

## **Wayne A. Wiegand: Main Street Public Libraries: Community Places and Reading Spaces in the Rural Heartland, 1876–1956**

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Library historian Wayne A. Wiegand’s latest book, *Main Street Public Libraries: Community Places and Reading Spaces in the Rural Heartland, 1876–1956*, explores the development and collections of four midwestern libraries: the Bryant Library in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, the Sage Public Library in Osage, Iowa, the Charles H. Moore Library in Lexington, Michigan, and the Rhinelander Public Library in Rhinelander, Wisconsin. All of these communities were founded by “Republican Protestant Yankees” and “were home to tidy, stable, and largely homogenous populations [with] shared cultural values” (2). All are also within driving distance from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where Wiegand worked while writing this book.

Wiegand dedicates a chapter to each library, sometimes sacrificing compelling narrative in exchange for an unyielding barrage of facts, gleaned from the better part of a decade’s worth of research:

Rhinelander’s... 3,260 registered borrowers... withdrew 24,237 items from its collection of 7,961 volumes... Of that total adults accounted for 15,280 books circulated (80 percent of these fiction), children 8,957 (74 percent of these fiction). At the time the library subscribed to thirty-eight periodicals and seven newspapers, none of them socialist. (114)

Readers would have greatly benefited from more frequent and more descriptive chapter subheadings, perhaps standardized across these four chapters, in order to facilitate comparisons between the four libraries.

Nonetheless, there is a lot to enjoy here. Readers will recognize timeless bureaucratic frustrations: In 1887, the Osage, Iowa town council failed forty-seven times before finally choosing a librarian, only to have their selection resign

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6 months later (52). You can't help but laugh when the library association of Sauk Centre, Minnesota asks a New England poet for a donation for its as-yet unnamed library, hoping for something along the lines of the \$12,500 he had recently given to a Massachusetts library, and instead receives a signed book of poems (12). They still named their library after him. And today's librarians will empathize with their historical colleagues: The Sage Public Library paid its librarian a dollar every day the library was open (51). This was a great deal, at least when compared to the librarian at the Bryant Library, who received "fifty cents weekly to open the library on Saturday afternoons, keep a catalog of books, and register borrowers" (12).

In addition to on-site historical research, Wiegand employed a team of research assistants to create a database of the information contained in the libraries' accessions records. Wiegand explores this information in his fifth chapter, detailing how the collections grew, how they compared to each other and to *Booklist* catalogs, and their inclusion and non-inclusion of censored books. Noting that as library collections grew, less and less space was available for the community meetings that were so important during the early years of the libraries, Wiegand checked local newspapers for complaints, finding little. "[F]or the most part, their patrons seemed to agree with [the] priority [of shelf space over meeting space]" (178). Wiegand is also able to show the push and pull between reader demands for popular fiction and "'higher' reading tastes advocated by the nation's literary establishment and [echoed by] library professionals" (157). The debate between popular reading and "higher" reading continues and, as libraries become less book-focused, a discussion of their history as providers of public space is timely. Wiegand has made his database freely available online.

While the information provided in *Main Street Public Libraries* is specific to the libraries profiled, with his first line, Wiegand tells us that he intends to paint a more universal picture: "As of this writing, the United States has more public libraries than McDonald's restaurants" (1). I love this fact. It stayed in the back of my mind as I read, reminding me that while the specifics were different, the stories of these libraries are much the same as the story of the library I grew up using, a small library that plays a big role in its community. With his last line, Wiegand completes the thought: "[A Main Street public library's]... primary purpose and mission—as crafted over the generations by local leaders and users—[is] to foster the kinds of social harmony that community spaces and stories, experienced and shared, provide" (186). This is a book about libraries and their communities, the effects libraries have on their communities, and the effects that communities have on their libraries.