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S580 History of Libraries

Final Project (Short Story and Paper)

Short Story

Mary Taylor put the last book into her saddlebag before securing the bag across the rump of her gelding, Outlaw. After tightening the cinch strap she took the reins in one hand to lead Outlaw around in a small circle to make sure the saddle wasn’t sitting wrong on his back. When he only plodded along beside her, she tossed the reins over his neck. Keeping the reins in her left hand she grabbed the saddle horn with the same hand, her right holding the stirrup as she stepped into it. Letting go of the stirrup, she gripped the back of the saddle, gave a little hop with her right leg and swung up into the saddle.

As soon as she settled back, she raised a hand to the small group that had gathered outside the library to see her off. She leaned down and gave Outlaw’s neck a quick pat and whispered, “Let’s hope you’re the only outlaw we run into.” A quiet laugh escaped her at her father’s familiar joke from when he’d thought of the name for the gentle Quarter Horse.

Ready to follow in Lutie Stearns footsteps, she nudged Outlaw with her heels and they raced out of town to deliver books to those who didn’t have access to them. Her excitement grew as the wind whipped her hair back from her face. With a laugh she leaned low over Outlaw’s neck, laying the reins down, giving him his head…giving him the freedom to run. He answered her unspoken command and his muscles bunched as he lengthened his stride.

Their journey was a long twenty miles to an isolated community reached best by horse but even though she knew she would have to pull him up, she decided to let them enjoy the run for a moment longer. Not everyone thought her work was worth it but she believed that Lutie Stearns was correct. These people who were too far out from the library had a right to the knowledge these books could bring. Mary had made sure that children’s books had been included since many children were unable to get books from the public libraries.

With a gentle tug on the reins she slowed Outlaw to a walk. As much as she wanted to get to her destination as quick as possible, she wouldn’t risk hurting her horse by pushing him too far. It would take them a little while but they would make it there. She just hoped they’d be welcomed by the community.

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Her palms grew sweaty as she rode into the small town of Cold Creek. A few people stopped to stare at her but mainly they went along their business as she made her way down the main road, passing a blacksmith shop, homes and a general store until she came to the post office at the end of the main road.

Dismounting, she led Outlaw over to the trough so that he could get a drink of water. When he finished, she tied him to the hitching post before removing the saddlebag. She sat it carefully on the ground so she could loosen the cinch strap.

*Well, here goes nothing.*

With a deep breath and a sharp nod she marched into the post office, ready to face whatever concerns or complaints the town might have about adding the traveling library to their community.

A lone man sat behind the counter, various papers spread out in front of him. He glanced up startled to find her standing before him. He jumped to his feet and tipped his hat to her. He appeared more like a ranch hand, so tall she had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes, broad shoulders that led to a trim waist hidden by a flannel shirt, jeans and even though she couldn’t see them she would have bet her favorite copy of *Jane Eyre* that he was wearing boots.

“Sorry about that, Miss. Didn’t hear ya come in.” He moved some papers to the side and gave her a warm smile.

A little of her nerves faded as she stepped up to the counter. “Hello, my name is Mary Taylor and I would like to set up a free library here. Is there any place that may be available? Here perhaps?” She cast a quick glance around the counter that was overflowing with paper, envelopes, stamps, pens and other supplies.

He took a seat again and was still eye-to-eye with her as he said, “Well…I could probably clear off some space on the end of the counter here.” He eyed the space in question that was in danger of being overrun by mail.

“Thank you. You know if you hung a bell on the door then you would know when it opened.”

The corner of his lips turned up in a small grin. “I’ll keep that in mind.” When he started stacking the various mail into one giant pile she frowned.

“Did you just put the outgoing mail with the mail that was delivered here? You don’t want to accidently get them mixed up.”

His grin grew as he nodded. “You’re right. I’ll work on that. I’m Jason. Jason Parker.”

Heat crept up her neck as she grabbed her saddlebag. “Nice to meet you Mr. Parker. I will
have more books sent out if the community members are open to the library. I also have
children’s books. Do you have a schoolhouse here or is it in another building? I want to speak
with the teacher about housing some of the books for the kids with her. So…um…I would also
like to have a meeting with the people here.”

He began moving the mail into small orderly piles as he spoke. “Schoolhouse is up on the
hill. Miss Smith should be there by now. Class will be starting soon. Just follow the sound of
giggling and screaming. You’ll find them easy enough. Town council meets tomorrow evening.
I’ll help spread the word about the library.”

“Thank you.” She lifted the saddlebag and removed the few children’s books she had.
“Would you mind if I leave the remainder with you?”

As he shook his head, she sat the saddlebag on the counter and started toward the door.
Before she could leave, he said, “It was a pleasure to meet you Miss Mary Taylor.”

“You too Mr. Parker.” She hurried out with the children’s books and as soon as she got
outside she heard them. Laughter and happy screams led her down the road where she caught
sight of a small one-room schoolhouse with a group of children running around in the grass.

Her nerves and embarrassment fled in the face of the happiness of the children playing
before class.

A few gave her hesitant waves and smiles as she walked up the steps and into the school.
A young woman around her age sat at the only desk facing the door. Her long blonde hair was
held at the nape of her neck in an elegant chignon.

“Hello. May I help you?”

“Hello. You are Miss Smith?” At the woman’s nod, she continued, “I’m hoping to help
set up a traveling library here in Cold Creek. I brought children’s books and would love to be
able to keep some here at the schoolhouse. The others will be at the post office.”

“Oh that’s wonderful!” She rushed from around the desk toward Mary. “Please, call me
Jane. What do you have?”

Mary laid out the books on the woman’s desk and Jane exclaimed, “Oh I love Alice’s
Adventures in Wonderland. What are some of the ones that are at the post office?”

“Merchant of Venice, Sherlock Holmes, Last of the Mohicans, Little Jarvis. Those are a
few of the ones I brought. I’m so glad you want this. How do you think the rest of the town will
feel?”

“There will be those that are excited. Many parents have expressed a wish for other items
to read beyond the paper or catalogs that Mr. Young has at the general store. There will be some
that won’t agree but I think it should go over well.”
Determined to keep positive, Mary left the schoolhouse and went to the only boarding house in town to get ready for the meeting the next day. She worked out what she would say to those who had doubts about the importance of having a library and hoped that she could show the ways that books could enrich their lives like they had hers.

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The day of the town council meeting, Mary had retrieved the books from Mr. Parker and hurried to the schoolhouse where the meeting was being held. Her boots kicked up dust as she practically skipped those last few steps. After taking a calming breath, she opened the door and gasped at what she found inside.

It was full to bursting—people sitting and standing in every available space—and every head turned to her as she entered. Mr. Parker had apparently spread the word to every resident of Cold Creek. She caught sight of a few children and babies in the crowd as well. All conversation stopped, as she stood frozen in the doorway.

Her nerves returned full force but she wasn’t going to let that stop her. With a small nod to herself, she marched up to the front where four men and one woman sat in front of Miss Smith’s desk. She gave each a brief smile and introduced herself.

“Parker tells us you’re here to start a library?” An older man sitting in the middle of the five spoke up, his voice not quite harsh but not welcoming either.

“Yes, a traveling library. There has been much success in other communities. This could lead to a larger public library for your town.”

A younger man that she had seen entering the general store earlier spoke up from the end. “How much is this going to cost the town?”

“Yes, tell us, Miss Tyler—”

Her mother would be appalled but she interrupted the older man anyway, “Taylor. Excuse me sir, but my name is Mary Taylor. And to answer the gentleman’s question is a simple one. It is paid for by the taxes that the town already pays.”

She fought the urge to fist her skirt in her hands, unwilling to show how nervous she was. This had to go well or the library might not let her work on any more traveling libraries. She had been lucky growing up, her parents making sure that she always had access to books that she could read and go on adventures through. She wanted everyone to have the same.

The older man turned an interesting shade of red as she stood her ground while the younger man that had asked the question chuckled before turning it into a cough.

The woman on the end who bore such a striking resemblance to Jane that she had to be a
relation of the schoolteacher asked, “How would this work?” She sent Mary a kind smile and a nod of encouragement.

Bolstered by the woman’s support, she replied, “Your schoolteacher Miss Smith has agreed to act as the librarian for the children’s books and to house them here at the school. The other books would be housed at the post office unless the town preferred another location. If the postmaster is not able to be the librarian then a volunteer would be needed. The librarian would be in charge of checking out the books to the patrons. They could keep track of who had what book and when it should be returned by. They would also keep a record if any did not get returned and if any fines were needed.”

“So it is not all free as you said it was.”

She met the older man’s gaze straight on and replied, “Sir the only fines that would need to be paid is if someone is very late returning a book or if one has gotten damaged in their care. But I would be happy to show the best ways to make sure that the books remain in the best condition.”

Clearly not happy with her response and the excited chattering from the gathered crowd, the man sat back in his seat with a huff.

It might not be possible but she wanted everyone, even this crotchety old man to see the value in the traveling library. She held out her hands toward the five, imploring them to give her a chance. “Books are not just about schooling, even though they can be very helpful in improving children’s ability to read and do their work, but books are a way to go on an adventure when you’re safe at home. We can learn about the world, other people and places, and it can open our eyes to new possibilities. There is so much information and knowledge in this world, this is a way for us to have access to it and to learn and grow.”

The younger man on the end smiled so wide she couldn’t help but smile back. “Tell me Silas, when was the last time you went on an adventure?”

The crowd laughed as the older man sent him a withering glare. He tried one last argument. “So you have the buildings that will have the books but will they just be put on the counter or a desk to be in the way?”

Her smile faded. “I have been in contact with James Stout and he will be providing traveling library boxes to house the books.”

“Well where is it? Where is this box then girl?”

“I don’t have it yet. With the weather turning cold I wanted to make sure that I got at least a few books that my horse could carry to the town incase the snow blocked the roads.”

A deep voice spoke up from the very back of the room. “I’ll build some shelves to hold the books until the library boxes get here.”
She turned around and smiled at Mr. Parker in thanks.

Silas Young stared at her a moment longer before his face softened. “Well girl, show me one of those adventure books then.”

A loud cheer went up from the crowd and suddenly she was surrounded by the townspeople who wanted a closer look at what she’d brought for them.

The woman on the town council, Elizabeth Colter, agreed to be the temporary librarian for the other books. Mary had been correct for she was the older sister of Jane Smith and shared her sister’s love of books. The woman’s husband, the blacksmith, came up from where he had been in the back of the room with their young son to look at the children’s books.

“Can I read them all, Papa?” Mr. Colter grinned down at his son as they laughed.

“One or two at a time, son. You have to share, remember?”

The boy began frantically glancing around before he yelled, “Auntie Jane! I want all the books!”

When the others finally left to return to their homes Mary helped Mr. Parker put the books that hadn’t already been checked out back in a bag to be returned to the post office.

As he opened the door to the post office, a loud ringing sounded and she jumped, glancing back to find a large cowbell hung on the door.

“That wasn’t what I had in mind when I suggested a bell.” She laid a few books on the counter before turning to face him.

“Well, it’s a little piece of home.”

“I thought you looked more like a rancher than a postmaster.”

“Last postmaster went back east to take over the family business.” He shrugged his broad shoulders and continued, “This town’s full of kind, helpful people, even Silas when you get past the grouchiness.”

“Yes well, I suspected that there would be those that were not on board at first.”

“You did real well. Will you be coming back with the library boxes?”

She nodded. “And more books.”

He walked her outside and helped her onto Outlaw. “I look forward to seeing you again Miss Mary Taylor.”
She ignored the heat that crept up her neck at his words and grinned. “I’ll turn you into the town’s librarian yet, Jason Parker.” She nudged Outlaw into a canter but was still close enough to hear Jason’s deep laughter.

Her heart light, she couldn’t wait to tell everyone back home how well it had gone. She had a feeling that soon enough there would be a public library in Cold Creek. Outlaw shook his head as if he wasn’t quite ready to leave.

She patted his neck and whispered, “Don’t worry boy, we’ll be back.” After all, now that they had welcomed the idea the town would need a lot more books. And maybe a trained librarian to help out.

The End.

(Paper below)
Traveling Libraries and Lutie Stearns

While there is information about traveling libraries it does not seem to be a topic that most of the public knows about. They know about public libraries and they know about bookmobiles but they might not know that many of the libraries got started because it began as a traveling library. Since this was a topic that I did not have prior knowledge of before this class, I wanted to do my final project over traveling libraries, inspired by Lutie Stearns and all the work she did for libraries. One of the strengths for this approach to my project is that I think it could be a way to get others interested in the topic because it is not only a research paper but a creative one as well. A limitation to this is creative direction, which authors can take which might deviate from the research to make a better story.

Even though this project was inspired by Lutie Stearns and all she did, I also researched other traveling library states and the people involved. I was able to find more on Lutie Stearns so the hope would be that this project could inspire further research into others who worked to bring libraries to isolated communities. One of the research statements that I wanted to show through this project was that just because these communities were isolated did not mean that they did not desire to have access to books and services that a public library offered, they merely did not have a way to get to this information before people like Stearns made an effort to reach out to them.

Lutie Stearns set up many of the traveling libraries in Wisconsin that lead to many becoming public libraries in the state later. She would travel all over the state to many of the isolated communities in the state to make sure that they had access to books and other services
that are provided by a library. In order to create my short story I researched how Lutie Stearns went about creating these traveling libraries along with Frank Hutchins and James Stout.

Because Lutie was passionate about making sure that children had access to books I wanted to make sure that my librarian also included children’s books that would be available to the kids in the fictional town that I created. At a conference for the American Library Association, Lutie Stearns gave a speech to the various librarians in attendance to show the importance of children’s books since many libraries would not allow children under the age of twelve to check out any of the books in the collection. (Stearns & Whitney, 216)

Stearns and the others who championed the traveling library wanted them to be a stepping-stone toward getting a public library in the community in which they visited, which was something I wanted to highlight within the story I created. Traveling libraries could be considered temporary and Stearns and the others wanted them to be a way for permanent libraries to be set up in the towns. (Pawley, 443) She made sure that the volunteer that was tasked with being the librarian for that town’s collection had an understanding of what was expected of them. She would explain the system that would be put in place to check out/in the items as well as what should happen if the items were not returned or if they were returned damaged.

Lutie Stearns was not the only of the three to traveling to these isolated communities to set up the traveling libraries. Frank Hutchins would also go out and work with these communities and towns to get them started with a traveling library, which they hoped would grow into a public library. Like Stearns, he also wrote reports about his travels. His brief descriptions of the towns he would visit gave me a better understanding of what might make up these communities such as having a post office, saloon, blacksmith shop, etc. He would interview the people, even
those not in the community he was visiting so that he could start to get an idea of what he might find when he got there. Some of the stories he recorded showed his surprise because it was not what he expected from what others had told him. An example of this was one man from a neighboring community claiming that the people did not wish to have a library of any kind because they did not care about reading. But when Hutchins arrived in the next town he found they were very open to the traveling library and in fact it became so popular in that community that they later had a permanent public library that had more success than that of their neighbor. (Pawley, 446)

Because not everyone was always supportive of the traveling libraries, I wanted to demonstrate this in my story but show that like in many of the communities that Stearns and Hutchins visited, most of the townspeople were very receptive of the traveling library and the idea that it could grow into their own public library.

In many of these communities their schoolhouses would be one room but they would normally be the meeting place for the town. In many of her reports, Lutie describes the majority of the crowd to be excited about the books and the library, which was something I sought to show through my story. (Stotts, 2006, p.31)

In addition to her traveling to set up the traveling libraries, Lutie would give many speeches throughout her career and would recruit many young women throughout the schools and colleges in Wisconsin to become librarians. Because she was so passionate and felt so strongly about this, these young women that she met would begin to follow in her footsteps and become librarians as well. (Tannenbaum, 162)

In many instances, Lutie Stearns would travel to these communities with the traveling library boxes from Stout that would have between 30-75 books in it. This made it easier for it to
be set up because it was already housed in shelves within the box and only needed to be placed in a clear space. It also made it easier to transport because the books were already inside so there was no need to try to organize it later. (Stotts, 2007, p.44) I chose to deviate from this because I wanted to really show that the town was behind this beyond them just being excited and saying yes. I wanted them to rally behind my character and show how much they valued this by making the room and a place for the books. I left the story open with the promise that Mary would return with a traveling library box from the collection provided by James Stout and that it would be filled with more books. This is another reason I chose to have Mary travel by a single horse instead of like Lutie who would normally travel by stage, buggy or even train if it was possible.

The books that I mention as being part of the traveling library were indeed many that would normally be included in a traveling library. One of the communities that Lutie Stearns and Frank Hutchins visited together not only to set up the traveling library but many times afterward to see how they had progressed and whether it was successful was Dunn County. They kept “a list of typical contents of one traveling library from Dunn County” which include: *Robinson Crusoe*, *Ivanhoe*, *Bird’s Christmas Carol*, *In a Child’s World*, *The Story of Norway*, *Ivory King*, *St. Nicholas*. (Stotts, 2007, p. 48) There were many others including the ones I mention in my story. Lutie and the others also made sure to always include books for the children of the community as well.

Because of the success of Lutie Stearns and the traveling libraries in Wisconsin, many other states began setting up their own traveling libraries. Kansas was one of those states for the women on the prairie did not have access to many books and expressed the need and want for more. Because of what Lutie accomplished with the help of the others involved, the traveling libraries spread to other states. Those in Kansas heard of traveling libraries in Ohio but had not
heard about them earlier and thought that this might be a way for them to provide books to the women that were asking for them. (Weaver, 54) Like Lutie Stearns in Wisconsin, Lucy Johnston in Kansas took it upon herself to make sure that the people who wanted books would have the opportunity to have access to them.

Also similar to Lutie, Johnston also wanted to make sure that children had access to books. She spoke to women’s clubs about the success of traveling libraries in New York, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Missouri about starting a traveling library that would hopefully lead to more public libraries. ""Because of our excellent school system every boy and girl in Kansas has the opportunities of the schoolroom,"" she told the group, ""but every boy and girl does not have the opportunity of reading good books." Johnston rallied the clubs to cooperate in getting books out to each school district in Kansas, ""not only for the boys and girls, but for the club women, the teachers, and the fathers and mothers." (Weaver, 55)

A way in which she differed from Stearns was instead of taking it upon herself to reach out to these isolated communities, she was the one being reached out to. A member of the community would often reach out to her in order to apply to receive a traveling library for their community. They would explain what books they wanted for their community and the reasoning behind why they chose those books.

Lutie Stearns gained an understanding of library users because she went out and met with them but not all had that option. Lucy Johnston was able to learn about the communities on the Kansas prairie thanks to the letters that were sent to her which showed that even these isolated communities wanted books and the knowledge that they provide.

Similar to the traveling libraries in Wisconsin, the traveling libraries would contain around fifty books and would be kept by the community for six months until it would be sent
back and other books could be requested. In many of these rural communities, these traveling libraries were able to help these clubs and communities create permanent free libraries, which would take the place of the paid libraries or traveling libraries. (Weaver, 59)

While the majority of the Kansas recipients of the traveling libraries were communities that were too isolated to get to a public library, there were other individuals who were interested in the traveling library because they themselves lived a ways outside of even those communities. Johnston received a letter from one such a woman who got together with the women from three other families in the same situation and they formed their own club and association with their families as the members so that they would be able to be a part of a traveling library. (Weaver, 59)

For many of the traveling libraries in Wisconsin the fees were already paid by the taxes that the community would pay so that the traveling libraries would not cost. I chose to keep that detail in my story instead of the way it was in Kansas for which the people would have to pay a two-dollar fee so that the books could be transported out to the isolated communities in question.

Even though the people of these various states that lived in these isolated communities were unable to get access to a public library did not mean that they had no desire to gain more books and knowledge. Traveling libraries gave them a way to not only connect with each other through their joy of reading but also with the world outside of their communities through the stories that they read. This also enabled them to create their own public libraries and grow the collections and services that they had access to.

Having the vast majority of the community in my story be excited about the prospect of not only having access to more reading materials but also the idea that it could grow into their own public library was a part of the plot that I knew I wanted to include in the story, especially
since my research showed that this was normally the case.
References:


