

## The Woman's Library of Bowling Green

by Lynn Niedermeier

On January 21, 1901, the *Times-Journal* of Bowling Green, Kentucky ran a front-page story about a sensational breach of promise suit filed by 23-year-old Julia Hill Willis against a prominent lawyer, 61-year-old Daniel Webster "Webb" Wright. In his lengthy reply to her petition, Wright denied Miss Willis's claims that he had sent her flowers, sung love songs under her window, or pledged to marry her, lamenting the fact that his "great personal beauty" made him the target of "artful and designing women" seeking to end his lifelong bachelorhood.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, this high-society scandal was all in jest. The mock trial of *Willis v. Webster* was a fundraising event for the Woman's Library, a fifteen-year-long enterprise that put books into the hands of Bowling Green citizens long before the establishment of a public library.

As its name suggested, local women were leaders in the library's creation. Late nineteenth-century progress had given them greater access to higher education but still shut them out of most professions, particularly after marriage. Unwilling to abandon their love of learning, they formed fifteen- or twenty-member clubs to discuss literature, history, art and contemporary issues. First to meet were the Ladies' Literary Club, established in 1880, and the Current Topic Club, founded in 1895. Every two weeks the members—usually unmarried teachers and the wives of prominent local doctors, lawyers, bankers and businessmen—took turns reading papers or speaking extemporaneously on topics as diverse as Roman aqueducts, modern opera, the Franco-Prussian War, Shakespeare and wireless telegraphy. Presenters often found it difficult, however, to locate sources of information for their papers. One recalled that the encyclopedia became "an old and tried friend" as the women made "repeated raids" on its pages for bibliographies in support of their essays.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, the Current Topic Club began a library fund in 1897. Each member contributed \$1.00 per year (equal in value to about \$20.00 today) for the club to rent a room and stock it with books and magazines for study. In May 1898, the Ladies' Literary Club offered to join the project by housing its own books at the common location. Like many socially conscious, reform-minded groups across the nation, the women's broader objective was to establish a permanent, public library with books of general interest as well as reference works. "It would be our wish," wrote the Ladies' Literary Club secretary, "to add to the books as rapidly as possible, and with one library it is probable that the public might feel inclined to assist looking to a future general benefit."<sup>3</sup>

The Current Topic Club purchased a bookcase and began the library in a room at the State Street home of member Mary Anderson Barr, the wife of dentist Edward T. Barr. A committee composed of members from the two clubs set borrowing rules and hours of operation, and levied fines not only for overdue books but for the failure of any member to serve her turn as librarian. By February 1899 the "Woman's Library" had its name, and soon moved one block farther south on State Street to the home of Litie McElroy, the wife of lawyer Clarence Underwood McElroy.<sup>4</sup>

In January 1900, the clubs opened their library to the public on payment of a \$2.00 annual fee. The library committee used the extra money to buy books of general interest, enlarging its treasury with fundraising events like the mock trial and an “Old Fiddler’s Contest,” which raised \$65.00 (equal today to more than \$1,200). In contrast to these lighthearted promotions was the committee’s grudging acquisition of novels in order to satisfy the public’s appetite for leisure reading rather than serious study. The Ladies’ Literary Club was encouraged in 1902 when, of the 1,447 books circulated in the first six months, only 600 were novels. A few years later, however, the committee decried the taste for fiction of a majority of patrons as “having a very bad effect on the morals of this library. . . as the baser elements of its composition are being cultivated to the exclusion of the standard and classic virtues.”<sup>5</sup>

Early in 1902, the growing collection of the Woman’s Library was moved again to the McCormack Building at 10<sup>th</sup> and State Streets. With almost 200 fee-paying supporters and a new state law authorizing cities to levy taxes for free public libraries, the women dared to hope that the city of Bowling Green might take over the library, but they were soon disappointed. A proposal to seek funds for a Carnegie Library failed when the City Council grew fearful of future maintenance costs. The women nevertheless continued to raise money and buy books, and by early 1908 had succeeded in moving the library a third time to rooms reserved in the new City Hall at 10<sup>th</sup> and College Streets.<sup>6</sup>

By 1909, the women seemed more anxious than ever to return to the study, rather than the management, of books. The library “as conducted at present is burdensome,” observed one member, but discussions about its future dragged on until 1913 when the committee proposed to give the collection to the Western Kentucky State Normal School (now Western Kentucky University). The Current Topic Club, however, opposed the plan. Fortunately, offers to give the library a home soon came from both the YMCA and the Bowling Green High School. On April 9, 1913 the clubs finally donated their collection of some 2,500 volumes, together with bookcases, furniture and cash on hand to the Board of Education on behalf of the High School, with each member retaining a right of access. The Woman’s Library played a valuable role in the cultural life of Bowling Green—but, as its creators had feared, the city would wait another twenty-five years for a true public library.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Times-Journal*, 21 January 1901.

<sup>2</sup> Ladies’ Literary Club Minutes, 20 October 1908, Kentucky Library & Museum.

<sup>3</sup> Current Topic Club Minutes, 24 September 1896, 7 March 1897, Kentucky Library & Museum; Ladies’ Literary Club Minutes, May 1898.

<sup>4</sup> Current Topic Club Minutes, 14 April 1898, 23 February 1899; Ladies’ Literary Club Minutes, 18 April 1899; Library Rules in Current Topic Club 1895-1899 Minute Book.

<sup>5</sup> Ladies’ Literary Club Minutes, 2 January 1900, 5 November 1901, 2 September 1902, 9 March 1909; Current Topic Club Minutes, 12 December 1901.

<sup>6</sup> Ladies’ Literary Club Minutes, 21 January, 4 February 1902, 17 March, 7 April 1908; Current Topic Club Minutes, 12 December 1901, 5 February 1903, 16 February 1905. At the Current Topic Club meeting on 18 April 1901, a member had given a presentation on Andrew Carnegie but, the secretary noted, “we failed to hear our library mentioned on the list of his magnificent gifts.”

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<sup>7</sup> Ladies' Literary Club Minutes, 16 March 1909, 17 October 1911, 7 January 1913; Warren County Deed Book 113, p. 139. For further information on the history of libraries in Bowling Green, see Jonathan Jeffrey, *Standing Strong: A History of the Bowling Green Public Library, 1938-2003* (Bowling Green: Friends of the Library Warren County/Bowling Green Public Library, 2003), and Jonathan Jeffrey, "The Genesis of the Bowling Green Public Library," DLSC Faculty Publications (2004), available at [http://works.bepress.com/jonathan\\_jeffrey/3](http://works.bepress.com/jonathan_jeffrey/3).