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My love affair with librarians

[Alt. title: The Great American Conversation]

By Jim Nowlan

As a grade schooler, I was captivated by the stereopticon at the Toulon (IL) Public Library, and its sepia-and-cream Matthew Brady photographs of the immediate aftermath of Civil War battles, the dead strewn higgledy-piggledy across pock-marked ground. I became a regular at this local 1905 Carnegie.

As a student in Urbana-Champaign, I spent many evenings in the reading room in the Main Library at the University of Illinois, home to one of our truly great American research libraries.

[Sitting at a huge oak table in the cavernous room, this small-town boy had a reverence for the hushed setting and the gothic windows that soared high toward the starry sky. I recall thumbing through the thick, green Readers' Guide to Periodic Literature, hoping to find a few articles in an evening's work to complete a term paper.]

Today, I work mornings in my home office, then take off for a rural or small college library in my area, to read, and maybe poke around a little. Then I walk a country road nearby. Nice day.

And don't look down your nose at the rural library and its assumed limitations. A quick story.

A decade ago I was commissioned to write an honest history of the venerable Union League Club of Chicago for its 125th. I came upon references to a "trial" inside the club in 1911,

presided over by William Sidley, founder of the eponymous (I just love the chance to use this word) global law firm based in Chicago.

Alas, neither the club archivist nor I could find much about it. Back at my Toulon library one evening, I lamented this to assistant librarian Janet Kamerer.

“Lemme me take a look,” Janet said, whose training for her job was, I’m sure, OJT and workshops.

Two weeks later, a really thick old-fashioned manila envelope arrived, the top secured by string wrapped around a paper button. Inside was the 700+ page transcript of the “trial,” typed on crinkly copy paper.

The issue was whether to expel member Edward G. Hines, the Chicago lumberman. A conversation in 1909 inside the Club had exposed Hines’ alleged part in bribing 40 Illinois state lawmakers with \$100,000 to elect William Lorimer to the US Senate. Lorimer was expelled from the Senate in 1912, and Hines from the Club the next year.

The copy came from the University of Washington Law Library, across half a continent, undoubtedly buried in its bowels all these decades! The find, probably the only extant copy, was invaluable to my research.

Thanks, librarian Janet.

Librarians are almost universally helpful, considerate, professional and knowledgeable, if sometimes a tad officious that patrons behave appropriately in *their* sanctum. No question posed to a reference librarian is considered less than very important. After all, this is a quest for information, the stuff of life, literally.

Libraries and librarians are civilized, and civilizing. And we in America could sure use a jolt of that kind of stuff right now.

Most of us want the same things: order, harmony, prosperity, a good place to rear our children, a chance to have a say about our governments.

We are, however, deeply divided, which is nothing new. Yet I sense we are having more trouble than possibly since the Civil War or the Viet Nam-Civil Rights Era in talking to one another about our differences.

Trump supporters are no more deplorable than pointy-headed academics like me are all godforsaken Lefties. Yet too many of us have retreated inside our respective FOX, MSNBC and other garbled ideological bubbles. The commentators create devils out of those who disagree—the Devil always sells.

We need, all of us, to sit down around a table with those of other persuasions, to parse the objectives we have for our country. We could see where we might agree, and disagree; evaluate our positions civilly; seek common ground, and realize that we're all in this together.

I think I could maybe talk old friend Barack Obama (from our days in Illinois politics) to co-chair a major enterprise that would generate thousands of discussions in towns rural and urban.

Former first lady Laura Bush, a librarian, you know, would make a great co-chair.

We might call such “The Great American Conversation.”

I envision conversations around a seminar table for 12 or so, from across the political spectrum, of course. The librarian, a respected pastor, or the local civics teacher might moderate.

The moderator would need solid preparation. As effective professors know, conducting a stimulating, productive seminar is a fine art.

Community TV and newspapers could transmit and report on the sessions.

I can think of no place better to sit around a table than in the community room of libraries everywhere!

And who better to host the discussions than librarians—I love'em all.