

Lura Slaughter and Mary Ahern: In the Service of Libraries

By Laura M. Wilkerson

The United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917, almost three years after the conflict erupted across Europe and spread across the empire into Africa, Asia and the Pacific (Bosco and Bosco, 2003, p. 46).

As soon as the United States entered the war, the American Library Association (ALA) was asked to set up libraries that would provide reading material to U.S. troops here and abroad (American Library Association [ALA], 1919).

The ALA leapt at the challenge and set about raising a million dollars toward this purpose (Hill and Baldwin, 1917). It exceeded its goal, raising a total of \$1.7 million (ALA, 1918), with small communities often exceeding their goal of having five percent of the population contribute, along with “three or four million books” donated by individuals and organizations to the ALA for the purpose of supplying service men with reading material (ALA, 1918). The state of Indiana raised \$49,414 toward this goal (Hill & Baldwin, 1917).

Along with camp libraries and branches, some maintained by partnering with organizations such as The Red Cross and the YMCA, the ALA took command of organizing libraries within military hospitals for the benefit of wounded soldiers. The report, *Books at Work During the Armistice and After* (ALA, 1919), elaborates:

“The trained hospital librarian knows a good book when she sees one. She knows men, too, and administers books with as much professional skill as the physician does his medicine. One of the leading psychiatrists of the country tells us it is almost impossible to over-estimate the therapeutic values of reading, and we must consider it in this light as well as in its relation to occupational and recreational work. By means of books misfortune is turned into a blessing.”

With war upon us, plans were made to procure hospital space for military cases (Weed, 1923, p. 28). On September 28, 1918, the owners of the West Baden Springs Hotel entered into a contract with the War Department and the Surgeon General of the United States to lease the hotel complete with all seven buildings then in existence, the golf course and 620 acres of surrounding land for use as a general military hospital at the rate of \$125,000 a year (Weed, 1923, p. 598). The lease went into effect October 15, 1918 and on October 24th the West Baden Hotel was designated General Hospital No. 35 and began accepting patients on November 23, 1918 with the hospital generally treating about 400 patients at any one time with an 800 bed capacity (Weed, 1923, pp. 598-560).

With the hospital at West Baden came a need for a librarian to oversee delivery of library services to the soldiers being treated there. The person selected was Lura Carr Slaughter, Librarian for the Spencer Public Library in Owen County, Indiana (“Miss Lura Slaughter,” 1919; “Camp library service,” 1919; ALA, 1919a).



This photograph of Lura Slaughter is being used with permission from Kari Anderson who said it was, “taken to commemorate Lura’s graduation from Syracuse.”

Lura Carr was born January 23, 1884 in Escanaba, Michigan (M. O’Brien, Syracuse University Archives, personal communication, February 14, 2011) to Tom and Josie Slaughter (*U.S. Federal Census collection*, 1900). Her family soon moved to Hudson, Wisconsin where they were involved in the lumber industry there (Celia Stolz, personal communication, February 28, 2012).

It is lost to history how Lura caught the library bug but in 1906 she enrolled at Syracuse University to undertake a two-year course of study that would earn her a degree in Library Economy (M. O'Brien, M., Syracuse University Archives, personal communication, February 14, 2012).

Lura studied under Mary O'Bryon Sibley. Her course of study to earn her degree in Library Economy included German, French, and Italian or Spanish, English, literature, biology, bibliography, book selection, library history, typing, cataloguing, classification, accession, book binding, circulation, selection, "library buildings and appliances," reference, "topics" and indexing. Students also were required to complete a practicum in the profession (M. O'Brien, Syracuse University Archives, personal communication, February 14, 2012).

Lura graduated from Syracuse in 1908 and accepted a position as a cataloger at the St. Louis Public Library ("Syracuse library school," 1909). She stayed there until the end of 1912 when she accepted the position of Librarian at the Spencer Public Library (*Spencer Library Board*, 1912; A. Bahr-Evola, St. Louis Public Library, personal communication, January 13, 2012).

Lura Slaughter was personally recommended for the position by Mary Ahern, a true force and advocate for the profession and a person key to the founding of the Spencer Public Library (Smith, 1931).

Mary Eileen Ahern was born October 1, 1860 on a farm southwest of Indianapolis to Irish immigrant parents, William and Mary Ahern ("Miss Mary Ahern," 1938). In 1870, her father took a position on the estate of Calvin Fletcher¹ and the family moved to Spencer where her mother died two years later (*Pictorial and Biographical Memoirs*, 1893, pp. 120-121). Mary Ahern graduated from Spencer High School in 1878 (*Pictorial and Biographical Memoirs*, 1893, pp. 120-121). She went on to graduate from Central Normal College and then taught school in Spencer, Bloomfield and Peru, Indiana before her appointment as Assistant State Librarian in 1889, being instrumental in the formation of the Indiana Library Association in 1891 ("Fostering Libraries," 1925; "Miss Mary Ahern," 1938). She was elected

1 For more information about the Fletcher estate, see Wilkerson, Laura M. (Jan. 11, 2012). "Spencer and the Rose Parade," *Spencer Evening World*, p.A1.

State Librarian by the legislature in 1893 (*Pictorial and Biographical Memoirs*, 1893, pp. 120-121).

At the end of her term as State Librarian, Miss Ahern successfully lobbied for a law that took control of the State Library away from the legislature, where positions were sometimes given on patronage rather than merit, and placed in the hands of the State Board of Education ("Miss Mary Ahern," 1938). She then spent a year in Chicago, Illinois obtaining technical library training at the Armour Institute of Technology under Katherine L. Sharp ("Miss Mary Ahern," 1938; Passet, 1991, p. 210). In 1896, she founded the publication *Public Libraries*² and remained its editor for the next thirty-six years ("Miss Mary Ahern," 1938), employing, as Melvil Dewey wrote in his own, singular style, her "fasil, efisient & sumtyms militant pen" (Dewey, 1931).

Mary Ahern, a librarian to the bone, had a passion for organizing and as a leader in the ALA she had a particular interest promoting library service in small, rural libraries ("Death has ended," 1939; "Librarian succumbs," 1938). She also kept her interest in Spencer, returning many times to vacation at the Canyon Inn in McCormick's Creek State Park and visit with family and friends there ("Death Claims," 1938; "Librarian Succumbs," 1938; "Miss Mary Ahern," 1938).

The Indiana State Legislature passed a law in 1901 allowing for small communities to be able to take up a subscription for the purpose of establishing a public library in their communities that would afterward be supported by a tax levy (Smith, 1931). The passage of this law engendered a vigorous exchange of letters between Sally Meek Hickam of Spencer and Mary Ahern of Chicago (Owen County Public Library, n.d.; "Willis Hickam," 1978).

The correspondence culminated with Mary Ahern returning to Spencer in order to give a talk to the Woman's Club there. After a reportedly rousing speech on the topic of public libraries, Mary Ahern topped off the evening by offering to give Spencer five hundred books to form a nucleus of a public library there (Owen County Public Library, n.d.).

2 Later titled simply *Libraries*.

The town of Spencer accepted Mary Ahern's gift and in April 2, 1906, a notice of subscription was presented to the Spencer Board of Trustees in the amount of \$388.05 and on April 10th the first two members of the newly formed library board were appointed ("Spencer Public Library was founded," 1931). Two months later a tax rate was set at 3 cents on each \$100.00 in property taxes to support a public library which, it was decided, would be established in the top two rooms of the Town Hall building ("Spencer Public Library was founded," 1931). Edna Smith (1931) writes of Miss Ahern and her relationship with the Spencer Public Library thusly, "Her gifts have not only been liberal but timely and judicious and selected with knowledge of our needs. Although her editorial duties were exacting in their demands upon her time and strength she has never failed to give careful consideration to our every problem and to respond with wise counsel and often very practical assistance. To Miss Ahern's untiring interest, more than any other one factor, we owe our growth and expansion."

The library grew steadily over the next few years to the point that the citizens of Owen County decided they needed a larger space and submitted a request for a building grant from Andrew Carnegie. Their first request was denied, but in 1911 the philanthropist approved a \$10,000 grant contingent upon the city securing a building site. This was done, and in June, 1911 the new Carnegie Library was opened in Downtown Spencer with Mary Ahern "patron saint," as a guest of honor (Spencer Library, 1910, 1911). Indeed, in an undated 1911 entry, the board requested that the librarian, Reba Davis, "write to Miss Ahern and ask for her picture which would be hung in the library suitably framed."

Reba Davis resigned in 1911 and "Miss Anna Gray of Gosport," described as a "trained librarian," stepped in on a temporary basis (Smith, 1931).

Mary Ahern, "was appealed to, as usual, and sent us Lura Slaughter who stayed with us for six years" (Smith, 1931).

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly how Mary Ahern first made the acquaintance of Lura Slaughter. In her position as editor of *Public Libraries*, she acted as something of a one-woman placement officer for young librarians (Passet, 1991, p. 214).

In the final edition of *Libraries*, Newberry Librarian, George B. Utley (1931), wrote, "Miss Ahern, more than anyone else we know, was for years instrumental in bringing together the job and the deserving person. Back in the days before the A.L.A. had been able to develop effectively its personnel service, her interest and her help could always be generously and freely secured. Trustees in all parts of the country leaned on her for advice, not only about running their libraries, but for suggestions and recommendations in securing the best available persons to run them."

Mary Ahern must have thought very highly of Lura Slaughter to recommend her to a library that held such a special place in her heart.³ Lura Slaughter first appears in the Owen County Board Minutes in the December, 1912. In September, 1912, she left Spencer to accept a position as a librarian at the city library in Dallas, Texas but returned to Spencer after just a few days there. An article in the *Owen Leader* dated September 9, 1914 explained, "She confesses the most overpowering home-sickness for the little Spencer library and her many friends. The work there proved not to be of her liking." The board had agreed to hold her position vacant for thirty days and Lura Slaughter wired them that she was "coming home" ("Miss Slaughter Returns," 1914).

A little over a year later, Lura Slaughter was in the news again when the December 9, 1915 edition of the *Owen County Journal* reported that she had been involved, as a passenger, in what is believed to be the first automobile accident in Owen County when a car driven by Oliver Hickam on a Sunday morning, "ran into a ditch near Rattlesnake Bridge on the Patricksburg Road about three miles west of Spencer and turned turtle."

The *Journal* reported, "Miss Slaughter was struck on the head by parts of the car and so severely injured that for a time it was thought she would have a concussion of the brain. She was rendered unconscious and cannot remember anything what ever of the manner in which the accident happened."

3 As evidenced by the trust Miss Ahern left the Spencer Public Library in her Last Will and Testament.

Another passenger in the car, Miss Olive Engor, was severely injured with a broken hip while a third passenger, Mrs. John Page of Grand Rapids, Michigan, escaped with minor injuries while the driver, who rescued a trapped Miss Engor from drowning, emerged unharmed (The First Automobile Accident, 1915).

Lura Slaughter recovered from her injuries (Miss Engor Improving, 1915) and returned to work at the Spencer Library.

As Passet (1991, 215 – 217) demonstrates, trustees of public libraries at the turn of the last century put great stock in the sociability of a potential librarian and with the advent of the United States' entry into World War I. Lura Slaughter really proved her worth in this respect, throwing herself with great zeal and passion into organizing the library as, "a center for war activities as well as for the circulation of books" (Smith, 1931).

According to Smith (1931), Lura Slaughter organized, "The Owen County branch for French Relief," as well as "The Owen County Chapter of the Red Cross," and "The Junior Red Cross Society." She arranged for, "Lectures on food conservation, drives for Liberty Loans, collected books for war libraries," which, "made the library into a community house during those stirring times."

Smith (1931) reports that Lura Slaughter, "was selected by the State Committee to be one of several librarians to go to French Lick to catalog and get ready for circulation the books collected over the state which were to be sent to the soldiers in the cantonments and we gladly gave her leave of absence." From this, Lura Slaughter was eventually appointed Librarian over General Hospital No. 35 at West Baden Springs.

The ALA (1918), from the beginning of the War, put special emphasis on library work in military hospitals. They had the foresight to see that "The many who were accustomed to library service in Army and Navy hospitals" would become advocates for local public libraries and indeed, after the War, ALA offices were inundated with requests from discharged service men seeking to establish free public libraries in their hometowns at a time when it was estimated that more than 50% of all communities in the United States, representing about 70% of the total population, had either no access or inadequate access to books and "a public reading room."

An accompanying illustration depicts a Doughboy following a trial of books labeled "Drafting," "Citizenship," "Building," "Business," "Engineering," captioned with the phrases, "Knowledge Wins" and "Public Library Books are Free."

In March, 1919, the transfer of patients to the West Baden hospital was halted (Weed, 1923, p. 600) and the Surgeon General recommended the facility for closure by May 15th of that year. The soldiers remaining at the hospital were transferred out "at the rate of about 50 each week, until April 29th, when the last sick had been moved out." On May 8, 1919, the hospital was closed.

Lura Slaughter returned to Spencer and her job at the library, but not for long. The September 17, 1919 edition of the *Owen Leader* carried the story that the Tri Kappa sorority had thrown a shower for Lura Slaughter on the occasion of her upcoming winter wedding to Mr. Warner Carr. The article notes that Miss Slaughter would be leaving, "this Friday for her home in Marinette, Wisconsin," and that, "The presents were many and beautiful, ranging from kitchen necessities, cut glass and silver to the daintiest of needlework. She was a very efficient librarian and enthusiastic worker in everything that meant the good of the town and young people." Mary Ahern then supplied the Spencer Public Library with its next Librarian, Margaret Sentell, also a graduate of Syracuse University (Camp library services, 1919a; Smith 1931).

Mary Ahern stayed on after the War with the ALA in the office of "Overseas Service." She acted as the ALA's "publicity agent" and was responsible for the reorganization of the French Library System after the War (ALA, 1919a; Death Has Ended, 1938). She continued on as the editor of *Public Libraries* until her eyesight failed her and the publication was discontinued in 1931 (Death Has Ended, 1938). Even after *Public Libraries* ended, Mary Ahern, who never married and had no children, maintained her keen interest in libraries; especially the Spencer Public Library (Miss Mary Ahern, 1938). She died Sunday, May 22, 1938 at the age of 77 while en route on a train from Orlando, Florida, where she had fallen ill some two weeks before, to her home at the Hotel Windemere in Chicago, Illinois (Librarian Succumbs, 1938).

She was cremated and her remains buried at Riverside Cemetery in Spencer (Major Abraham Owen Daughters of the American Revolution Chapter, 1983).

Family lore has it that Lura Slaughter met Warner Carr when the young man came into Spencer Public Library to check out a book and was immediately smitten by the enthusiastic librarian (Kari Anderson, personal communication, January 23, 2012). Warner Carr was born in Indiana but was actually living in St. Louis with his parents, Robert and Augusta Carr, in the years before Lura Slaughter worked as a cataloger at the St. Louis Public Library, but he was only six years old in the 1900 Census and there is no evidence that Lura Slaughter knew the Carr family during this time. The 1910 Census finds Warner Carr living with his parents in Indianapolis (U.S. Federal Census collection, 1900, 1910).

Warner Carr was an ambitious young man who studied at the Art Institute of Chicago (Kari Anderson, personal communication, January 23, 2012) and he and Lura Slaughter were married in that city on December 6, 1919 (Cook County, 2010). The 1920 Census finds Warner and Lura living in Chicago where he is employed as an artist for an advertising agency and Lura's occupation is listed as "none" (U.S. Federal Census collection, 1920).

By the 1930 Census, Lura and Warner had settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and were living with their two children, Robert, 9, and Jane, 7, along with Warner's parents, Robert and Augusta. Warner's profession is still that of "artist" and he is now owner of his own business. Lura's profession is still listed as "none" (U.S. Federal Census collection, 1930).

The Great Depression took its toll on Lura and Warner and they lost their home in Milwaukee and moved to a cottage at Pewaukee Lake with their two children and Warner's parents (Celia Stolz, personal communication, February 28, 2012).

At the end of the 1930s, Warner and Lura purchased a dairy farm in Whitewater Wisconsin. Lura's granddaughter, Celia Stolz, remembers Lura as, "a very loving grandma with flour on her hands, and sometimes baby chicks in those hands (personal communication, February 28, 2012). Ms. Stolz recalls that Lura had "a weaving loom much larger than she" and that she produced, "fine draperies, place mats and other practical but lovely pieces" (personal communication, February 28, 2012).

She also recalls Lura was an "enthusiastic" member of the Episcopal Church and especially remembers attending an impressive "strawberry ice cream social" with her (Celia Stolz, personal communication, February 28, 2012).

Lura and Warner sold the farm in that late 1940s and moved back to the Pewaukee – Merton area before moving to a duplex in Heartland, WI in 1955 while Warner continued to live in Milwaukee during the week where he worked for an advertising agency as an artist. After Warner retired in a few years later they moved to Madison, Wisconsin where their daughter Jane Anderson and her husband lived (Celia Stolz, personal communication, February 28, 2012).

Lura Slaughter Carr died in Wisconsin, December 18, 1963, after an eighteen month battle with colon cancer (Mrs. Warner Car Dies, 1963, Celia Stolz, personal communication, February 28, 2012).

When Lura Slaughter left Spencer to be married, the community wanted her to know, "We are very sorry to see her go but the best wishes of her friends go with her to her new home with its promises of joy and happiness she so richly deserves" (Gives Shower, 1919). One hopes those best wishes were fulfilled to the fullest measure.⁴

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Final Note:

Two interesting tidbits came up during my research related to Lura Slaughter's family that I wanted to include. (1) Her granddaughter, Kari Anderson, became a librarian. She is the Chief of Reader Services at the Joint Forces Staff College Library in Norfolk, Virginia - a neat tie-in with her grandmother's WWI library service. Lura's other granddaughter, Celia, has a summer home in Green Bay where she can see the lighthouse on Escanaba Island where Lura was born. She writes that she sees the lighthouse often - and it makes her think of Lura.

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