

J.D.Witter Traveling Libraries

Excerpts from Centennial Story 1890-1990, McMillan Memorial Library, Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin by Alice McCaul Hayward

From Chapter One

The most pivotal event of these years, however, was the trustees' acceptance of the help offered by Wisconsin's Free Library Commission. This State commission was formed five years after the Rapids' library was established. Its purposes were to foster new libraries and to reorganize those struggling for existence.

One of the Commission's early acts, in May of 1896, was to help Senator J. H. Stout create a system of thirty-seven traveling libraries for Dunn County. (The word libraries here, refers to boxed collections of forty or fifty books that were sent to various places in an area and were loaned from there.)

Mr. Witter learned of this service and instantly gave the T. B. Scott library one-thousand dollars to create such a system for neighboring villages and townships in South Wood County. At his request, the Board of Trustees organized itself into a second Board to operate this project which the trustees insisted should be called the J. D. Witter Free Traveling Libraries.

This valuable service, the second to be established in Wisconsin, was offered throughout the area for fifty-one years.

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By the turn of the century, the trustees of the Scott library had thus taken three important steps into the future. First, they were operating the J. D. Witter Free Traveling Libraries which were spreading library service throughout the South Wood County area. Second, they had committed themselves to the goal of employing trained librarians. And third, they had established a card catalog that opened the library's resources to everyone.

Before his death in 1902, Mr. Witter had been the acknowledged leader in making these changes in the library's direction. He was also the library's most generous benefactor. His will added another five thousand dollars to the T. B. Scott Library's endowment, and it created a five-thousand dollar endowment for the J. D. Witter Free Traveling Libraries. He also left a tradition of service and financial support that has been carried on through the rest of the library's one-hundred years by his son, Isaac P. Witter; by his son-in-law, George W. Mead; and by his granddaughter, Emily Baldwin Bell.

From Chapter Two

Another outreach program was the operation of the J. D. Witter Free Traveling Libraries by the staff of the T. B. Scott library.

By 1905, the librarian and her one assistant were responsible for thirty-three of these libraries which circulated books from all type of sites in South Wood County: from schools, homes, banks, post offices,

and stores. Local teachers, housewives, clerks, and storekeepers did their best to keep track of the books. In 1910, the indefatigable Miss Lutie Stearns of the Free Library Commission visited every Wood County book station she could reach, by horse-and-buggy or train, to help set up record-keeping systems.

Some of the localities which, at one time or another, had "stations" were Babcock, Biron, Cranmoor, South Grand Rapids, Daly, Four-mile Creek, Lindsey, Meadow Valley (in Juneau County), Pittsville, Port Edwards, Nekoosa, Burmeister, Rudolph, Saratoga, Arpin, Altdorf, Auburndale, Elliot's and Sherry. By 1924 there were forty-nine Witter libraries with a yearly circulation of 7,212.

Statistics, however, cannot measure what those pretty, new books meant to children in little one-room country schools or to families isolated by almost impassable roads during long Wisconsin winters. A book from one of the Witter libraries might be the only secular book in the house. Many school children taught their parents to read English by using the simple children's stories that they had brought from school. Many new immigrants to Wood County read and reread the loved books, written in Polish or German, that were included in the boxes.

No place seemed too big or too small to merit the attention of the T. B. Scott library's trustees and librarian. With almost a missionary zeal, they sent book boxes with the Boy Scouts who camped at Waupaca; they sent old books and magazines to lumber camps in the north woods. The days of the locked cases were far behind.

From Chapter Three

Three years later [1929], Mr. Isaac Witter's annual "Christmas gift" to the city was made to help the library meet its expenses. He placed four-thousand dollars at the disposal of the Board of Trustees and gave one-thousand dollars to the J. D. Witter Free Traveling Libraries.

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During this wartime period, in 1942, Mr. Isaac Witter died. This meant the loss of one of the community's most useful and generous civic leaders. Among his many bequests to the city was an endowment of fifteen-thousand dollars for the T. B. Scott Library.

He did not leave money to the J. D. Witter Traveling Libraries, for both he and the rest of the Board recognized that this last privately financed traveling library in Wisconsin had outlived its time. In 1947 the service ended and its endowment came under the ownership of the T. B. Scott Library.