

Reading *versus* the Red Bull: Cultural Constructions of Democracy and the Public Library in Cold War Wisconsin

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During the run-up to the November 1952 election, newspaper readers in Luxemburg, a small town in Kewaunee County, Wisconsin, encountered competing appeals for their vote. The Republican Party dramatized the choices facing the electorate. "Joe McCarthy Says: Give Ike a Good Staff to Control the Red Bull!" proclaimed a typical advertisement. "It's time we all saw Red! Vote Solid Republican November 4th." Depicting a pawing and snorting bull as "Communism and Corruption," the ad continued: "In China, Europe and the Middle East, the red bull has enslaved almost three quarter billion humans. . . . In Washington, the headlines tell of corruption and red influence in high places. . . . Contrast all this," it asked "with clean Republican government in Wisconsin. Free of deals and debt . . . free of communism and corruption!"¹

The lines of the cold war had formed, as Republicans and other critics pointed to the Stalinist domination of Eastern Europe as evidence that although the Democrats had won World War II, they had lost the peace.² Fascism may have gone underground, but already some in politics and the media had found a new bogey: communism.³ By the late 1940s, accusations of disloyalty were multiplying; in February 1950, Joseph R. McCarthy, Republican senator from Appleton, Wisconsin (a few miles from Kewaunee County), loaned his name to a phenomenon that was already under way.⁴ Public rhetoric was infused with the vocabulary of patriotism and anti-communism, often presented as synonymous with

democracy. Media reports helped to sustain a continuous sense of urgency. School textbooks also adopted language that reflected the new cultural climate. Whereas in the mid-1940s educational journals had stressed the need for international government and social-science education, four or five years later, calls for heightened patriotism, loyalty and anti-communism were common.⁵ Religious leaders, too, stressed political issues in their sermons. As a young evangelical preacher at Protestant revivals, Billy Graham repeatedly hammered home a message that identified communism with Satan. Speeches by Francis Cardinal Spellman and the pages of the *Brooklyn Tablet* and the Knights of Columbus's monthly magazine *Columbia* reinforced the pro-McCarthy views of Catholic conservatives.⁶

But in the same *Luxemburg News* issues as the strident Republican advertisements, a public library column urged readers to consider all sides of a question before making up their minds in the forthcoming election. "Reading only one newspaper or one news magazine is a sure method of acquiring a closed mind on political issues," earnestly counseled library assistant Helen Arnold. "If we read *Time* and the *U.S. News*, we ought also to read the *New Republic* and the *Nation*. . . . [S]oon we'll find ourselves evaluating material, separating truth from that which is false, or hoping we are."⁷ The essence of democracy, this writer implied, lay in the careful, reasoned consideration of alternative views in the light of printed evidence.

These two styles of rhetoric, each making use of a distinct cultural construction of the meaning of democratic participation, aimed for specific, practical outcomes. While McCarthyite advertisements urged voters to elect a Republican president and Congress, the library-inspired articles appealed for support on a different, but not unrelated, issue. In 1950, Kewaunee County and its neighbor, Door County, joined in a state-sponsored experiment to introduce library service to a rural area. Funded jointly by the state of Wisconsin and the two counties, the Door-Kewaunee Regional Library Demonstration established rural bookmobile service, expanded small-town library collections, and organized cooperative cataloguing and book selection. From early in 1950 to the end of 1952, county residents enjoyed access to not only a vastly improved book collection, but also films, pamphlets, a business information service, book talks, and children's story hours.

But now, in the fall of 1952, the demonstration faced a referendum. A "Yes" vote would ensure continued county funding. A "No" vote would dissolve the regional library and sell the bookmobiles. While official Republican campaign literature did not explicitly call for the end of the library project, its rhetoric was far from encouraging. "GREATEST DISAPPEARING ACT ON EARTH" screamed an advertisement in which a cartoon donkey waved a banner of WASTE over a sack of YOUR HARD-EARNED TAX MONEY. "NOW YOU SEE IT AND NOW YOU DON'T!"⁸ By linking appeals to patriotism and fiscal conservatism, Republicans sent a message that did not bode well for the survival of the regional library.

On the other side of the political and cultural divide, library supporters argued that voting for the library made fiscal sense. With laborious—almost painful—logic, the library column spelled out the calculations:

An 80 acre farm valued at \$8,625 . . . paid \$3.66 in taxes. With five individuals in the average family it meant a charge of 73¢ per individual. Considering that a school age child used 27 books and each adult used 2 books, that would mean that 58 books were used per family. Dividing \$3.66 by 58 meant that each book cost the family about 6.3 cents. The total value of the books used was \$20.00.⁹

Less ponderously, 58 local teachers signed a plea; “We, the Rural Teachers of Kewaunee County wish to thank you . . . and sincerely hope you continue such a fine program at the Referendum vote in November.”¹⁰

The Demonstration Area

When Wisconsin Free Library Commission (WFLC) officials were searching for an area for the proposed demonstration, Door and Kewaunee Counties seemed a perfect choice. Occupying the Door Peninsula (an area of outstanding beauty on Lake Michigan), the counties had an appropriate demographic profile—neither too rich, nor too poor. More important, local librarians and citizens had to be enthusiastic, and the municipalities willing to take part.¹¹ The chosen area had a total population just over 38,000, two-thirds of whom lived in rural areas. The median income for the two counties was also similar: \$2,438 for families in Door County, \$2,323 for families in Kewaunee County.¹² Local industry included ship-building in Sturgeon Bay and Kewaunee. World War II had brought boom-town conditions, as shipyards expanded their industrial output, but much of the region was still heavily rural, and even remote.¹³ Off the northern tip of Door County lies Washington Island; there, and in other coastal villages, local inhabitants were engaged in fishing waters that could be turbulent and treacherous. The strait between Washington Island and the mainland—Porte des Morts (Death’s Door)—was the site of many wrecks. But fishing communities were not the only inhabitants of northern Door County. For decades prosperous Chicago and Milwaukee families sailed up Lake Michigan to picturesque villages like Ephraim for the summer months. With these affluent visitors came cultural practices virtually unknown elsewhere on the peninsula: an art association, regatta, botany classes and concerts.¹⁴ By 1950, northern Door County had an established tourist industry that attracted not only the wealthy but also campers and resort visitors.

But in the peninsula as a whole, the most common occupation was agriculture.¹⁵ In the late 1940s, agricultural workers still dwelt in enclaves of the ethnic groups who had migrated there in the nineteenth century. In the south of

Kewaunee County, Czechs had settled in Tisch Mills and near Pilsen was a community of Poles. Centered on the Door County town of Brussels were Belgians (many of whom still spoke Walloon), while further north were groups of Norwegians, and Icelanders on Washington Island. German communities, too, were common in Kewaunee County and southern Door County. Often including several generations, families were tightly knit. Women shared farm labor, as did children.

The WFLC most wanted to reach these rural farm families. Cultural authorities defined the rural population's lifestyle—especially literacy levels—as a problem. “More than half the counties of the United States, all of them rural, are being depopulated,” wrote Baker Brownell, professor at Northwestern University, in support of the WFLC's proposal.¹⁶ Since the late 1890s the WFLC had sponsored traveling libraries that brought reading materials to some of Wisconsin's most remote areas.¹⁷ But by the late-1940s, 23 percent of Wisconsin's population still lacked free library access, and rural literacy rates were also low. Most adults in the two counties had no more than an eighth-grade education, and often less. Among farm men and women in Door County, barely one-quarter had more than an eighth-grade education, while in Kewaunee County, this was true of only 18 percent.¹⁸ Most of the area's farm children attended their local one- or two-room school for all eight grades. And rural children's school performance persistently failed to match that of their urban counterparts. The nearer a child came to living in an urban environment, concluded Eugene Rector, University of Wisconsin graduate student in rural sociology, the better his or her chance of successfully concluding the eighth grade.¹⁹ But local people did not necessarily share this gloomy view. Some ethnic groups especially valued their freedom from government “interference” in America, on the grounds that their forebears had often fled oppressive economic and political regimes in their native lands.²⁰ They felt that their children were doing fine with a grade-school education in one-room schools that their local communities controlled. “One old German farmer used to sit right in the front row of the county board,” recalled former regional library director Jane Livingston. “He had learned in school all right, and if it was good enough for him, it was good enough for his kids.”²¹

Despite a local culture which tended not to value formal education, the Kewaunee County Board voted to fund the Demonstration. And the Door County Board, priding itself on being more “progressive” than its southern neighbor, felt it had no choice but to follow suit.²² But not everyone rejoiced over this result. “It surely is a fine muddle when something like this can be put over without the taxpayer knowing until it has cost twelve to fifteen dollars a year in additional taxes,” fumed a Luxemburg newspaper reader. “About the only thing we may be able to learn about this demonstration set up is that it will be very expensive reading.”²³ And while library supporters strove to win over the local county boards, the WFLC waged a major funding campaign in the state legislature. Margie Sorenson Malmberg, librarian and Wisconsin Library Association

activist, took a leave of absence from the Appleton Public Library to steer the legislation through both houses.²⁴ In September 1949, library officials and supporters were rewarded in their efforts, when, over Republican Governor Oscar Rennebohm's veto, the Wisconsin Legislature passed a law that allowed the WFLC to "establish a single demonstration . . . in a limited, predominantly rural area . . . now lacking an efficient coverage by existing library systems."²⁵ Thus for the first time, the State of Wisconsin agreed to provide funds in direct support of community library service. These state funds were to be matched by the communities involved. Otherwise, the law only set out general guidelines for the project. The details were left to the WFLC to work out in conjunction with the areas to be selected.

For Culture and Democracy: the Public Library

During the Progressive era, reformist librarians like John Cotton Dana had rejected an elitist, high-culture model of the public library as "storehouse of treasures." Instead, they advocated that public libraries play a role in promoting a more democratic and egalitarian society. However, during the 1920s, Progressive ideals declined as faith in government waned and business-oriented values reasserted themselves.²⁶

The revival of "big" government during the New Deal and World War II gave fresh impetus to the cultural democrats. During the 1940s, cultural authorities continued to ponder the library's role in the light of the growth and influence of the mass media. At the center of the debate were faculty and researchers at the University of Chicago's Graduate Library School (GLS). A highly productive GLS professor was Douglas Waples, author of several influential studies of reading.²⁷ In 1942, Waples edited a collection of papers that assessed ways in which mass communication could help "preserve the democratic way of life."²⁸ Contributors included Bernard Berelson, former Waples student, and now working for the Federal Communications Commission.²⁹ Berelson pointed to print's effectiveness in "shaping" public opinion: "It is important that [print's] effects serve the public interest within the democratic framework. The public interest is best served when the people have a clear comprehension of the relevant alternatives in public policy."³⁰ Another contributor, Ralph Beals of the Washington, D.C. Public Library, argued that this clear comprehension could be achieved through public library use.³¹

Thus, library leaders like Waples, Berelson, and Beals looked to cultural institutions to revive the republican value of an informed citizenry and to restore democratic participation by all on an equal basis. In particular, they recommended that public libraries enhance their role as "Arsenals of a Democratic Culture" and providers of adult education.³² But in a study of the 1940 presidential campaign, Berelson had argued that local "opinion leaders" exercised much more influence on public opinion than the mass media.³³ Opinion leaders were the politically alert; they read and listened to campaign material much more

than “followers.” To the friends, family, and neighbors who relied on them for advice, opinion leaders were a far more trustworthy source of information than the “more remote newspaper and radio.”³⁴ Three years later, Berelson again made use of the concept of “opinion leader,” this time linked with the public library. In 1949, Robert D. Leigh, University of Chicago political scientist, headed a team of social scientists that published the *Public Library Inquiry* (PLI), a study of American public librarianship, commissioned by the American Library Association (ALA) and funded by the Carnegie Corporation.³⁵ The PLI attempted to justify librarians’ belief that the public library helped create and maintain democratic society.³⁶ It published its findings in seven volumes that focused on different areas and included Berelson’s study of public library users, titled *The Library’s Public*. Berelson argued that since the principal users of the public library were middle-class and well-educated opinion leaders, libraries should focus resources on serving this influential segment of the public.³⁷ However, many practicing librarians reacted with outrage. Berelson’s phrase “opinion leaders” became a code for what some librarians argued was an elitist approach to library service. An unsigned 1951 *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* article sharply commented that the new Door-Kewaunee bookmobile service “supplies good evidence that those who may not be the ‘opinion leaders’ in the community enjoy the atmosphere of the public library that is transported in the bookmobile to the smallest village or community center.”³⁸

Faced with controversy over their role in the community, librarians struggled to realize the ideal of the public library as an influential, but local and non-elite, cultural institution. In an open letter to the Wisconsin library community written in 1947, John Chancellor, a recently-appointed WFLC member, wrote a strong condemnation of two adverse social trends that he felt constituted the main threat to democracy.³⁹ First was the tendency towards centralized organizations and the domination of economic life by large-scale monopolies. Second was the growth of commercially-motivated popular media industries, “powerful communication industries . . . dominated, for the most part, not by motives of enlightenment or social service but by a profit motive.” Moreover, Chancellor complained, these operated “on the principle that more attention—hence more patronage—is gained if the appeal is to emotions, to selfish instincts, to the sensual and intellectually lazy sides of people tired from monotonous and uncreative work.” Thus he intertwined the two elements of his critique. The mechanization and monopolization of advanced industrialization forced people into alienating and dehumanizing work, while popular commercial media responded to their desire for distraction from unsatisfying work offering commodified, prepackaged entertainment that filled their non-working hours. In seeking a remedy for these “dangerous tendencies,” Chancellor called upon a reinvigorated public library—a “virile library system”—which might permeate “the everyday lives of the people in every city ward and every rural village with personnel and materials—printed, audio and visual—focused on making

daily living more intelligent, creative, healthy and hence enjoyable." What is more, by providing an "entering wedge for other agencies to join in the same kind of effort and, by raising the tastes and hence demands of the people," such a library system might "eventually influence the great commercial communication systems in the right direction."⁴⁰

The following year, the WFLC published a 64-page booklet that set out its vision for the future of public libraries in Wisconsin, and that echoed many of Chancellor's concerns.⁴¹ For more than 50 years the Madison-based WFLC had consulted University of Wisconsin-Madison faculty for expert help, particularly in compiling specialized reading lists. This working relationship between the university and the state, characterized as the "Wisconsin Idea," was common in many different fields. Now, in its pamphlet *The Wisconsin-Wide Library Idea*, the WFLC renewed the Wisconsin Idea, stressing the state's and the university's responsibility for involving as partners-in-democracy all of Wisconsin's citizens, including those living in remote rural areas. The vehicle was to be the rural public library—but not the old "small recreational depot" that was "unfortunately the total picture of a library carried in the minds of most people and public officials today." Downplaying the value of reading for pleasure in favor of a more utilitarian approach, the WFLC emphasized the need for an "efficient, flexible institution for informal education, information, inspiration and recreation easily accessible and easily used by all people of all ages everywhere in the State."⁴² The Door-Kewaunee Regional Library Demonstration was to spearhead this "democratic" thrust.

The Demonstration in Theory and Practice

The demonstration began in January 1950. The plan provided library services through existing "units" (permanent town or village libraries), plus two new bookmobiles that would make scheduled daytime stops every two or three weeks, with evening stops in larger communities. Bookmobiles would carry a wide selection of books—at least a thousand volumes—and also pamphlets, magazines, booklists, and reading suggestions. Commission officials envisaged two informal standards for the project's success. First was the type of reading materials that patrons would choose. Drawing a clear distinction between fiction and nonfiction, and echoing professional librarians' age-old concerns about the value of fiction, the WFLC intended the demonstration to emphasize nonfiction. Despite evidence—confirmed again and again in the 1930s by Waples and other GLS researchers—that public library users overwhelmingly preferred novels, the WFLC felt no qualms about imposing an "expert" view about what library patrons ought to be reading.⁴³ A focus on local democratic participation in the library as a cultural institution, did not, it seems, preclude steering readers towards what library authorities had already decided was good for them. Indeed, past failures at attracting readers to non-fiction would be overcome by "an able librarian . . . on hand to fit [the collection] to the serious interests of people."

After all, the WFLC argued, “Experience has shown that a community will use two or three times as much non-fiction as fiction if served by a bookmobile rather than a station.” All in all, the WFLC felt that “the whole regional project may stand or fall on the quality of the bookmobile service.”⁴⁴

In fact, as Commission staff understood, the key to success lay in their own efforts at winning over the voting population of the two counties. County funding depended on the November 1952 referendum, and from the beginning, officials worried about a potential lack of adult use. In December 1950, WFLC Secretary Walter Botsford wrote to library consultant Gretchen Knief, “The thing that has bothered us for some time is what you warned us about and what we tried to prevent—that is, too much of the budget and the expenditure of time goes to the children.”⁴⁵ The WFLC had identified adults as their main target for reasons of principle: after all, it was adults who would spearhead the renewal of democracy. Their ability to win adult users became their second yardstick as the WFLC anxiously monitored the project’s progress.

However, not all project staff shared these two goals. While in their public rhetoric and private correspondence the Madison-based Botsford and Chancellor might emphasize non-fiction to adults, in the two counties themselves librarians had no qualms about focusing on children or supplying readers with the fiction that they preferred. Project director Jane Livingston as well as other library staff remembered growing up in rural Wisconsin and identified with the Door and Kewaunee children, many of whom, they said, were “starved” for books. “I was delighted with the job because the first thing that Jane said was, well you’re going to be working with rural children who had never had library service,” recalled a former bookmobile librarian, “and I grew up going to a one-room school, so I thought, oh what a great opportunity! It was the best job I ever had.” Local librarians also recognized that vital voting support for the library came from *parents*—adults who wanted the service primarily for their children rather than for themselves.⁴⁶ Neither did local staff necessarily defer to the cultural authority of experts when it came to book selection. Although Commission fieldworkers made recommendations, local project employees and volunteers who might—or more likely, might not—have professional qualifications in librarianship decided what to buy for the collection. The fieldworkers were careful to advise, but not to impose: “We had great supervision and advice from the Madison people,” a librarian commented. “They never interfered, but they offered to help.”⁴⁷ As a source of cultural authority, then, the librarians hardly spoke with a single voice.

At first it seemed that WFLC concerns about who was using the library, and for what, were unwarranted. Overall circulation statistics indicated that the project was a staggering success. Between 1942 and 1948, circulation ranged from a low of 71,140 in 1946 and a high of 77,682 in 1944. But once the project got under way, these figures soared. In 1950, circulation showed an 83 percent increase over 1949. Two years later, it had risen again, to 222,141—an increase of 160 percent over 1949.⁴⁸ But these gross circulation figures failed to provide the

sort of detail that the WFLC needed to gauge the likelihood of their political success. Were adults using the library to the extent that the library staff hoped? Moreover, what sort of reading was taking place? Were users checking out the “right” materials—those informational pamphlets, journals and nonfiction books that would justify Commission leaders’ faith in libraries as vehicles for democracy?

Two sample surveys administered in late spring of 1951 and 1952 showed that WFLC fears that children’s use would dominate were entirely justified. According to these more detailed studies, combining unit and bookmobile use, adults accounted for only about thirty percent of circulation, and once the figures were split between units and bookmobiles, the picture worsened. In the units, circulation divided evenly between adults and children. But in the bookmobiles (representing half of the total circulation) children constituted 88 percent of the total in 1951, and 91 percent in 1952.

Gender was yet another issue. In the early 1950s, existing research indicated that women and girls tended to use public libraries more than men and boys.⁴⁹ Was this pattern also true of the Demonstration’s bookmobile users? After all, children could not vote, and the WFLC was certainly not interested in raising democratic participation only by women. Yet here too, the Demonstration’s experience confirmed previous studies: 94 percent of the bookmobiles’ adult users were women, who accounted for 95 percent of adult book charges. Adult men made only two percent of male books charges. So not only were adult users in a distinct minority, but adult males counted for only a tiny fraction.⁵⁰

What these figures cannot tell us, of course, is why this is the case. A likely factor was that while the WFLC organized some evening stops, most took place during the day at times and places that were not convenient for men of working age—which included most males over the age of fourteen. Another possibility is that women took it upon themselves to pick out reading matter for their husbands.⁵¹ Or perhaps the time periods of the samples made a difference; in the spring and summer, male farm workers would have little time for recreational or even informational reading. But maybe it was simply that these rural men did not buy into the library’s rhetoric of civic engagement through reading, and neither did they develop strategies of library use. Like the German farmer who felt his own education set an adequate standard for his children, they perhaps saw no need, and had no desire, for the cultural goods that the bookmobiles contained.

Adult Reading Choices⁵²

Whatever the underlying reasons, the WFLC had evidently been correct in their fear of low adult use. And among the 600 charges made by married women patrons whose records have survived, reading choices also failed to fulfil the WFLC’s hopes. The presence of an expert librarian on the bookmobile, the ex-

perts believed, would channel adult readers towards educative pamphlets and serious non-fiction. But conforming to previously-revealed patterns, Door-Kewaunee women patrons overwhelmingly checked out fiction. A favorite author was Kathleen Thompson Norris, a prolific novelist of Irish Catholic descent who wrote stories that idealized family life and the role of women as mothers of many children.⁵³ Close behind Norris were other best-selling women novelists—Faith Baldwin, Frances Parkinson Keyes, Mazo de la Roche and Daphne Du Maurier—all of whom set their stories against a backdrop of romanticized middle- and upper-class family life, sometimes in the historical past.

The nonfiction that the women patrons borrowed ignored current political issues; rather, they echoed the domestic themes that dominated their favorite fiction. By far the most popular genre of nonfiction consisted of home-centered craft books with titles like *Painting Patterns For Home Decorations*, *How To Beautify And Improve Your Home* and *Use and Care of Furniture*. Cookbooks and manuals of food preparation, too, were popular, including *Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook* (one of the best-selling cookbooks of all time) and *Home Freezing For Everyone*.⁵⁴ Women patrons also checked out sewing and knitting titles, like *The Complete Book of Knitting* and *Sewing For The Home*, in addition to books about gardening, like *Garden Flowers In Color* and *Grow Your Own Vegetables*. Among periodicals, the most popular was *Good Housekeeping*, followed by *House and Garden* and the *Ladies Home Journal*.

Cultural historians continue to debate the nature and meaning of the 1950s preoccupation with hearth and home, especially for women. This period is often depicted as a era when Rosie the Riveter was steered back towards containment in a domestic cage (though perhaps not very successfully, and not for long).⁵⁵ Preoccupation with domesticity was also reflected by the spread of suburbia: newly-built single-family homes on the outskirts of cities, equipped with up-to-date household appliances and furnishings. Popular magazines, television shows, and advertisements portrayed the model family as focused on the home, raising children, and spending time together around the TV or the backyard barbecue. The middle-class domestic idyll depended on a home-based wife and mother whose role was to control the family's operations from the kitchen—now relocated from the back of the house to a central and commanding position.⁵⁶ This tranquil vision would seem to be at odds with the political “reality” of the atomic age and the Cold War. But historians have pointed to the phenomenon of domestic containment as forming an “ideological duality” with the anti-communist hysteria of the late-1940s and early-1950s. “McCarthyism,” comments Elaine Tyler May, “was fueled, in large measure, by suspicion of the new secularism, materialism, bureaucratic collectivism, and consumerism that epitomized not only the achievement but the potential ‘decadence’ of the New Deal liberalism.”⁵⁷

Despite the apparent ubiquity of the suburban ideal, Door Peninsula women must have struggled to relate such popular images to their own lived reality.

Local newspapers carried some advertising of consumer products for the home, but for many rural residents, these must have seemed hopelessly out of reach, with the price of even a “low” end bedroom suite at about half the average monthly wage. Most Door Peninsula families lived in traditional homes unlike the ranch-style houses that dominated the new housing developments springing up around the nation’s large cities. While most had electricity, many still lacked indoor plumbing. And few rural women had escaped from the endless kitchen and farm chores even during the war years.

Yet, despite their focus on domestic concerns, far from reinforcing traditional gender roles, the women’s library choices had the potential to open up new worlds, just as cultural authorities believed, though not in the way that they intended. Instead of choosing to educate themselves as citizens, the women borrowers opted for fiction, instruction manuals, and popular magazines that connected them to the middle-class domestic consumerism preoccupying suburbanites. But rather than induce a mindless conformity to corporate-generated values, these women’s reading experiences may have represented multiple small acts of resistance. First, like Janice A. Radway’s romance readers, the Door-Kewaunee women, carving out part of the day for the personal pleasure of reading a novel, departed from the domestic ideal.⁵⁸ In the traditional, patriarchal families that in the prewar years constituted the norm on the rural Door Peninsula, finding time for emotional “replenishment” must have been a rarity. Second, as Jessamyn Neuhaus points out, paradoxically, the very act of reading domestic instruction manuals prompts a reappraisal of traditional gender roles. By “stating assumptions about women’s lives,” cookbooks, gardening and sewing books “left room for those ‘assumptions’ to be questioned.”⁵⁹ The manuals and magazines introduced women to new ways of homemaking, ways that differed from the practices of their mothers and grandmothers, and opened up space for the exercise of individual taste and difference.

Democracy in Action: the Referendum

On November 4, 1952, the nation went to the polls to elect a new president. At the same time, citizens of Door and Kewaunee Counties voted on funding for the Regional Library Demonstration, the final test of the WFLC’s democratic partnership principle. The referendum asked simply, “Shall Kewaunee [or Door] county continue to participate in the Door-Kewaunee Regional library or some similar library?”⁶⁰ Although the results would be non-binding, county supervisors were widely expected to base their decision about the library’s future on the referendum as a statement of the people’s will.

From the beginning, the WFLC had made strenuous efforts to “market” the project to voters, legislators, and other professionals. Promotional pamphlets, spots on local radio stations, and articles in newspapers and the state library literature contributed to the publicity campaign. Satisfied bookmobile users added their two cents’ worth. Wrote Mrs. John Marnard of Luxemburg in March 1951:

Where else can one obtain so much for so little? Children's books—so many, so interesting—adult books—romance, adventure, mystery,—fiction of all kinds; cook books, books of manual arts, science, biography—name it and you can have it. . . . Perhaps one reason I am so enthusiastic over the Bookmobile service is because books are so expensive. Very few of us can buy all the books we want to read, and there are so very many books to which one only wants to refer.⁶¹

The WFLC also sent out an evaluative questionnaire to gauge the reactions of local library boards. Here, too, replies seemed positive. A trustee wrote from Washington Island, "I am 100 percent in favor of the regional plan. Prior to it, the library service was extremely limited. We were only able to have our library open one day a week, and during January-February found it necessary to close completely." However, under the Regional system, the library could be open three afternoons and evenings the year around.⁶²

Local newspapers loaned their support. *Algoma Record-Herald* editors appealed to their readers' civic duty, as well as to their sense of good financial management: "Each of us as intelligent, progressive citizens should look at the proposal from the standpoint of costs . . . and also on the other side of the ledger—just what is the Regional library giving us in return for our hard-earned tax dollars—it's as simple a business proposition as that." On the other hand, some things were beyond price; "Consider what good your children of school age, to say nothing of adults, are getting from the bookmobile service. Can it be measured entirely in cold dollars?" the editors wrote. ". . . We think that you should vote 'yes' on this question . . . and we make no bones about it." The Algoma Woman's Club also voiced its approval of the Demonstration, claiming that the Algoma library under the regional plan had "gained everything and lost nothing."⁶³

Yet in most people's minds, the regional library was not the election's main focus. The big question was, who would be the new president: Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower or Democrat Adlai Stevenson? The residents of Door and Kewaunee County can have had little doubt over the issue. The area was traditionally Republican, and Joe McCarthy was virtually their next-door neighbor. Indeed, in a record turnout, 81 percent of Door County and 77 percent of Kewaunee County electors voted for Eisenhower.⁶⁴ And although in Wisconsin as a whole, McCarthy was the least successful of the Republican candidates, he was re-elected by 80 percent in Door County, and by 77 percent in Kewaunee County. "A whopping all-time record-breaking vote was recorded Tuesday as Kewaunee county joined the Republican parade The county voted Republican right down the line," proclaimed the *Algoma Record-Herald*.⁶⁵

Despite the Republican clean sweep, at a first sight the referendum result looked like good news for the library supporters, receiving as it did an overall favorable majority of 910. To succeed, however, it needed a majority in both

counties. "Only three Kewaunee county units favored the library—Algoma, Casco village and Luxemburg village," reported the *Algoma Record-Herald*. "Each of the ten towns gave it a resounding slap in the face and Kewaunee City rejected it 652 to 653—just one vote difference."⁶⁶ Despite devoting a disproportionate amount of resources to adult services, despite extensive lobbying, and the creative use of publicity, including radio spots, the WFLC had failed to carry Kewaunee County.

The library had faced formidable opposition as traditional parsimony and dislike of government intervention combined with Red Scare rhetoric. "One of the main reasons our Grand Parents came to a 'Land of the Free' is to get away from Gravey Taxes," wrote Clarence Antholt and Gordon Mallien of Brussels in a paid newspaper advertisement. "A 'yes' vote on the Bookmobile issue means favoring the hardships they left."⁶⁷ A Kewaunee resident wrote an open letter to a county supervisor that was published in the *Algoma Record-Herald*; "I heartily agree with the stand you have taken in voting negatively on the Door-Kewaunee Regional Library. Why? Because the cost of it was born by so many people and the benefits realized by so few." In this voter's view, the problem was a matter of competing demands on the public purse. Moreover, the prime threat to democracy came not from the lack of citizen participation identified by the WFLC and other cultural authorities, but from international factors beyond American borders highlighted by the cold warriors. "[T]he past decade did not . . . in view of the present and future world conditions, warrant such an enormous cash outlay. . . . Due to the instability of international relationships we may be called upon to defend our freedoms more vigorously than ever before, against an indomitable foe." The Door-Kewaunee Regional Library Demonstration was in direct competition with military spending, and there was no doubt as to which should have priority:

If we fail, all our Bookmobiles and our entire educational system may be of little consequence. If God will that we survive this crisis . . . then, and only then we shall return to Traveling Libraries and improvements in our educational program. If we are called upon to reimburse a military commensurate with an all out war effort, the tax burden will be great enough without also having to pay for a bookmobile service.⁶⁸

The Long Run

Bitterly disappointed, the WFLC tried to put a brave face on their defeat. Comforting themselves with the truly remarkable circulation increases, they argued that the Demonstration was indeed a success. Others, too, were disappointed. While the Door County supervisors, following their referendum mandate, quickly appropriated \$30,000 to establish a Door County regional library,

efforts to persuade the Kewaunee supervisors to follow suit came to no avail. The *Algoma Record Herald*, in an implied criticism of the voters' shortsightedness, reported on low educational attainment in Kewaunee County; "We blush as we write this. Kewaunee county residents over 25 years of age have the lowest education median in the state with half having completed 8.4 years."⁶⁹ Later in December a delegation of teachers argued for two hours in favor of some kind of rural library service in Kewaunee County, but despite their best efforts, the bookmobile service was dead.⁷⁰

Yet as the library records show, those whom both sides—cold warriors and cultural authorities—were trying to win over, that is, the residents of the two counties, were convinced by the rhetoric of neither. Overall circulation figures proved that, contrary to conservative contentions, the library did reach large numbers of people. The bookmobile service played a considerable part in the lives of rural children as well as their teachers and mothers. But the benefit they derived from the library services was not what cultural authorities had hoped. Rather than supporting the cultural democracy role of the library, patrons valued the library for something less elevated: its supply of popular fiction and consumer-oriented magazines.

On the Door Peninsula the public library continued to grow in the local community. In the decades following the referendum, Door County continued to fund its bookmobile, helping to raise, as Jane Livingston has commented, a "generation of readers."⁷¹ Permanent community libraries continued to expand in Door County, resulting in the present system headquartered in Sturgeon Bay, with its eight branches in smaller towns and villages. In 1971 the Sturgeon Bay Library moved out of its 1908 Carnegie building and into new quarters, built with the aid of a successful local fund-raising drive.

In Kewaunee County, despite the disappearance of the bookmobile after 1952, the two existing permanent libraries in Algoma and Kewaunee have prospered, and some villages are now considering establishing their own library buildings and collections. Other opportunities for Peninsula inhabitants to participate in print culture have also increased. Several communities boast bookstores. The one-room schools have disappeared, replaced by large consolidated systems to which the rural children travel daily by bus. These schools have their own library-media centers, staffed by professionals and accessible to students and teachers on a daily basis.

It is in public libraries' fundamental nature that they should struggle to balance contradictory demands, continuously faced as they are with redefining their role and justifying their expenditure of local resources. The ideologies that underlie their claim to cultural authority and that focus on civic participation perpetually vie with a populist imperative that requires them to identify and respond to consumer demand. In their professional rhetoric, public library experts continue to appeal to the same cultural democratic principles articulated since the Progressive Era. But in their everyday use, libraries are still dominated by

48. *The Idea in Action*, 31.

49. For a comparison of studies on library users' demographic characteristics, see Berelson, *The Library's Public*, 19-50.

50. Bookmobile patrons recorded their own circulation information on yellow slips of paper, on which were preprinted spaces for author, title, patron name and address, date and so on. The great majority of these slips were probably destroyed at the time the Demonstration ended, or even before. But some have survived. Packed away in the Commission archives can be found about 6,000 circulation slips—representing only a small fraction of those filled out—but providing the basis of a database containing 5,819 usable records. About one-third (1,935) of the records are undated. The dates of the remaining two-thirds (3,885) cluster into two groups. The smaller group (1,694 or 44 percent) represents materials borrowed from the bookmobile around the end of October, and the beginning of November 1950. The larger cluster (2,191 or 56 percent) represents books borrowed in July 1951. A database of these records contains a single file consisting mainly of fields of data taken directly from the yellow slips themselves: patron name, book title, date, and so on. The total number of individual users was 1,816. But because it was not possible to determine from all these individuals whether they were male or female, young or old, the total number of usable names was reduced to 1,770, or 97 percent. The judgment of age is based on several factors. First, these early 1950s adults signed themselves Mr., Mrs., or Miss. This is the most important criterion. It is validated by the criterion of handwriting (patrons filled out the slips themselves). If small children's slips were filled out by their mothers (in days before daycare), the mothers often also charged out books of their own. A third and related factor is that patrons from the same family seemed to visit the bookmobile together, so that several siblings might charge out books at the same time. I feel confident of the general age groupings that result; what I am less sure of is the exact boundary of the "child" category. Older teenagers might well be counted in the "child" category. Lastly, the overall findings support the project's own findings with respect to age.

51. This supposition is supported by an editorial in the *Algoma Record-Herald*. After recommending that (the implicitly male) readers borrow a particular title available in the public library, the editorial concluded, "Perhaps you can get your wife to bring it home for you, too!" (*Algoma Record-Herald*, 4 September 1952).

52. Closer analysis of the content of specific library charges—what patrons actually chose to read—is the focus of a forthcoming paper. The aim here is to make a broad comparison between patrons' actual selections and library experts' intentions.

53. For a discussion of Norris's opposition to birth control and her advocacy of large families, see Anne G. Balay, "'Hands Full of Living': Birth Control, Nostalgia and Kathleen Norris." *American Literary History* 8, no.3 (1996): 471-95.

54. Karal Ann Marling, "Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book: The Aesthetics of American Food in the 1950s," in *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 17 (1992), 79.

55. Eugenia Kaledin, *Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s* (Boston, 1984), 61.

56. Clifford E. Clark Jr., "Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago, 1989), 171-91.

57. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War* (New York, 1988), 10-11.

58. Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1991).

59. Jessamyn Neuhaus, "The Way to a Man's Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology, and Cookbooks in the 1950s," *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 3 (1999): 547.

60. *Algoma Record-Herald*, 30 October 1952.

61. Mrs. John Marnard, "From a Bookmobile Patron," *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* 47, no. 2 (1951): 45.

62. *The Idea in Action*, 19-20.

63. *Algoma Record-Herald*, 9 October 1952.

64. In Door County, McCarthy received 7,513 votes as opposed to 1,902 votes received by his opponent, Democrat Thomas R. Fairchild. In Kewaunee, the vote was 6,412 to 1,941. See James R. Donoghue, *How Wisconsin Voted, 1848-1960* (Madison, Wisc., 1962) 97, 57. See also Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), especially chapter 3.

65. *Algoma Record-Herald*, 6 November 1952

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Sturgeon Bay Advocate*, 30 October 1952.

68. Open letter dated March 19, 1953, to Mr. Ray P. Fulwiler, Supervisor, Fourth Ward, Algoma, Wis. from Frank Wessely, *Algoma Record-Herald*, 30 March 1953.

69. *Algoma Record-Herald*, 4 December 1952.

70. *Algoma Record-Herald*, 18 December 1952.

71. Interview, 23 October 2000.

24. John Chancellor, "The Local Solution" in *The Idea in Action: a Report on the Door-Kewaunee Regional Library Demonstration, 1950-1952* (Madison, Wis., 1953), 7.
25. *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* 47, no. 2 (1951): 39.
26. The Progressive era is usually defined as lasting from about 1890 to 1920. See Kevin Mattson, "The Librarian as Secular Minister to Democracy: The Life and Ideas of John Cotton Dana," *Libraries and Culture* 35, no. 4, (2000): 514-534, especially 520-21.
27. John V. Richardson Jr., "Douglas Waples (1893-1978)," *Journal of Library History* 15, no. 1 (1980): 76-83. Books by Waples include *People and Print: Social Aspects of Reading in the Depression* (1937), and *Libraries and Readers in the State of New York* (1939).
28. Douglas Waples, (ed.), *Print, Radio and Film in a Democracy* (Chicago, 1942), v. Two experts in the emerging field of communications, political scientist Harold D. Lasswell and sociologist Paul F. Lazarsfeld, contributed essays to this collection. Lasswell was head of war communications research at the Library of Congress from 1939 to 1945, while Lazarsfeld directed the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University from 1940 to 1950.
29. Berelson had worked as a librarian before he entered the GLS in 1938. After working for the FCC, he joined the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University in 1944, and in 1946 joined the faculty of the GLS, eventually becoming its dean.
30. Bernard Berelson, "The Effects of Print Upon Public Opinion" in *Print, Radio and Film in a Democracy*, ed. Waples, 63.
31. Ralph A. Beals. "Implications for Communications Research for the Public Library," in *Print, Radio and Film in a Democracy*, ed. Waples, 160; 173
32. The title of a well-known history of public libraries written in the 1940s: Sidney Ditzion, *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture: A Social History of the American Public Library Movement in New England and the Middle States from 1850 to 1900* (Chicago, 1947).
33. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* (New York, 1968).
34. *Ibid.*, 51, 155.
35. The seven volumes included *The Library's Public* by Bernard Berelson; *The Public Librarian*, by Alice Bryan; *The Public Library in the Political Process*, by Oliver Garceau, studies on government publications, the book industry, and the information film, and *The Public Library in the United States*, by Robert D. Leigh.
36. The PLI identified what they called the "Library Faith" in the following terms: "Reading books in order to learn is good and useful; the public library contributes to democracy because it facilitates reading books by providing free access; it is a source of knowledge for an informed citizenry, on which the continuation of democracy depends." See Douglas Raber, *Librarianship and Legitimacy: The Ideology of the Public Library Inquiry* (Westport, Conn., 1997), 39, 67.
37. Bernard Berelson, *The Library's Public* (New York, 1949), 127, 130.
38. *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* 47, no. 2 (1951): 40.
39. Although the Wisconsin Free Library Commission had a salaried staff headed by the Commission Secretary, overall authority rested with a volunteer board. In 1949, this included three *ex officio* members and four citizens appointed by the Governor. The *ex officio* members were: John Callahan (State Superintendent); Edwin B. Fred (President, University of Wisconsin) and Clifford L. Lord (Director, State Historical Society). Citizen members were: Ella Veslak, librarian of Shawano, Wisconsin; William J. Deegan Jr, City Manager of Superior, Wisconsin; John P. Barton, University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor of Rural Sociology; and John Chancellor. Chancellor had been a public librarian in New York and New Haven before moving to Wisconsin and taking up farming.
40. John Chancellor, "An Open Letter from a New Commission Member," *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* 43, no. 9 (1947): 143-144.
41. Drawing on its historical antecedents, the Commission titled the pamphlet, *The Wisconsin-Wide Library Idea for Voluntary Education through Reading: A detailed but tentative statement from the Wisconsin Free Library Commission*.
42. *Wisconsin-Wide Library Idea*, 3
43. In *What People Want to Read About: A Study of Group Interests and a Survey of Problems in Adult Reading* (published by a conjunction of cultural authorities—the American Library Association with the University of Chicago Press, in 1931), Douglas Waples and co-author Ralph W. Tyler established a hierarchy of reading priorities among adults, and claimed that "More people read to forget than to learn." But, they went on, "[T]he problem of making recreatory reading more valuable is essentially the same as the problem of making informational reading more attractive." In other words, "information reading" was intrinsically more valuable than "recreatory reading," but if it could only be made as attractive as fiction, adults would readily turn to this worthier genre.
44. *Wisconsin-Wide Library Idea*, 17-20.
45. Walter S. Botsford to Gretchen Schenk, December 22, 1950. Archives, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Series 1967, Box 110.
46. Interviews, 22 October 2001, 14 March 2001.
47. *Ibid.*

48. *The Idea in Action*, 31.

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