

My Memories of the Monroe County Public Library, Bloomington IN

by Georgia Flaten Shaw, August 2015

The Monroe County Public Library is celebrating its 50th birthday. That's exciting news and I have played a small part. The alumni have been asked to contribute, hence the attached memories. This is a brief personal memoir rather than a journalistic focus solely on the library. I have wandered into personal memories. I'm happy to put it down on paper; I'm getting old, becoming a part of Monroe County history.

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I grew up in Bloomington and because of that I do remember the old library, the old Carnegie Library. I remember all of the rooms, shelves, books, water fountain, first Xerox machine, card catalog, card stamping machine, the tables and chairs, the clock on the shelf and the big windows because they were solid and safe and interesting and nothing was off limits for me as a child when I was there. I browsed to my heart's content and this made me extremely happy. I remember in the back corner -- the original "Reference Room" which was converted to the Indiana History room.

The endearing Capra-esque Carnegie library appealed to my heart from a very early age. That era felt vintage to me even as I lived it. I felt excitement each time our family drove up to the library in our 1950 Studebaker and was eager to enter into its architecture. Curved limestone steps led up to the large central doors. Inside the foyer, heated radiators, so warm in the winter, warmed and welcomed me and made my pull-on rubber boots feel happy, too. The vintage Minton tile floor amazed my eyes, charmed me. Warmed and pleased to be there, I took the second set of foyer steps up through a set of glass-paned, wooden double doors to the main floor where inside my companions greeted me: librarians, books, and a sense that time had slowed way down. Instead of "don't touch", all I understood was "please touch".

The old library children's section was off to the left. My first set of books: the Cowboy Sam series. The binding on all of the children's books were hardcover. In that section I discovered the feel and heft and smell of these hardbound books, and loved the feel almost as much as the actual stories. Other series of this era included Flikka, The Swedish Sisters, Snip Snap and Snurr, and Steamshovel Mike, all with beautifully lithographed illustrations.

Since my family owned few children's books, (the Munck and Platt Fairy Stories, 'Best in Children's Books' series and a few others), the library gave me wider choices. I grew into Laura Ingles Wilder, Willa Cather, and other authors. I enjoyed the entire collection of Alfred Hitchcock short stories. With these, I discovered a taste for the scary tales and they were so perfectly well written, well suited to an adolescent. Then on to Edgar Allan Poe, and other short story writers. Poe was a good doorway to other classics: Steven Crane, Benjamin Franklin, and Helen Keller.

My nonfiction browsing always ended in the history section, to the right at the top of the stairs: World War II, specifically. As I took down volumes to look at photos to try to make sense of my father's past military service, I attempted to answer: How could I understand Dad's trunk of exotica: army canteen, fox shovel, uniform, war photography, and the souvenirs he brought back from India and Burma? I stared hard at the library book photos of war casualties trying to place myself there, in those towns, beside the victims. I remember the very first Xerox machine at the library and I was thrilled to make a few copies of the WWII photos. The copies were always pungent with chemical smell and the ink faded through the years. One photo which I copied and kept until college years was a photo of a WWII woman sitting in a field cradling a dead boy. It made me wonder all the more about the story which would lead up to such a tragic look in her face and the despair in her body language.

I also looked through biographies and dipped into them randomly. The result was little solid foundation for scholarship, but not a decrease in the thrill being able to pull any subject matter off the shelf and read the book jacket, contents and scan the chapters. The library was a very basic place; I could hear only the clunk of the library card stamping machine to interrupt the peace. There was a long, tall drinking fountain (with a tiny step stool for shorties) near the checkout desk. What a marvelous design that Checkout Desk was! Dead in the center of the library, oak, massive as the tables, chairs, and beautiful architecture. There were usually two female librarians with extremely pleasant personalities there ready to answer questions, even make recommendations to me, a meek nobody.

The library was a meeting up place for the Flaten family; we lived out in the country and reconnoitered there to get a lift back home in the family station wagon after school. I spent many hours of free time, sitting at massive wooden tables, and sitting on the couch, wandering through the stacks, touching the books, pulling them down on impulse. This cozy environment was so safe and pleasing it is hard to describe. After Dad left work at IU for the day, he would pick us up. One day when my father came to pick us up, we went out to the car, which to our surprise had been left idling on the curb with key in ignition. I told Dad I was surprised he would do that, as anyone could steal our car! He said he only hoped someone would! (Steal our old rundown station wagon.) This statement, coming from my father who was the epitome of honesty and who had a very stoic Norwegian demeanor, was most amusing to me!

The Indiana History Room (as I had previously mentioned) was a perfect little hide-away in the corner. It used to be the Reference Room, but changed identity several times. As oversized books became more numerous, they were given special shelving there. I noticed these things intently because I liked the library, frankly, the way it was, and did not like to see changes but nonetheless it was always evolving. Things were always changing at the library.

I became a teen, my reading dissipated, and I became drawn to the magazine rack. I stared for hours at photos of models in Vogue, jealous of Verushka's skinny legs and wanting to have skinny legs or at least look like Cheryl Teague. And so my reading

devolved to practically nothing save for school work. At age 15, searching for a way to earn money, I had a very lucky day when I walked into the basement of the library and was hired for my very first job of my lifetime. I interviewed with Charlie Hunsberger and was hired as a "book processor." What a smile he had! I quickly got my summer work permit.

My very first position was as a processing assistant, and I sat right next to elderly Henrietta Baker -- "Mrs. Baker" who smoked while we worked, and who patiently showed me the art of processing books before they reached the shelves. She sat next to me, in the basement room which contained the new books, her thin, crooked fingers held a long ash as she smoked and showed me how to do the job. We treated each new book in a specific fashion: hand-stamped the bottom pages and inside the front title page with the library stamp, then we pasted the card pocket 1/2 inch from the bottom of the final inside hard cover, and tucked the card inside. Next we took the hot stylus with tape, and clearly labeled the spine with the call numbers and author letters, delicate task requiring nimbleness so as not to burn ones fingers. And if the book included a dust jacket, we took clear cellophane wrappers, slid the jacket inside, folded it over and re-wrapped it neatly around the book, taping it just so, hidden, so that the tape did not show and distract from the book cover. For older books which needed refurbishing due to wear and tear, we used the electric eraser to clean smudges and children's scribbles off, we used library glue to re-attach the spine to the cover; sometimes we sent the book out to be rebound if the condition was beyond our skills. We were paid to extend the shelflife of all books. The volume was fairly large but she urged me not to go too fast. Henrietta was a real dear and she lived near the library and talked often and told wonderful stories about family vacations -- especially on the Mississippi River cruises. I loved her and her family stories and what I did at the library, even if I worked in a rather dim small room in the basement and our lunchroom was cold, dim and uninviting, as lunchrooms tend to be. At that time, we did not process any other material. It was a marvelous job. I felt I was doing something important. Sometimes Mrs. Baker told me to "slow down," no need to rush through the pastepot tasks, but I was young and eager to prove my worth.

This first job in the Processing Department was part of a bigger scheme in life: to save money to travel to England to meet a penpal with whom I had corresponded since 6th grade. This was the platform which allowed me to take my paycheck, deposit it at the Workingmens Federal Savings and Loan (right across the street from the library) and save up enough to buy a plane ticket to see "Europe On \$5.00 A Day!" which was actually possible way back then. What happiness I felt with both the environment, the people and my dreams.

I continued to work every summer at the library. I look at my Social Security statement now, and check the accuracy of my memory. Indeed in 1968 (age 16) I paid SS taxes through 1975, with work at the library.

In 1969, the library needed to expand and because of this, my work location changed. I continued to work at the library Processing Department after school during my high school years, but the location now was conveniently relocated next door to my high

school, Bloomington High School South. In the basement of that building, (the Montgomery County School Administration Building) the scope of the work was ramped up; a larger crew was hired for processing all of the books for the Monroe County public school system libraries in addition to the public library; I made lifelong friends with the truly dear and wonderful people who worked there: Jan Ingle, Elaina Kintgen, Vicki Peterson. I even met my future-husband-to-be there when he was hired to move books from the old library to the new one while he attended grad school at IU. I finally graduated from Bloomington High School in 1970, and having finally saved \$100.00 to fulfill my dream to travel to England, thanks to the library work, where I met my penpal, Janet Batt and we have remained lifelong friends and travelers ever since.

My association with the library did not end with high school, however. When I returned from England, I enrolled at Indiana University. I had decided to stay in town for higher ed. Indiana University's faculty caliber and familiarity were inducements. I applied to continue with the library through the Work-Study program, and was able to cover partial rent and tuition while I went to school. My husband-to-be and I became co-workers in the new Processing Department when the move was made to the library on Kirkwood Avenue. In those grand and brand-new quarters, the processing department was increased and the volume of books grew tremendously.

The new library was a glamorous, modern building: it had egg-shaped reading pods for chairs, poured concrete walls, spacious public areas and a new innovation in book storage: the book retriever called the Randriever. And in our department, in order to boost processing of books, the new processing department had a U-shaped 'conveyor belt' which shuttled books along from person to person. We put stacks of books on trays (not very sophisticated pieces of plywood), and pushed them along from conveyor 'station' to the next conveyor 'station': from the cataloguers through to the processors who stamped and prepared the books before they were finally shelved; it was a charming system. Since the new library contained many more new books, our workload increased greatly. We also processed many more records and other AV items like cassettes. Our department bought a record player in order to "test out" all of the records before they went on the shelf to make sure they weren't defective in any way. In this way, all of us got to sit every day and test out the absolute greatest music of the 1970s: the Stones, the Fifth Dimension, Bob Dylan, all of the popular music of our day. Of course, we could bring any book home to read it before the public could, but my college reading was too demanding so I made little use of it. Nonetheless, the perks of the job were enticing.

The biggest perk was the camaraderie. I doubt there was ever a happier group of persons who worked together anywhere, any time. We even, though rarely, slipped over to Nicks for a noon pint during our lunch hour, and then filtered back to work through various entrances. We socialized together, shared highlights of Bloomington in the 1970s: Peoples Park, rock concerts, the joys and heartaches of dating, and in general experienced the larger political issues of the day, and felt very in tune with each other. Some of us even went skinny dipping. I remember riding a bike out to the quarries with Donna Palmer one day to go skinny dipping. It was a joyful time. Donna even let some guy put tanning lotion all over her back. I admired herchutzpah, and it was all an

innocent lark. It was a time for hippies, laid back fun, and we were young with blue skies and knew how to let it all hang out. Bloomington even today has some of that inherent laid back character.

Other friends which come to mind from that time: Margaret Gentry and Fran "the Jersey Turner" in Processing, and Barb Council, Iannis Ozolins, Roberta Mueller, Dana Burton Lawson, Chris Arata (who worked the Randtriever), Norma, Bob's secretary, Ralph Campbell, Sue Marshall, Bobbie Taylor, Elaine Phillips and Sally Hunt.

Our processing room was divided from another part of the library by a temporary wall built with plywood paneling. One day, our processing manager, Jan Ingle, suggested that I paint a mural on the wall since it was temporary. Since I was studying painting at IU School of Fine Arts I merrily painted characters from childrens books, and other lighthearted cartoons. It was so amusing that the library director, Bob Trinkle asked if I would like to paint a large children's mural down in the new Childrens Department on the permanent wall. Of course I was so happy to, and ended up creating a rather nice collage of illustrations from the beloved classics which the children's librarian (was it Jenny Ritchie?) had pulled from the shelves for me. Although she did not hand me Cowboy Sam or Snip, Snap and Snur (from my own childhood), the characters were such icons that I think they all would be recognized even today. I also created a few unique images, one of which was a Victorian house artfully modified to include names of colleagues from the Processing Department hidden within small brushstrokes. (see below) One day as I was painting I even asked a child to paint the face on the sun in the mural, and his childish hand lent a directness, the likes of which even Picasso might confess to be envious of. (see below)



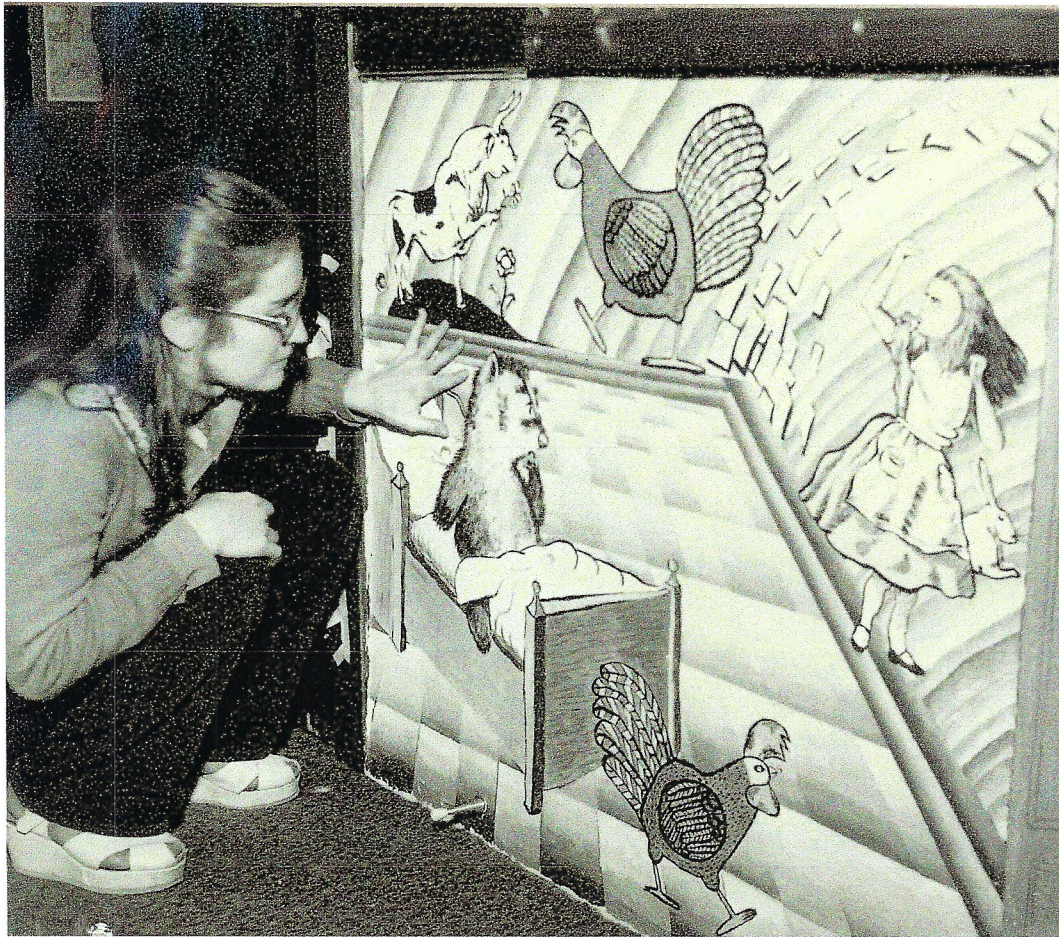
Here is a detail of the yellow house where some of the the names were hidden. (Georgia, Elaina, Jan, Vicki, Pat) Did anyone notice?

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I finished the mural during my junior year. At that time I was also working at several other jobs (on campus washing test tubes in the IU biology dept as well as being a hostess at the Fireside Restaurant in town at night) to make ends meet. I also taught folk guitar as a side income and have wonderful memories of teaching Bob Trinkle's daughter, Sue, to play folk songs. She was one of the friendliest, and most beautiful students I taught. She would join me after work in the processing department and have her lesson while her father finished business as the library Director. She was a young student yet she understood the genre of folk music right away and had a gift for intonation and singing.

As a result of my mural project, I was invited to paint a mural at the Bedford Public Library Children's Room in Bedford, Indiana. I painted the mural on the stairway walls leading down to and into the children's room in the basement. No hidden names there, however. I completed it while driving back and forth between classes at I.U. (See photo below for a small portion of the project.) It was a very busy time for me but I eventually decided to end work at the library due to multiple responsibilities and class scheduling conflict.



Both murals are gone now due to library renovations.

I cannot say that I regularly correspond with people whom I have worked -- except for my dear friends at the Monroe County Library. It was a grand moment in time, catching me during my coming of age years, and it was through those friendships, which have long endured, and for that the golden opportunity which led me to contribute to the fine mission of the organization, that I have also gone on to do much more in life with publishing, illustration and graphic design. I owe so much to the Monroe County Public Library and this small piece is an attempt to say thank you.

Georgia Shaw