



Rainbow Round My Shelves

Edna Gillespie, Blackfoot Public Library, Blackfoot, ID

***Originally printed in PNLQ Quarterly 7:3 (April 1943), pp 156-7.**

Keywords: *Idaho libraries; public library history; World War II; Vardis Fisher; Blackfoot, Idaho*

Editor's Note: We decided to reprint this article, to share the fantastic detailed account of the Blackfoot Public Library. We hope you enjoy it as much as we do.

Libraries, like Isabella's basil plant, may thrive on dead men's brains – but why sustain a mordant atmosphere?

For years the Blackfoot Public Library lay buried under ground. Yet the ghosts that haunted our shelves and aisles were blithe spirits and they dispensed gaiety throughout the community. How could they help it? The floor was orange, the walls primrose, the chairs vermilion, the tables topped with jade green. I think that many patrons still think regretfully of those days when we could reach right out from the desk and pick a book asked for, or by rising reach in behind the doubled row to get out an obscure volume that we had fondly hoped no one would be demanding for ages.

The farm wife would stop to tell us about the trouble she was having with her obstreperous turkey flock while little Peter clutched the corner of the desk with grubby hands sticky with an all day sucker.

Those were the days – ten thousand books, magazines by the hundreds, pamphlets innumerable, and a rather stout librarian all trying to find room in a space 17x44x8! The patient readers would have to be moved frequently so that we could get around the tables to the shelves behind, and I chose the high school girls who assisted me according to their poundage.

The summer before we moved into our new quarters brought me the most anxious moments of my life. A patron who weighed two hundred pounds (an expectant mother, too) found her favorite material in the floor stacks which were just about a foot and a half apart. Fortunately the fire department was next door; we reflected that firemen were handy with the axe; our anxiety subsided somewhat, but wasn't completely relieved until an announcement came from the hospital.

Vardis Fisher spent practically an afternoon owlshly viewing our life in this subterranean sphere, and I still think that when he chose his latest title, *Darkness and the Deep*, he was remembering his hours submerged in the Blackfoot Library.

Oh. yes, before emerging from the mushroom to the sunflower days, I must mention the black widow and her offspring that a terrified assistant and I swept out of the dirty web in a dark corner and crushed on the cement floor; the cats that crept through the open transoms (our only source of ventilation) to seek warm naps on the top shelves close to the ceiling – we have picked off as many as six at closing time; the drunks that we shoved from our polite environs to the police quarters on the other side of the building.

And then came Oscar! Oscar was a black sprite of a mouse who showed no fear but seemed to love the library, and even the librarians. He would scoot across the floor almost to the desk, then sit back on his haunches, cock his head impudently, and practically demand *What every young mouse should know*. We returned Oscar's interest

and affection until that fatal day when he trotted out with Oscaretta and we found a file of Harper's chewed up for a nest. Sadly we brought the poison. R. I. P.

Now, above ground, we flourish in the golden light of the morning coming in from over Mount Putnam's snowy height and in the evening glow reflected from the Three Buttes as they purple on the western desert. Night brings man's fluorescent to the gleam from the Early American maple of the furniture. The floor stacks are properly three feet apart, and the most callipygian of mortals can stoop to the lower shelf without disarranging the stack to the rear.

We have an honest-to-goodness children's room in a well-lighted basement. I throttled my yen for wild, barbaric colors, and the room stands out in buttercup yellow and cream and tan. However, I still hanker for crimson and turquoise and gold. I am violent woman, and, by Dewey, I am going to have the sunset scheme some day!

Our library is part of the business district. Men barge in from the street to settle a furious argument, not by fists but by statistics; the tired housewife leaves the groceries at the desk while she glances through *Good Housekeeping* or copies a recipe from *Sunset*. An old pioneer drifts in with his wide-backed *café au lait* spaniel at his heels. I do not protest; the little dog lies so quietly by the chair, blending with the brown and yellow floor as his master thumbs through a book of Idaho lore; a dark, handsome sailor with a retinue of admiring girls stalks in to find out whether Pocahontas did have a son (she did, and the sailor clinches his statement that he is a descendant). Can you blame me if I maintain that a library in the center of a town becomes its heart and throbs with its life?

Our library does not dodge controversial issues. The policy of the library board is to let the librarian function uncensored and unhung. The dictates of good taste and reputable publishing govern the choice of books. A wrong book to the right person may sometimes do more good than the right book to the right person – the usual library slogan. Shock treatments are frequently beneficial to the sane also.

Wartime in our small library has not upset the usual schedule to a noticeable degree. We are in the midst of a farming community. The farmers take their problems to the county agent or to some of the numerous organizations set up to help them. What they ask of the library is a refuge, a bit of peace in the demoralization of a world.

The demand for technical books is light. I add a few new volumes to this division each year. Eagerly some months ago I began to build up a shelf on post-war planning; now a jaundiced eye examines the date slips to find that but two have gone out. Our people are just too tired to read and form philosophies. The books that circulate are books that tell of the lands where our merry-faced boys of yesterday have gone; a picture of the jungles where maybe "my son lay down to die"; a sketch of the fog-bound Aleutians where the earth seeps ice and the fire drops from the sky; the story of dynamite cargo and the sailor on an earth-girdling voyage – "My son is a first class torpedo man on the Wahoo."

Yes, the librarian sees pride and tears, hears the faltering voice and the brave words, and glimpses at her desk the sum of man's courage. Books have told the story; book will tell the story again; that's what books and libraries are for.

*Vardis Fisher had this to say about Edna Gillespie and the Blackfoot Public Library – "If a town can be summarized by a single quality then perhaps the most notable characteristic of Blackfoot is the fact that its indefatigable librarian has made of this city not only probably the most book-conscious one in the State but has also lifted its taste in reading far above the usual levels. This circumstance is all the more remarkable when the books in this small library are compared with those in other public libraries in Idaho, and when it is remembered that all the books in all the public libraries in the State do not add to more than half a million. So awakened has this town become to the cultural possibilities to be found in a good library that it recently made an extensive drive to enlarge its resources in reading." Idaho: a guide in word and pictures, p. 211. (Vardis Fisher was the state director and editor for Idaho in the Federal Writers' Project). – Ed. (Ruth Hale, University of Washington Library, Seattle, WA)