.15), and finally in the downstairs apartment. Since her death, the table and chairs have found a new home at my brother's house, where they continue to serve her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

In addition to the table and chairs, my mother was also allowed to purchase a small section of the original oak central desk, which was resplendent on the back side with dozens upon dozens of drawers of various sizes designed to hold everything from index cards to pencils and paper. On 10th Avenue this served as a breakfast counter in the tiny kitchen and on Lincoln Avenue as a work surface for the many art and crafts projects with which she entertained her grandchildren. Since her death, the desk section has found a new home as part of my sister's future design studio.

During my mother's early years at the library, the official policy with regard to book donations was that any items not of use to the library were to be destroyed. However, sometime after my mother's move to Lincoln Avenue in 1976, this policy was changed and any items not of interest to the library were instead set aside to be sold at an annual library used book sale. Employees of the library were also given the privilege of previewing these items prior to the sale and of purchasing any that might interest them. At the time I was still in graduate school and, every Friday evening during these years, Judy and I would drive from Madison to Wausau so Judy could spend the weekend helping her aging aunt. By then my sister had long since grown up and married and my mother's work schedule had changed accordingly, such that she usually worked the front desk on Friday evenings when the library remained open until 9:00 pm. Consequently, after arriving in Wausau and first checking in at her aunt's house, Judy and I would drive to the library in order to both give my mother a ride home after the library closed and to peruse the treasures in the basement awaiting the annual book sale. For several years this was a Friday night ritual and in this manner I gradually acquired lovely editions of many of the classics of American and British literature – most of which would occupy the built-in book shelves in my mother's upstairs apartment that are visible in figure 5.1.

In addition, as already mentioned, over the years my mother

would drag home dozens upon dozens of discarded children's books and art and crafts books for her grandchildren. These were so tattered and worn out from years of public abuse that they were deemed unfit for the annual used book sale. Likewise, when the expanded Marathon County Library absorbed the small Joseph Dessert Memorial Library in Mosinee, large runs of bound journals and magazines were deemed redundant and slated for shredding. Once again my mother came to the rescue and her downstairs apartment contained a lovely 30-year run of bound *National Geographic Magazine* that she saved, and a similar run of bound *Scientific American* from the 1920s and 1930s gradually found its way into the Oesper Collections in the History of Chemistry at the University of Cincinnati.

In closing, I cannot help but remark that, if there is such a thing as a librarian gene, it probably runs in our family. In addition to my mother, I have already mentioned my sister's brief sojourn at the Wausau Public Library and my aunt Kathy's earlier employment at the Marshfield Free Library. Kathy would later spend 39 years working as a volunteer at the genealogical library run by the Mormon Church in Shawano Wisconsin and would author several articles on how to conduct genealogical research. Even I seem to suffer from this affliction, since, in my capacity for the last 30 years as Curator for the Oesper Collections in the History of Chemistry at the University of Cincinnati, I have been in charge not only of its apparatus museum, but of its rare book and journal collection as well, and have probably interacted over the years far more extensively with the staff of the university library than with my fellow colleagues in the chemistry department.