Cooperative Men and Library Ladies

By Sharon Carlson

[Sharon Carlson, the Director of the Archives & Regional History Collections, WMU, presented the following remarks on April 14, 1999, at the annual meeting of the Friends of the University Libraries.]

In the early 1980s, Helen Hooven Santmyer provided an entertaining narrative of a Xenia, Ohio, woman's organization in her book...and Ladies of the Club (Putnam, 1982). Possibly most important was the fact that her story also captured in print the social life and customs of a small midwestern community. Xenia's organizations, in fact, were a mirror of societal norms for the nineteenth and early twentieth century. That mirror of reflection holds true for Michigan as well since this state was home to a fair number of women's organizations, and, in particular, ladies' library associations.

The ladies' library associations not only reflected the intellectual and social life of the communities in which they operated, but they were able to provide educational opportunities for women, and went so far as to promote broader community projects which, in turn, involved the support of men. Published histories, organizational records, buildings, and the continuing legacies of the public libraries that were built on or benefited from the library associations speak to the cooperation between the women and men. Over one hundred Michigan communities at the turn of the century were heirs to the products of these organizations—educational, social, intellectual.

The Kalamazoo Ladies' Library Association was formed in 1870, and the Kalamazoo success, the idea of building a permanent library surfaced. The women canvassed the town's businessmen to determine if this were a feasible idea; it was. In fact, the town's businessmen agreed to take a lease on a piece of land if the money could be raised for a building. The women put their heads together and came up with some novel ideas that raised eyebrows—and funds—and thrust them into the national spotlight in 1892. One kind of fund raiser had the women...
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selling services such as making candy, trimming coffins, blacking shoes, and washing the milk wagons—or they sold a product such as doughnuts that they had made. A few brave ladies rented an organ and gave public performances on the streets of Otsego—much to the chagrin of the more conservative townspeople. After their fund-raising efforts, the ladies had a meeting in which each described what she had done to raise a dollar for the building. The “reports” turned out to be so entertaining that the ladies decided to repeat it for the public. Of course, they charged admission, and called it an Experience Social. At the public social, someone took notes and the activities of the women were reported to and published in a Chicago newspaper—the nationwide publicity began. Other major newspapers, including the Police Gazette, featured the story, and the end result was that funds and books arrived from all over the United States.

The building was built and opened in 1892 with a gala affair that attracted a capacity crowd to hear the addresses, recitations, and music. The building became the cultural center of Otsego. It also became the center of controversy only a few short years later when, in 1895, the women decided to raise more funds. Their activities, this time, resulted in condemnation by one of the town’s ministers. Apparently, a performance of the short play Spanish Student featured members of the organization wearing tights—including the married wives of prominent townsmen and unmarried school teachers. The play, said the minister, was “hellish;” the women were lambasted for stooping to such means to raise funds!

The controversy spread to other nearby media outlets, specifically the Kalamazoo Telegraph, where stories were embellished with quotations from the minister—and responding comments from the Ladies’ Library Association of Otsego. Eventually, the whole issue subsided especially since the townsmen defended their spouses and the other ladies involved. A prominent paper mill owner wrote an editorial lauding the women’s efforts. The women artfully avoided further scandal by respectfully declining an invitation to perform the play in the neighboring community of Plainwell.

Each of the one hundred or so Ladies’ Libraries Associations of Michigan has a story that inevitably involves cooperative men and the library ladies. The Kalamazoo and Otsego buildings remain very tangible testaments to the clubs that enriched the lives of small-town women at the turn of the century. The library association building was a place where women networked—if not for the first time, at least in a supportive atmosphere that focused their efforts. The organizations sought and received solid support from the men of the community who believed in the goals of the associations. This intriguing interplay occurred within the Victorian world of “proper gender behavior” where women and men knew the bounds of respectability—and usually traveled within them. Yet, on occasion, and more and more often as one century ended and another began, the limits were stretched. The Ladies’ Library Associations were a small but significant component of the evolution of society.