

Librarians, Unsung Heroines

By Christel Yount

Kathi Appelt's book *Down Cut Shin Creek* was my eye-opener to the extraordinary heroics performed by librarians and their sponsors in times of hopelessness at locations of abject poverty. I could see three such situations with my mind's eye: The era of the Great Depression, Post-War Germany, and my Toilets for Literacy project in Nepal.

The crash of the Stock Market in 1929 initiated the Great Depression. President Roosevelt found a way to help the American people: In 1933, he created the Work Projects Administration. The WPA made a concerted effort to create jobs for women, as so many women were unemployed heads of household. Women found work in health services, school lunch programs, and libraries.

"It was during the time of the WPA that many areas of the country, particularly poor rural areas, received free public library service for the very first time. Without a system of paved roads, reaching many of these areas required ingenuity. For example, in the backwaters of Mississippi and Louisiana, librarians delivered books on small flatboats that they navigated with poles through the marshy bayous. But it was eastern Kentucky's Pack Horse Library project that proved to be the most innovative of all" (Appelt 3-4).

A Kentucky book woman's routes were full-day trips. At dawn she left her home on horseback with a book bag tied to the horse. It might be sleeting, or even snowing. If she and her horse had an accident alone out there, she might freeze to death before somebody came to her rescue. Her tasks were many-fold: to bring books and magazines to outlying log cabins, to read to the illiterate, and to counsel stubborn elders to allow the young ones the luxury of literacy. The twofold goals of the WPA were thus fulfilled: Women had gainful employment, and they promoted social and cultural awareness with art and literature.

World War II left an equally barren cultural scene for children in Germany. And American First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the great advocate of WPA programs, offered her hand to help. Jella Lepman was German born, a visionary and politically active journalist. In 1945, Roosevelt met Lepman in Munich, where Lepman was engaged at the American Headquarters as advisor for questions related to children and young people in post-war Germany. The two ladies agreed on the importance of children's books in promoting international understanding and peace. The American First Lady used her clout with the American publishing industry and secured a great number of first edition children's books for the collection of the fledgling Internationale Jugendbibliothek in Munich. Today, Munich houses the largest collection of international Youth Literature (*Jugendliteratur*), never ceasing to promote Jella Lepman's ideas of tolerance, reconciliation, and intercultural understanding.

Neither Jella Lepman nor Eleanor Roosevelt foresaw their incredible impact on the international peace movement. Their vision was supported by cadres of hardworking librarians, teachers, and

volunteers. The boundaries of these stakeholders are not well-defined: a teacher may become a librarian; a volunteer may have the impact of a teacher; and a librarian will most likely teach and volunteer. However, they all are the most influential forces in children's lives everywhere. Just as Eleanor Roosevelt started the outpouring of book donations to the International Youth Library, international philanthropy has supported the cause of literacy for more than a century.

An amazing facet of American society is philanthropy. It is enacted by the generosity of Americans, willing to "pay back" to society when they have reached a comfortable station in their own lives. Rotarians form such a group, and Pi Beta Phi sorority women belong to another. Both groups were founded and operational in the beginning of the 1900s. Both organizations, therefore, have focused for more than one hundred years on literacy in one form or another.

By 1917, Pi Beta Phi had created and built the Settlement School in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Although no one could have known it at the time, Pi Beta Phi and Gatlinburg had forged a relationship that persists into the present day. Why Tennessee? Because the State government there was particularly receptive to benevolent organizations bent on assisting the state's education department. The scarcity of taxpayers in certain districts necessitated passage of a law allowing public schools to be run cooperatively with the sectarian schools. The Settlement School in Gatlinburg was a successful enterprise; children learned to read, write, and exercise arithmetic.

By 1913 Rotary had been founded. I am a Rotarian. When I traveled to Nepal two years ago, I learned at a Southeast Asian Literacy Conference about the plight of girls: Because many schools don't have toilets, girls miss two-thirds of the learning opportunities boys have. With the help of Rotary International funding, I am in a collaboration with Nepalese Rotarians, building toilets in four schools and affording more than 500 girls opportunities to learn to read. I would not have thought of the connection between toilets and literacy; now I do.

We are gathering this week for a Children's Literature Conference. On our dedicated Steering Committee are professional librarians, and they act as always: They volunteer, they advise, they nurture all of us, especially the children; and they carry on as unsung heroines.

Work Cited

Appelt, Kathi, and Jeanne Canella Schmitzer. *Down Cut Shin Creek: The Pack Horse Librarians of Kentucky*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.