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BRINGING BOOKS TO A “BOOK-HUNGRY LAND”



Print Culture on the Dakota Prairie

Lisa Lindell

The dearth of reading material was a recurring lament in the writings and memoirs of Dakota settlers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “I was born with a desire to read, . . . and I have never gotten over it,” declared Henry Theodore Washburn, recalling his Minnesota boyhood and homesteading years in Dakota Territory, “but there was no way in those days to gratify that desire to any great extent.”¹ This lack was indeed of consequence. In the pre-electronic era, print was a primary means of obtaining information, insight, and pleasure. High rates of literacy, sharp increases in book production, and falling costs all contributed to the pervasiveness of the printed word. Whether it promoted particular values or challenged them, reading played a vital role in shaping how individuals assigned meaning to their lives.²

Governing what and how much was read were geographical location, environment, economic conditions, educational levels, and amount of leisure time. For many early South Dakota settlers, reading was certainly not a prime activity or even a real option. Those who did actively involve themselves in the culture of print were variously motivated. From ordinary rural dwellers, to the educated elite, to book publishers and sellers, each had an agenda—whether to strive for cultural improvement, spread “right

ideals,” make a quick profit, or simply eke out a living. In any case, getting books to remote regions required initiative and perseverance. A historical examination of South Dakota’s print culture, focusing on the experiences of those who supplied reading material and those who received it, can afford a valuable glimpse into the cultural aspirations and attitudes of a rural population in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America.

“There were but few books in any home in our community, in my early childhood,” wrote Mabel Kingsley Richardson of her upbringing in southeastern Dakota in the 1880s. “I am proud to be country born, and in South Dakota. If I had my choice over, I’d choose to be born on the same hill, in the same house, by the same river, . . . but I would like more books.” Among the family’s small stock of printed materials were a Webster’s dictionary, a brown leather Bible, almanacs, seed catalogues, and advertising material from which the children resourcefully clipped illustrations for homemade picture books. Richardson’s keenest memories were of a lavishly illustrated gift book carefully stowed in her mother’s trunk. Bound in “soft tan leather, with heavy gold tooling and gilt edges,” the book was “filled with beautiful pictures in soft tints of dainty ladies in fluffy dresses and poke bonnets” accompanied by “grown up” poems and stories. When she learned that her father had presented this book to her mother the Christmas before they were married, Richardson decided that “it was reason enough for marrying any man.”³ The allure of the appearance and aura of books went beyond the enchanted reaction of a child. Indeed, for cultural aspirants in Victorian America, a reverence for books as objects and status symbols was a common response, something book publishers were quick to grasp and exploit.⁴

The Richardson family’s few books were typical of the sparse holdings in many South Dakota homes. A survey of books owned by late nineteenth-century Hand County residents, for example, reveals that most of these households had a Bible, a schoolbook or two, and little else.⁵ Specific references to the books of South Dakotans in this era are unfortunately scanty. Although many left written records of their pioneer experiences, Richardson’s account is exceptional in that she provided a detailed description of her family’s book holdings.

The voices chronicling life in South Dakota’s territorial period and early years of statehood were mainly those of Euro-Americans whose settlement, at first confined to the southeast corner of the territory, spread progressively westward as the railroads advanced and millions of acres of Native American reservation lands were opened to homesteaders.⁶ From 1878 to 1887, the years of the “Great Dakota Boom,” the population of eastern Dakota Territory burgeoned, spurred by the railroads, aggressive advertising, and favorable weather patterns. The forcible opening of tribal lands in

1890, the year after South Dakota achieved statehood, and the period between 1904 and 1913 precipitated further land rushes, tripling the population in western South Dakota in the first decade of the twentieth century. Boom times, though, alternated with periods of drought, crop failure, and economic depression. As a result, the young state lost many settlers after only a short residency despite registering continuous population increases in its early years.⁷

Those who remained faced hard conditions in their attempt to wrest a living from the land. Thus it is hardly surprising that books and other reading matter were often not a priority. Determined readers who overcame the difficulties of access are indeed the more remarkable, as is illustrated by the example of Edna Jewett Allen and her husband, who, in 1881, transported their large personal library, reportedly consisting of a thousand "well chosen books," by train to their new home in Groton, Dakota Territory.⁸ More modest was the collection of Stephen Street, a Grant County homesteader whose shanty accommodated "quite a row of books," including *The Adventures of Don Quixote* and *The Arabian Nights*. That Street was largely self-educated through reading could be discerned in his pronunciation of authors' names as they were spelled. In his system, Goethe became "Go-thee" and Bjornson "Be-jorn-son."⁹

While Street sought to boost his educational stature through books, filtering what he read through his English sensibilities, other settlers, especially the many recent immigrants populating South Dakota, approached books and other reading material as overt symbols of their traditions and culture. The 1900 census identified 22 percent of South Dakotans as having been born outside the United States and 39 percent of foreign parentage, thus significantly influencing what was read and how it was viewed and valued. Norwegian immigrant Walborg Holth was among those who maintained close ties to their homeland through reading, including, in her case, the Norwegian newspaper *Morgenblade*. Although the specific contents of the books and albums Holth proudly displayed in an alcove in the wall of her family's sod home remain unknown, they undoubtedly featured titles in her native tongue.¹⁰ Religious faith shaped the reading habits of immigrants, as indeed of many settlers. Illustrative were the Trygstad family, early residents of Brookings County, who regularly read the devotional books, catechisms, and Bibles they had carefully transported from Norway, and Emma Westrum, also of Brookings County, who diligently studied her catechism and Bible while herding the family's cattle in Oslo Township.¹¹

For settlers who desired fresh reading material and were fortunate enough to have the means to acquire it, books could be ordered through mail-order catalogues or directly from publishers.¹² Other Dakotans subscribed to

newspapers, farm journals, or magazines, even to the point of financial hardship. Ethel Fish Riffle recollected that the only money her father ever borrowed (\$5 from the local postmaster) was to pay his subscription to the *Orange Judd Farmer*, a Chicago-based farm weekly.¹³ Newspapers served other practical purposes, as Jessie Andrews Sherard attested, describing her family's use of pages from the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* as window curtains in their sod shanty. And the Black family recalled stuffing newspaper into the cracks of their claim's walls to keep out the snow during a spring blizzard in 1881.¹⁴

That "hard winter" of 1880–81, long remembered for its frequent and heavy snowfalls, proved challenging for Dakota Territory's early newspaper publishers. A railroad blockade lasting into May and the consequent lack of supplies inspired many innovative newsprint substitutes, including wrapping paper, bleached flour sacking, and wall paper.¹⁵ Despite the obstacles, newspapers became increasingly prevalent during the homesteading years, owing in part to the requirement that settlers publish, for a fee, five consecutive notices in the nearest newspaper stating their intention to gain title to their land. Contestants to these claims were obliged to pay the newspapers as well. The resulting proliferation of "final-proof" newspapers contributed to South Dakota's total of 275 publications in 1889.¹⁶ Proof notices and ready-printed material, rather than substantive news or literary matter, formed the primary content of many of these early newspapers. These papers tended to be transitory as well, going out of business or moving on as regions became settled.¹⁷

Other ready sources of reading material remained in short supply throughout the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. In the 1880s a few bookstores emerged in Dakota Territory's developing towns. Among them were two businesses in the newly incorporated town of Brookings—in 1881, C. W. Higgins advertised books along with "Drugs, Chemicals, Paints and Oils, Glass, . . . Stationery and Cigars," and E. E. Gaylord marketed "Furniture, Books and Stationery." As a rule, storekeepers who sold books combined their trade in print wares with other merchandise.¹⁸ A case in point was William Hyde's drugstore in Revillo, where "upon a certain shelf, noble in its solitude and as relieved of competition as the Washington monument, stood a gold-titled set of the novels of Charles Dickens."¹⁹ Books were more plentiful in other stores, but selections were inevitably limited. And the location of these stores in scattered towns made them inaccessible to many rural households.

Libraries, too, were few and far between in South Dakota in the early years. Of those in existence at the time of statehood in 1889, nearly all began as subscription libraries or small reading rooms sponsored by individuals or organizations.²⁰ These rudimentary libraries, commonly located

in parlors, churches, or above stores, were, despite determined fund-raising efforts and a few generous donors, susceptible to financial difficulties, lagging interest, and natural disasters. A fire in Howard, South Dakota, "swept away" the library in 1892, burning "400 volumes, the large bookcase, stove, table, lamps, chairs, etc., with no insurance."²¹ An 1895 fire likewise decimated the Ipswich Library, founded in 1886, destroying all the books and records. Attempts to begin anew were temporarily defeated by another fire in 1898 that resulted in the loss of all but seventy-five books.²²

Among the earliest towns to establish a reading room was Sioux Falls, advantageously located in the southeastern section of the state and destined to become South Dakota's largest municipality. Instigated by private citizen Louisa Gale, the reading room opened in 1875 above the Williams Brothers' store. The public-spirited enterprise proved transitory, closing after a short time; but the growing town was not long deprived of a library thanks to the successful efforts of two organizations, the Ladies' History Club and the Humboldt Club, in forming the Sioux Falls Library Association. By 1887 the library collection totaled 278 volumes, including works by Mark Twain, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Thackeray, Bret Harte, and George Eliot. The struggling library was funded through membership fees, dues, fines, and fund-raising events until 1899, when the city voted a one-mill tax for library support.²³ Other South Dakota libraries would follow similar paths, but not until after the turn of the century did the pace of library development quicken.²⁴

None of South Dakota's early libraries, in any case, was easily accessible to the inhabitants of villages and farms. The remote location, in addition to limited finances and education, served to curtail access to reading material. Nothing, though, could wholly stifle a basic yearning for books, and two methods in particular, subscription book selling and traveling libraries, attempted to fill the void.

Subscription book selling became a thriving industry in late nineteenth-century America. Drawn by the promise of riches and adventure, agents crisscrossed the country, gathering book orders and delivering door to door. South Dakota's isolated, undersupplied population presented a potentially fruitful field. Among those enticed to the book-selling enterprise was Eliza Jane Wilder, the future sister-in-law of author Laura Ingalls Wilder. A single woman homesteading in Kingsbury County, Dakota Territory, in the 1880s, Wilder struggled to make a living from her land. In a letter requesting the aid of the U.S. land commissioner in getting a patent for her claim after the requisite five-year residency, Wilder described the rigors of homestead life and vigorously defended her extended absences during the winter to earn money for necessary improvements to be made in the summer months, "the only time when work can be done in that climate on a farm."²⁵ A sometime

schoolteacher who owned “50 or 60 books” of her own, Wilder spent a part of these long winter months selling books:

In Nov. 1883 fall work being done, all bills paid[,] I found myself without fuel with but a scanty supply of food and \$30.00 cash to face a long, cold winter. I made an engagement with Wm. Garretson [Garretson] & Co. for canvassing for a book on the line of the C&N.W.R.R. [Chicago and Northwestern Railroad] (that I ought not be long from home at any time. There being much there requiring attention.) [I] bought a 1000 mile ticket and started with but \$5.00 in my pocket to pay expenses until the books were delivered. In one month I had cleared \$100.00.²⁶

The conditions under which Wilder worked proved far from agreeable at times. She vividly recalled an intensely cold day in January 1884, spent outdoors in the young prairie town of Huron, with the thermometer registering forty degrees below zero. Despite this experience, Wilder renewed her engagement with William Garretson & Company in the fall of 1884.²⁷

Wilder’s status as a female book agent was not unusual. Indeed, many subscription publishers specifically catered to women, if sometimes condescendingly, as did the advertisement for an 1888 political campaign volume, which declared that “this is a book that ladies can sell just as well as men.”²⁸ Other groups targeted as book agents included students, educators, and veterans. The American Publishing Company identified subscription book selling as “particularly adapted to disabled Soldiers, aged and other Clergymen having leisure hours, Teachers and Students during vacation, etc., Invalids unable to endure hard physical labor, Young Men who wish to travel, and gather knowledge and experience by contact with the world, and all who can bring industry, perseverance, and a determined will to work.”²⁹

Subscription selling was controversial. Although endorsed by partisans as a noble endeavor, the subscription industry was criticized with equal fervor. Detractors leveled accusations of “importunity and trickery” and denounced subscription publishers as self-serving profiteers who threatened the regular publishing industry.³⁰ Reflective of the widespread animosity toward subscription agents, and indeed toward all types of itinerant sellers, was the disparaging title of an 1879 publication: *How ‘Tis Done: A Thorough Ventilation of the Numerous Schemes Conducted by Wandering Canvassers, Together with the Various Advertising Dodges for the Swindling of the Public.*³¹

Despite the criticism, subscription book publishing flourished. Supporters eagerly attributed this success to the industry’s role in feeding what one



Figure 1. Dakota homesteader Eliza Jane Wilder was among the many “lady agents” canvassing books in late nineteenth-century America. Photograph courtesy of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, De Smet, South Dakota.

South Dakotan termed “a book-hungry land.”³² Among those lauding subscription agents for bringing books to the bookless was encyclopedia publisher and salesman F. E. Compton. “An army of book salesmen stormed through the land, leaving behind them millions of books, good, bad, and indifferent,” he proclaimed. “Into communities remote from bookstores and libraries they brought bibles, dictionaries, encyclopedias, textbooks, histories, classics, children’s books, and a flood of handy compendiums on farming, law, medicine, and cookery.”³³

The staunchest champions were, not surprisingly, the subscription firms themselves. William Garretson & Company, the firm for which Eliza Jane Wilder worked, produced a thirty-page booklet for its agents, promoting the book-selling business and offering tips and tricks for success. “An agent with good books is a moral benefactor,” the circular declared. “He goes into the highways, byways and dark places of the land, and circulates knowledge where it otherwise would not penetrate. His calling is a noble one, and, when pursued with right motives, improving to his character.” The booklet gave canvassers advice in deflecting the negative reception they might encounter. “People will tell you awful stories about having been cheated by agents,” it acknowledged. “Ask them if they have never bought a hat or a pair of boots that failed to do them good service, and if so did they determine to go bareheaded or barefooted for the rest of their days?”³⁴

American Publishing’s Elisha Bliss, a shrewd and calculating businessman, fervently defended the subscription trade. “Instead of injuring the regular book business,” he loftily declared, “I think we create a thirst for knowledge and thus increase the sale of all kinds of books. In the little towns where there are no bookstores the book agent induces the people to buy. One book thus sold is read with avidity by the whole household, and when another agent comes it is ready to buy another book. In that way a nucleus is formed for hundreds of thousands of little libraries throughout the country, which never would have existed except for the book agent.”³⁵

Willard Dillman of Grant County, Dakota Territory, was eager to sign on as a canvasser for the American Publishing Company. Dillman was commissioned to sell Mark Twain’s *Library of Humor*, published in 1888. The works of Twain indeed dominated the publishing company’s offerings. Beginning with his *Innocents Abroad* in 1869, the prolific author had elected to have most of his books sold through subscription, an immensely profitable decision that eventually led to the formation of his own company.³⁶ Dillman, in his memoir, recounted his experience selling Twain’s book. “I had steeped myself in the sales literature that the publishers had supplied,” he reported. “I had set forth confidently. But after many weeks’ canvassing I came to doubt my talent as a book agent. No more than a dozen sales had been consummated.” Dillman did not lose his admiration

for the work he was selling, however. "I retained my personal copy of the book and it proved an education in its way," he declared. "It was really a noble example of the publisher's craft. . . . Purporting to be no more than a collection of humorous writings, it was scarcely less than an anthology of American literature. . . . This book became my winter and summer companion. If each of the dozen copies that had been locally distributed proved as potent, Mark Twain had his part in bringing culture to our town."³⁷

Residents of the small town of Revillo, the Dillmans were, to be sure, exceptional in their enthusiasm for literary culture, reflected in Dillman's writing of his memoirs and the family's habit of sending for books and magazines by mail. Dillman recalled receiving "the old standard magazines," including the *Century*, *Harper's*, and *Scribner's*, as well as *McClure's*, "a new venture of fascinating quality," first issued in 1893. "We were not suffering intellectual starvation," he maintained, "though we dwelt beyond the border of culture."³⁸

Dillman's book-selling career might well have prospered had he found more families like his own to target. The family's preoccupation with gaining "culture" made them ideal customers for book canvassers, and they were in fact frequent buyers of subscription books. Among their purchases was *Great Leaders and National Issues of 1896*. Dillman described the heavily illustrated and fancily bound publication as "a timely book if not great literature."³⁹ Prominently featured were the 1896 presidential campaign and the candidacies of William McKinley and famed orator William Jennings Bryan, then galvanizing audiences as Populism gained momentum in the Midwest.⁴⁰ Contemporary politics proved a popular topic of subscription books, its appeal to the Dillman family thus mirroring a widespread interest.

Despite the evidence that many subscription books did indeed sell well, booksellers' short-lived careers were by no means unusual. In his study of the American subscription publishing network in the nineteenth century, Michael Hackenberg characterizes local canvassers as "moonlighting individuals who briefly flirted with the hope of quick money and more often than not bowed rapidly out of the enterprise."⁴¹ Although charges of dishonesty were in some cases deserved, many, if not most, agents set out with enthusiasm and good intentions, naïvely taking the glib hyperbole of the subscription publishers at face value.

That the job was by no means as rewarding as promised was a lesson painfully learned by aspiring book salesman John Merton Aldrich, an 1888 graduate of Dakota Agricultural College. Shortly before graduating, Aldrich sent for prospectuses for the three volumes he would be selling, a Bible history and campaign biographies of presidential and vice-presidential candidates Benjamin Harrison and Levi Morton, before accepting a commission

for Day County, Dakota Territory. “Immediately after leaving Brookings, I plunged with much enthusiasm into the vocation of the book agent,” he recalled. “Two days later, with less enthusiasm but more experience, I plunged out again.”⁴² Aldrich did not specify the reasons for his abrupt bailout, but his expectations were clearly too high. His observation that “everybody was poor, and it was very hard to accumulate even a few dollars” is telling.⁴³ Another likely factor was fear on the part of potential customers of being duped. Even those eager for books may have been deterred by the negative stories that had spread about traveling salesmen.

The book-selling experience of Ole Edvart Rølvaag, later to commemorate pioneer life in South Dakota through his acclaimed immigrant novels, was akin to Aldrich’s. In the summer of 1899 the young Norwegian-American student signed on as a book agent, eagerly anticipating easy sales and ample earnings to support his education at Augustana Academy in Canton, South Dakota. He described his expectations in his autobiographical novel *The Third Life of Per Smevik*. “After I got out into the country, there would be nothing to do but rake the money in. Oh yes, I would succeed, no doubt about that.”⁴⁴ Disillusionment quickly set in, however. Encountering indifference, mistrust, and long treks in miserable weather, Rølvaag’s fictional alter ego, like Rølvaag himself, soon succumbed to discouragement, quitting after one month. “Since then I’ve been wandering around, sometimes working by the day, other times by the job. I’ve done almost anything you can name—dug wells, helped build windmills, butchered hogs, picked corn, and so forth. It hasn’t always been fun and games either, that you must realize. Yet these things are nothing compared to being a book agent.”⁴⁵ Rølvaag did not wholly reject the experience, however. The next summer he again sold books; and years later, as a college professor, he informed his students that “no one was truly educated who had not tried to sell books or aluminum-ware.”⁴⁶

Fellow subscription agent Albert Tallman Free took a less starry-eyed approach to selling books, adapting his education and experience to the exigencies of the trade. A graduate of the University of Iowa, Free arrived in western Dakota Territory in the early 1880s, serving as superintendent of Deadwood public schools and vice president of the Dakota Territory Board of Education. Free later relocated to the southeastern part of the territory, where he was a professor and ultimately president of Yankton College. As a sideline to these professional activities, he applied himself industriously to book selling.

Among the works Free was commissioned to sell was *Johnson’s Universal Cyclopaedia*, published by A. J. Johnson & Co. of New York. After signing a contract in October 1886, he received a canvassing outfit, including order forms and weekly report forms, general advice on selling, testimonials



Figure 2. Norwegian immigrant Ole Edvart Rølvaag spent the summers of 1899 and 1900 selling books while attending Augustana Academy in Canton, South Dakota. Photograph courtesy of the Norwegian-American Historical Association, Northfield, Minnesota.

promoting the work, a sample of the book for sale, and a promotional pamphlet addressed to agents. “We have men at work on our Cyclopaedia who are making over \$600 per month,” the company claimed, “and in every instance they are men who, before they undertook the canvass, memorized the entire Description verbatim; and many of them have assured us their success has come from having followed our system.” The company predictably warned against easy discouragement, asserting that “the subscription-book business is a trade, and is not to be learned in a day, a week, or a month. . . . It takes some talent and ambition, and a good deal of energy and perseverance. In fact, if you possess these qualities—perseverance and energy—follow our instructions, and labor hard, your success is only a question of time.”⁴⁷

Although Free surely did possess most, if not all, of these traits, he soon turned prudently to the more lucrative business of schoolbook subscription selling, representing North and South Dakota, first for D. Appleton & Co. and then for the American Book Company, formed in 1890.⁴⁸ Free received \$100 a month for his service, which consisted of active fieldwork, visiting the counties where textbook adoptions were to be made, and promoting the company’s list. Among the offerings were McGuffey’s readers, Ray’s arithmetics, and Appleton’s geographies.

As Free quickly discovered, the competition between textbook publishers could be fierce. In its correspondence with the South Dakota agent, the company regularly complained of being “vigorously attacked in all directions” by rival agents. “Your most important business at this time is to correct the misinformation about us which is so sedulously scattered by our competitors,” the company declared.⁴⁹ Ever diligent in protecting its interests, the company directed Free to travel regularly throughout his territory to ensure that its books were not “thrown out of the schools” in favor of competing texts.⁵⁰ In late 1890 Free’s employment with the American Book Company ended, when the company rearranged its agents and their territories. A single agent was assigned to represent Minnesota and North Dakota, and another agent took charge of northwestern Iowa and South Dakota.⁵¹ Obviously unswayed by the company’s vilification of competing publishers, Free promptly offered his services to its key rival, Ginn & Co.⁵²

The movement to establish textbook uniformity throughout South Dakota counties was followed closely by Free and other subscription schoolbook agents eager to have their products adopted in quantity. The lack of standardized, freely provided textbooks persisted for many decades, however, resulting in a jumble of readers, arithmetics, geographies, and spellers. In 1891 the passage of a school law amendment provided for uniform texts throughout South Dakota, but the implementation process was gradual.⁵³

Also proceeding slowly, but continuing to gain momentum owing to the

zealous efforts of state leaders and educators, was the development of school libraries. One who made a passionate case for good and varied reading material for students was library advocate William Henry Harrison Beadle, territorial superintendent of public instruction from 1879 to 1885. Protesting that “the same old text books for years, heard and repeated by successive classes, are not enough,” Beadle contended that it was as much a duty to provide for libraries as it was to establish schools.⁵⁴ South Dakotan O. W. Coursey would no doubt have agreed. He and his classmates reused their schoolbooks year after year, he recalled, with the students beginning at the front and leaving off at about the same spot each school term. “At sixteen years of age,” he wrote, “I was no farther ahead in any of my books than I had been when I came to Dakota, six years before.” Despite their scarcity, schoolbooks were certainly influential, if only through sheer repetition and a lack of competing types of media, in shaping ways of thinking and in serving as an authoritative literary voice.⁵⁵

A potentially promising step for school libraries in Dakota came in 1883 with the passage of legislation allowing school boards to spend up to \$500 to purchase books to be rotated among the schools in townships or districts.⁵⁶ But because no financial provisions were made, the plan went for the most part unimplemented.⁵⁷ The concept of rotating libraries would live on, however, with the deployment of traveling libraries throughout the state.

Traveling libraries began tentatively but expanded steadily in the early decades of the twentieth century, with the ambitious goal of supplying the book needs of South Dakota’s rural residents. Like subscription book selling, traveling libraries targeted remote populations, with the added attraction of free access. First promoted widely by New York State Librarian Melvil Dewey in 1893, the concept of traveling libraries for rural communities spread quickly throughout the nation. By 1900, around thirty states had established traveling library systems.⁵⁸

In South Dakota, as in many states, women’s clubs were the primary organizers of traveling libraries. Championing the causes of self-improvement and public education, South Dakota’s Federation of Women’s Clubs sent out several cases of books in the first decade of the twentieth century. Impeded, however, by the expense of the operation and the difficulties of management, the women strongly advocated a state-sponsored library network.⁵⁹ The recently organized South Dakota Library Association also promoted a traveling library system, estimating in 1912 that more than 80 percent of the state’s population was still unserved by a public library.⁶⁰ Rejecting school libraries as a viable option for rural residents, given that most of these libraries did not circulate their collections (which in any case were meager), the association identified traveling libraries as “the only square deal for this state.”⁶¹

Finally, in 1913, the efforts of these library enthusiasts were rewarded when provisions for a statewide traveling library system were codified into law with the establishment of the South Dakota Free Library Commission.⁶² Ambitious field librarian Lilly Borresen at once set to work augmenting and publicizing the collection. The state's carpenter was employed in constructing wooden library cases "at a considerable saving to the book fund,"⁶³ and sample book collections were displayed at popular locales throughout the state, including the State Fair in Huron, the Alfalfa Palace in Rapid City, and the Corn Palace in Mitchell. The South Dakota Library Commission handed out hundreds of postcards at the state fair and other events; sent letters and advertisements to county superintendents, newspapers, and magazines; gave public addresses at conferences, teachers' institutes, and club meetings; and visited towns throughout the state.⁶⁴

The publicity paid off. The number of libraries and books circulated continued to grow. Fifty traveling libraries were launched in September 1913, with fifty more following in March 1914. In its first year of operation, the commission estimated that, on average, each volume circulated nearly four times. Two years later, it boasted of a high of fourteen circulations per volume in the community of White, South Dakota. By 1920 the collection had grown to 251 traveling libraries, all constantly in use, with "thirty to fifty communities on the waiting list."⁶⁵ The books were typically lent for six months, with each community responsible for transportation costs.⁶⁶

The lack of adequate funding and the consequent inability to accommodate all requests were persistent concerns. The *South Dakota Library Bulletin* complained that "the necessity of buying only the cheapest editions has caused recourse to clearance and bargain lists, with the unhappy result that where five or six copies of one book are needed only one could be procured. Then other titles had to be substituted, or the same ordered elsewhere."⁶⁷

Judging from the many enthusiastic letters received by the South Dakota Free Library Commission (admittedly a partisan sampling), these concerns did not deter readers. Their testimonies reveal that the books the commission managed to acquire were eagerly welcomed and hungrily devoured. "We consider the traveling library as absolutely indispensable [*sic*]," declared one satisfied beneficiary.⁶⁸ "The winter months are very long and reading is about the only enjoyment people can get out here," observed another.⁶⁹ A third recipient, voicing her gratitude for the service, noted that she lived far from a railroad or post office and joined with many readers in characterizing traveling libraries as "a blessing to people in isolated sections of the state."⁷⁰

Traveling book collections were frequently shared by groups of farm families, housed in their residences or in the local schoolhouse, where all

in the neighborhood had easy access. “Perhaps only a pioneer in this vast portion of the west can so fully appreciate the value of even one book,” asserted Nellie Vis, a Pennington County resident whose homestead served as an early traveling library station. Myrna Lyman of Potter County was likewise delighted to host a traveling library in her farmhouse. She proudly attested to the widening of mental horizons through the steady lending and re-lending of books to “every home in our community.”⁷¹

The 1916 *South Dakota Library Bulletin* provided data on the state’s traveling collections. In addition to homes, the books were located in general stores, schools, drug stores, public libraries, and post offices. Deemed the “most unique location for a traveling library” was a car belonging to A. W. Palm, the county extension agent for Codrington County. Books as well as agricultural information and advice were thus regularly exchanged as Palm made calls throughout the county.⁷²

Although they shared some of the same goals as book publishers and sellers, traveling library advocates were wary of the subscription business.

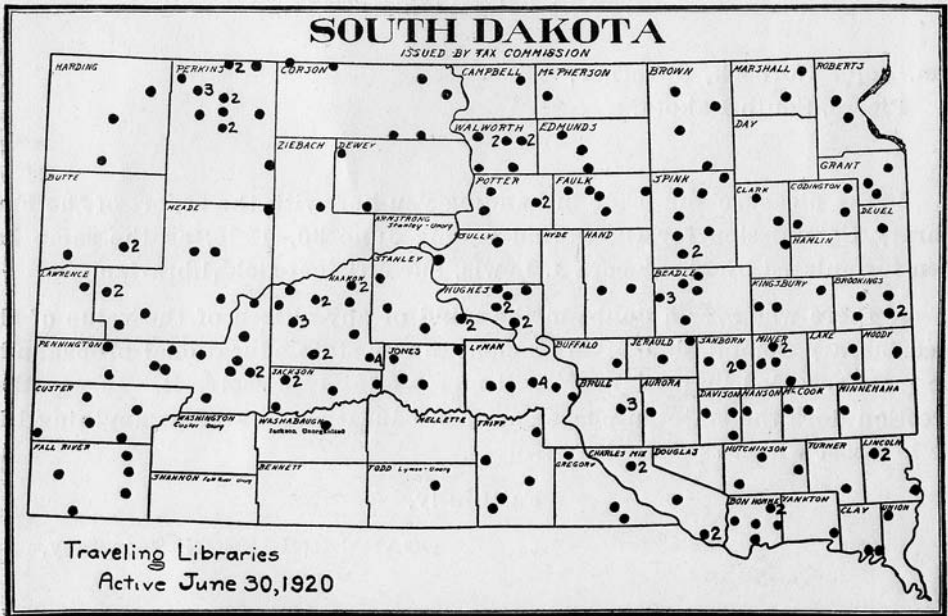


Figure 3. By 1920 traveling library stations were scattered throughout South Dakota, located in general stores, post offices, schools, and homes. From *Fourth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre, S.Dak.: The Commission, 1920), 4.

The remarks of T. A. Crisman, school superintendent of Spink County and ardent promoter of traveling libraries, are typical. While decrying the lack of reading matter in the average South Dakota farmhouse, Crisman was nonetheless dismissive of the efforts of itinerant booksellers. "What books will you find [in the country homes]?" he asked. "The Bible, nearly always. Usually an almanac advertising some patent medicine, with a few witty sayings thrown in as a bait. A book or two bought from an agent, just to get rid of her. . . . What a grand opportunity there is for the cultivation of the literary taste in most of our country homes!"⁷³

The notion of the book agent as a nuisance to be "gotten rid of" clearly reflected the popular stereotype. The concern over literary taste, by contrast, was an issue primarily engaged by the educated and reform-minded, and it figured prominently in their criticisms of subscription book selling. Generally raised in a conservative literary tradition and roused by the reforming impulses of the Progressive Era, many educators and librarians saw books as a powerful and crucial force in effecting moral renewal and cultural uplift.⁷⁴ This stance was in part a response to the major social changes and unrest sweeping the nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the desire to retain, in the wake of rapid industrialization and modernization, a sense of stability and control. The proper, indeed only, role of literature, from this perspective, was to "enlighten, purify and elevate."⁷⁵ Representative of the era were the views of Charles Lugg, South Dakota's superintendent of public instruction, and George M. Smith, professor of pedagogy at the state's university. Focusing especially on children, Lugg criticized the reading habits of rural South Dakotans. "Too often the stuff they elect to read is not conducive to intellectual growth or the formation of moral fiber," he said, and he urged librarians to be diligent in providing better fare. George Smith, equating reading with character, argued that "unhealthful" reading instilled "wrong views of life" and made the startling declaration that "there can be no doubt that many of the strange and bizarre notions of the times are due to the literature of the day."⁷⁶

The books sold by subscription agents, commonly perceived by the cultural elite as sensational, lowbrow, or even "trashy," thus failed to meet their definition of quality literature. An observation in the *Literary World*, maintaining that subscription books "cannot possibly circulate among the best classes of readers," was characteristic. Such elitist perceptions, however, neglected to take into account the wide variety of books sold by subscription agents as well as the mutable boundaries between "high" and popular culture.⁷⁷

The book agents themselves would no doubt have defended the material they sold. Although none of the agents noted here left a record of how

he or she might have responded to critics of the subscription trade, these booksellers seemed genuinely to believe in the value of what they sold and would have resented inferences of its being of lesser quality or class. Products of their time, the agents would have agreed on the importance of upholding moral standards but probably would have contended that the books they sold did just that. All were avid readers and viewed the works they sold as a means of promoting knowledge and culture. Rølvaag, especially, was convinced of the worthy task he was performing by selling books. Intellectually ambitious and a great believer in the power of reading, he was a little contemptuous of the farmers who refused to buy from him, complaining that “their highest interest” was “pigs, cattle, and horses” and proclaiming the desirability of shaping them into “thinking beings.”⁷⁸ In effect, he saw himself as a cultural authority, just like those who would disparage him.

Through the early years of the twentieth century, elitist notions of what constituted quality literature continued to reign. The South Dakota Library Commission at first clung to its role in molding literary taste and closely monitored the content of the library collections.⁷⁹ As the twentieth century advanced, however, librarians’ zeal for literary quality and moral guidance increasingly gave way to a commitment to meeting the desires and tastes of readers. The traveling libraries offered a mix of nonfiction, fiction, and children’s books, with special agricultural collections available as well. By far the most popular was the fiction. Topping the circulation figures in South Dakota in 1916 were Eleanor Hallowell Abbott’s *White Linen Nurse*, Alice Hegan Rice’s *Romance of Billy-Goat Hill*, and Jean Webster’s *Dear Enemy*. Among children’s fiction, Julia A. Schwartz’s *Beatrice Leigh at College*, Inez Haynes Gillmore’s *Maida’s Little Shop*, and Carroll Watson Rankin’s *Adopting of Rosa Marie* were the most widely read. The Library Commission willingly supplied these novels, although they did hail the occasional request for nonfiction as a very “happy” and “refreshing” surprise.⁸⁰ By the mid-1920s, the commission had switched from a fixed book-collection system to an open-shelf system in which each community’s needs and interests were taken into account when sending out the traveling libraries.⁸¹

Traveling libraries continued to fill a real need in South Dakota throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, when approximately 80 percent of the population still lived on farms and in towns of fewer than a thousand inhabitants.⁸² Getting books to these remote localities, given financial and transportation constraints, was an ongoing concern. A 1926 study of rural residents of Lake County revealed that only 38 percent had read any books in the previous year. The key reason given was a lack of access.⁸³ In 1931 Carroll P. Streeter of the *Farmer’s Wife* magazine, speaking to an audience of South Dakota librarians and addressing the challenge of providing books

to the thousands of farm families in South Dakota who wanted them, declared that it would require “showing missionaries’ ingenuity, zeal and determination to surmount difficulties.”⁸⁴

Only with the establishment of county libraries and a growing number of public libraries, inspired in many cases by traveling book collections lent to the community, did the call for the traveling libraries gradually subside.⁸⁵ County libraries, designed to provide equal library service to both urban and rural residents within the county, fulfilled many of the same functions as the traveling libraries. Located in county seats, the libraries sent their books to strategic points around the county, including, according to a 1927 study, creameries, stores, post offices, telephone offices, churches, schools, and private residences. The same study found that while a mere 3.2 percent of South Dakota library borrowers were from rural households in counties lacking a county library, slightly more than half the borrowers were rural residents in the three counties with a county library.⁸⁶ The benefits of the traveling libraries were extended through these county-based services and, increasingly, through branch libraries, bookmobiles, and direct mail service.⁸⁷

Despite insufficient funding and supplies, the traveling library system and subsequent forms of library outreach clearly were effective means of providing reading material to South Dakota’s rural communities. The legacy of the subscription book industry is more ambiguous, but it, too, succeeded in delivering numerous books to isolated individuals eager to read. Debate over motives, methods, and questions of quality notwithstanding, subscription publications were, as scholar Keith Arbour recognizes, “all books that a significant number of Americans of the [nineteenth] century, and the first decade of the [twentieth] century—of all regions, ethnic affiliations, and walks of life—thirsted to consume.”⁸⁸ The value and pleasure of reading clearly extended beyond narrow, often inconsistent definitions of “worthwhile” literature. Through the efforts of librarians, and book agents too, many of the state’s rural residents discovered what fellow South Dakotan Mabel Kingsley Richardson called “the joy that lives in good books.”⁸⁹

Notes

1. Henry T. Washburn, *Genealogy and Other Writings of Henry T. Washburn* (Watertown, S.Dak.: Lambert Printing Co., 192?), 33.

2. For insight into the role of reading in late nineteenth-century America, see Christine Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border: The Culture of Print in Late-Nineteenth-Century Osage, Iowa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), and Barbara Sicherman, “Reading and Middle-Class Identity in Victorian America” in *Reading Acts: U.S. Readers’ Interactions with Literature, 1800–1950*, ed. Barbara Ryan and Amy M. Thomas (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 137–60.

3. Mabel K. Richardson, "A Plea for County Libraries," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 6 (Dec. 1920): 60, 61, 63, 64.
4. See Sicherman, "Reading and Middle-Class Identity," 142.
5. Information on the number of books, along with other articles of personal property, owned by early settlers of Hand County, South Dakota, is available from probated estate inventories. Of the few inventories that mentioned books (22 out of 210 households), around two-thirds (68 percent) had a Bible; nearly as many (64 percent) had one or more schoolbooks; and 50 percent owned other books, none exceeding a combined value of \$10. Individual book titles were not listed, with the exception of a single mention of Webster's Dictionary, appraised at thirty cents. Hand County Inventory and Appraisement Records, 1891-1906, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre.
6. Created in 1861, Dakota Territory became two states, North and South Dakota, in November 1889. For background on South Dakota's history, see Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 3rd rev. ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975); Howard R. Lamar, "Perspectives on Statehood: South Dakota's First Quarter Century, 1889-1914," *South Dakota History* 19 (spring 1989): 2-25.
7. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 252-53, 256; Lamar, "Perspectives on Statehood," 14. The state's population grew from 98,268 in 1880 to 583,888 in 1910. *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910: Abstract of the Census; Statistics of Population, Agriculture, Manufacturers, and Mining for the United States, the States, and Principal Cities, with Supplement for South Dakota Containing Statistics for the State, Counties, Cities, and Other Divisions* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 568.
8. Edna Jewett Allen, Brown County, Pioneer Daughters Collection, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre (hereafter "Pioneer Daughters Collection").
9. Willard Dillman, *A Human Life: Memories of a Pioneer* (Excelsior, Minn.: Record Office, 1934), 114-15.
10. *Thirteenth Census of the United States, with Supplement for South Dakota*, 589; Lorna B. Hickok, ed., "A Pioneer's Letter," *South Dakota History* 6 (summer 1976): 310, 314.
11. Kristianna Trygstad, Brookings County, Pioneer Daughters Collection; Emma Westrum Sterud, Brookings County, Pioneer Daughters Collection.
12. The Montgomery Ward catalogue, for instance, devoted much space to book offerings, providing a thirty-nine-page list in their 1895 edition. For further analysis, see Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border*, 33-34.
13. Ethel Fish Riffle, Charles Mix County, Pioneer Daughters Collection.
14. Jessie Andrews Sherard, Turner County, Pioneer Daughters Collection; Dorothy Louise Black, *History of Grant County, South Dakota, 1861-1937* (Milbank, S.Dak.: Milbank Herald Advance, 1939), 29.
15. Ruth Elizabeth Bergman, "Printing in South Dakota During the Territorial Period, with a Check List of Newspapers and Periodicals from the Beginning Through 1889" (master's thesis, University of Illinois, 1936), 152-53; Robert F. Karolevitz, *With a Shirt Tail Full of Type: The Story of Newspapering in South Dakota* (Freeman, S.Dak.: South Dakota Press Association, 1982), 29.
16. Bergman, "Printing in South Dakota," 160; Arthur C. Mellette, *Report of the Governor of Dakota: Made to the Secretary of the Interior for the Year 1889* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1889), 26.
17. For a firsthand account of operating a final-proof newspaper, see Edith Eudora Kohl, *Land of the Burnt Thigh* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986); see also Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 186-87.
18. *History of Southeastern Dakota: Its Settlement and Growth* (Sioux City: Western Publishing Company, 1881), 257-305, 393-400, esp. 262. Advertisements of businesses

selling books along with other supplies also appeared in early South Dakota city directories and newspapers.

19. Dillman, *Human Life*, 96.

20. Towns with libraries or reading rooms at various stages of development prior to South Dakota's statehood in 1889 included Aberdeen, Howard, Huron, Ipswich, Milbank, Mitchell, Rapid City, Sioux Falls, and Yankton (*50th Anniversary of the South Dakota State Library Commission and Histories of South Dakota Libraries by Their Librarians: 1913-1963* [Pierre: The Commission, 1973], 12, 37, 39-40, 48-49, 52, 62, 65, 79).

21. *Ibid.*, 37.

22. *Ibid.*, 40.

23. Penny McLeod, "The History of the Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Public Library" (paper, University of Minnesota, 1971), 2-5; Dana R. Bailey, *History of Minnehaha County* (Sioux Falls: Brown & Saenger, 1899), 402-4; *50th Anniversary of the South Dakota State Library Commission*, 65-66; R. E. Bragstad, *Sioux Falls in Retrospect* (Sioux Falls: Bragstad, 1967), 61.

24. Despite an 1887 territorial law allowing for the establishment of free libraries, library growth was very limited. Revisions to that law and more favorable economic, social, and cultural conditions stimulated public library development after 1900. Dakota Territory Session Laws, 1887, chap. 56, sec. 1-9, pp. 160-62; Mary Lois Crouch, "The Library Movement in South Dakota with Special Reference to Some Outstanding Libraries" (master's thesis, University of Illinois, 1930), 22-23. Supplementing the few town libraries in South Dakota's early years were institutional libraries, primarily of the fledgling public and private colleges. Their service, though, was chiefly directed to their own constituencies. A list of institutional libraries and dates of establishment is provided in "Library Report," *Tenth Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, State of South Dakota*, 1909-10, 208.

25. Eliza Jane Wilder to Land Commissioner, Dept. of the Interior, n.d., Land Entry Files, Record Group 49, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C. In order to receive patents to their land, homesteaders were required to reside on and cultivate it for five years, never leaving for more than six months at a time. *U.S. Statutes at Large*, vol. 12, Act of 20 May 1862, p. 393.

26. Wilder to J. F. Chaffre, n.d., Land Entry Files, Record Group 49.

27. *Ibid.*

28. "Confidential Circular to Agents," (guide to selling the campaign book *National Contest*), Albert Tallman Free Family Papers, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre.

29. Quoted in F. E. Compton, "Subscription Books," in *Bowker Lectures on Book Publishing* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1957), 69.

30. S. R. Crocker, "Subscription Books," *Literary World* 5 (Aug. 1874): 40, quoted in Nancy Cook, "Reshaping Publishing and Authorship in the Gilded Age," in *Perspectives on American Book History: Artifacts and Commentary*, ed. Scott E. Casper, Joanne D. Chaison, Jeffrey D. Groves (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 228. Cook's article provides a useful overview of the antagonism between the regular book trade and subscription publishers.

31. [Bates Harrington], *How 'Tis Done: A Thorough Ventilation of the Numerous Schemes Conducted by Wandering Canvassers, Together with the Various Advertising Dodges for the Swindling of the Public* (Chicago: Fidelity Publishing Co., 1879).

32. Edna Jewett Allen, Brown County, Pioneer Daughters Collection.

33. Compton, "Subscription Books," 69, 70.

34. William Garretson & Co., *Confidential Circular to Agents* (Nashville: Garretson, 1868), 12, 16. The William Garretson circular directed agents to woo prominent members of

the community, “men of influence, such as ministers, physicians, lawyers, editors, [Sunday School] superintendents, etc.,” persuading them to head the subscription list, offering, if need be, lower rates or even a free copy. The circular further advised employees to carry only one book at a time to avoid dividing the potential buyer’s attention, and to contrive to initially keep that book out of sight. Men were counseled to construct a false pocket, while “lady agents” could “carry their book under their shawl or in a little covered basket very neatly.” The circular included several pages of text to commit to memory, which it urged agents to practice at length in order to avoid sounding “like a school-boy reciting a composition.” *Ibid.*, 13, 14, 24, 28–29.

35. Elisha Bliss, “Subscription Books,” *New York Tribune*, 28 Oct. 1874, 8, quoted in Cook, “Reshaping Publishing and Authorship in the Gilded Age,” 228. See also Hamlin Hill, *Mark Twain and Elisha Bliss* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1964); Keith Arbour, “Book Canvassers, Mark Twain, and Hamlet’s Ghost,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 93, no. 1 (1999): 5–37.

36. Cook, “Reshaping Publishing and Authorship in the Gilded Age,” 247. At first highly successful, Twain’s firm, Charles L. Webster & Co., eventually succumbed to mounting debt, exacerbated by the effects of the national financial crisis of 1893. John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, 4 vols. (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1972–81), 2:523–27.

37. Dillman, *Human Life*, 133.

38. *Ibid.*, 149. For an analysis of the great national appeal of popular magazines in the 1890s, see Matthew Schneirov, *The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America, 1893–1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). For an examination of how culture was perceived and aspired to in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, see Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 1–33.

39. Dillman, *Human Life*, 145.

40. Populism, described by historian Howard Lamar as “a logical, almost inevitable response to economic problems brought on by drought, depression, railroad and grain elevator rates, deflation, and the world market,” shaped the attitudes of many South Dakotans in the 1890s. Lamar, “Perspectives on Statehood,” 11–12.

41. Michael Hackenberg, “The Subscription Publishing Network in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Getting the Books Out: Papers of the Chicago Conference on the Book in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Michael Hackenberg (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1987), 52.

42. Aldrich Diary, 31 July 1888, Archives/Special Collections, Hilton M. Briggs Library, South Dakota State University, Brookings, S.Dak.; *Dakota Collegian*, Nov. 1888. John Merton Aldrich went on to become a professor of biology and ultimately an entomologist at the United States Department of Agriculture and United States National Museum (Smithsonian Institution).

43. Aldrich Diary, 8 Aug. 1888 (1932 insert).

44. Ole Edvart Rølvaag, *The Third Life of Per Smevik*. Translated from *Amerika-breve* (1912) by Ella Valborg Tweet and Solveig Zempel (Minneapolis: Dillon Press, 1971), 87.

45. *Ibid.*, 93.

46. Ella Valborg Tweet, “Introduction,” *Third Life of Per Smevik*, xvi. For more on Rølvaag’s experience as a book agent, see Theodore Jorgenson and Nora O. Solum, *Ole Edvart Rølvaag: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1939), 46–47, 51; Einar Haugen, “Rølvaag in South Dakota: Materials for Literary History,” in *Siouxland Heritage*, ed. Arthur R. Huseboe (Sioux Falls: Nordland Heritage Foundation, 1982), 27.

47. A. J. Johnson & Co., “Confidential: To Be Read Carefully Before You Commence Canvassing” [1887], Free Family Papers.

48. The American Book Company was formed from the merger of Appleton and three other leading textbook publishers. Tebbel, *Book Publishing in the United States*, 2:565.

49. American Book Company to Albert Tallman Free, 20 June 1890, 1 Aug. 1890, Free Family Papers. Principal among these rivals was Ginn & Co. The American Book Company urged Free to “work against Ginn’s books wherever you can find them” in order to keep the company too busy in defense to “apply all of their time in attacks upon us.” Harper’s and Porter & Coates were other companies eyed with suspicion. American Book Company to Albert Tallman Free, 1 May 1890, 7 July 1890, 16 July 1890, Free Family Papers.

50. *Ibid.*, 4 Sept. 1890.

51. *Ibid.*, 26 Nov. 1890.

52. Although unwilling to offer him a regular paying job, Ginn encouraged Free to introduce its books on commission, for which it would pay him half the net proceeds. Instead, Free turned to Silver Burdette & Co., who hired him to represent both Dakotas. Ginn & Co. to Free, 27 Dec. 1890; Silver Burdette & Co. to Free, 17 Dec. 1890, both in Free Family Papers.

53. *School Law of South Dakota with Session Laws Relating to Public Schools, 1891*, Appendix I, chap. 104, sec. 1–11, pp. 82–85.

54. William Henry Harrison Beadle, “Literature and School Libraries,” in *A Teacher’s Manual and Guide and Course of Study for the Common Schools of South Dakota* (Mitchell, S.Dak.: Mitchell Printing Co., 1892), 97. In 1890 fewer than 4 percent of South Dakota schools had a library. By 1900 the number had risen to nearly one in three, but holdings were sparse. School library statistics are from the *First Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, State of South Dakota*, 1890, 75, 78; *Fifth Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, State of South Dakota*, 1899–1900, 342, 352.

55. O. W. Coursey, *Pioneering in Dakota* (Mitchell, S.Dak.: Educator Supply Company, 1937), 151. Likewise growing up in late nineteenth-century South Dakota, Willard Dillman acknowledged that some of his “primary notions” were obtained from schoolbooks (Dillman, *Human Life*, 115). For analysis of the role of schoolbooks, see Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border*, 52–56; Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964).

56. Dakota Territory Session Laws, 1883, chap. 44, sec. 129–33, pp. 115–16.

57. “The Libraries of South Dakota,” *Eleventh Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, State of South Dakota*, 1910–12, 381–82.

58. For further information on the history of traveling libraries, see Joanne E. Passet, “Reaching the Rural Reader: Traveling Libraries in America, 1892–1920,” *Libraries and Culture* 26 (winter 1991): 100–118; William B. Shaw, “The Traveling Library: A Boon for American Country Readers,” *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 17 (Jan.–June 1898): 165–70; Helen E. Haines, “The Growth of Traveling Libraries,” *World’s Work* 8 (Sept. 1904): 5231–34.

59. In 1904 the South Dakota’s Federation of Women’s Clubs, holding their annual convention in Watertown in conjunction with the inaugural meeting of the South Dakota Library Association, appropriated \$50 to send traveling libraries to towns with populations of fewer than one thousand. The next year, meeting in Huron, the federated clubs reported that one case of books had been in circulation and that the clubs planned to send out three additional cases in the coming year. Letitia H. Stormo, “Sixty-Five Years with the South Dakota Library Association,” *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 55 (July–Sept. 1969): 167–68; “Commission History,” *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 11 (March–June 1925), 5–6. For more on the role of women’s clubs in the growth of libraries, see Paula D. Watson, “Founding Mothers: The Contribution of Women’s Organizations to Public Library Development in the United States,” *Library Quarterly* 64 (July 1994): 233–69; Haines, “Growth of Traveling Libraries,” 5233.

60. “Libraries of South Dakota,” 380. By 1910 only twenty-four of South Dakota’s fifty-three organized counties had a public library. Seventeen of these libraries were funded through

the Carnegie Library Building Program. Susan Richards, "Carnegie Library Architecture for South Dakota and Montana: A Comparative Study," *Journal of the West* 30 (July 1991): 70.

61. "Libraries of South Dakota," 379, 381.

62. South Dakota Session Laws, 1913, chap. 217, sec. 1-16, pp. 300-303. The commission was composed of the governor, superintendent of public instruction, state historian, and a member each of the Federation of Women's Clubs and South Dakota Library Association (50th Anniversary of the South Dakota State Library Commission, 5). After almost a decade of overseeing the nascent traveling library network, the Federation of Women's Clubs transferred their collection of nearly three hundred books to the newly formed commission. Stormo and Dorette Darling, "The South Dakota Library Association," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* (New York: Marcel Dekker, Inc., 1980), 28:280. In addition to these volumes, books for the traveling library system included 2,264 volumes from the state's Department of Education, 55 volumes from the Department of History, and 3,506 purchased volumes. *First Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre: The Commission, 1914), 4.

63. *First Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, 4.

64. "Traveling Library Notes," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 4 (Sept. 1918): 98; "Some Results of Publicity," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 2 (Dec. 1916): 42-43; *First Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, 8.

65. *First Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, 4, 8; "Traveling Library Notes," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 2 (Sept. 1916): 38; *Fourth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre: The Commission, 1920), 4, 24.

66. "The Traveling Libraries," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 2 (Jan. 1916): 14.

67. *Ibid.*, 13.

68. *Fourth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, 18.

69. *Fifth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre: The Commission, 1922), 15.

70. *Seventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre: The Commission, 1926), 16; *Eighth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre: The Commission, 1928), 17.

71. Nellie Vis, "Three Cheers for the Bookmobile," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 24 (March 1938): 8; Myrna Lyman, "What the County Library Means to Me," *Dakota Farmer* 50 (1 March 1930): 264.

72. "Traveling Libraries," 14; *Eighth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, 4-5.

73. T. A. Crisman, "Libraries for Our Country Schools," *South Dakota Educator* 11 (March 1898): 61.

74. On this topic, see Esther Jane Carrier, *Fiction in Public Libraries, 1876-1900* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1965), 12-31; Evelyn Geller, *Forbidden Books in American Public Libraries, 1876-1939: A Study in Cultural Change* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), 17-76; Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 67-87.

75. Carrier, *Fiction in Public Libraries*, 91.

76. Charles Lugg, "What the Teacher May Expect from the Library," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 3 (Sept. 1917): 32; George M. Smith, "Some Psychological Aspects of the Library," *South Dakota Educator* 12 (Oct. 1898): 11. For a discussion of the importance of "character" in mid-nineteenth-century America, see Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 3-5.

77. S. R. Crocker, "Subscription Books," 40; David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 32. For insight

on the incentives of regular trade publishers to attack subscription books' lack of literary value as a means of "cloaking their own commercial motives," see Cook, "Reshaping Publishing and Authorship in the Gilded Age," 224–25.

78. Quoted in Einar Haugen, "Rolvaag in South Dakota," 27.

79. See, for example, "Book Censorship," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 10 (Sept. 1924): 34–35.

80. "Traveling Library Notes," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 2 (Dec. 1916): 57.

81. *Seventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, 5; *Sixth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre: The Commission, 1924), 5.

82. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre: The Commission, 1934), 5.

83. W. F. Kumlien, *What Farmers Think of Farming*, Bulletin (South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station), no. 223 (Brookings, S.Dak.: Agricultural Experiment Station, South Dakota State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, 1927), 12–14.

84. Carroll P. Streeter, "Books and Farmers," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 17 (Dec. 1931): 68.

85. The state's first county library was constructed in Hyde County in 1920; Tripp and Potter counties established county libraries in 1921 and 1925, respectively. Laws passed in 1917 and 1921 facilitated the establishment of county libraries in South Dakota. Crouch, "Library Movement in South Dakota," 62; South Dakota Session Laws, 1917, chap. 293, sec. 1–7, pp. 603–5; South Dakota Session Laws, 1921, chap. 163, sec. 1–8, pp. 260–62.

86. Kumlien, *Equalizing Library Opportunities in South Dakota*, Bulletin (South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station), no. 233 (Brookings, S.Dak.: Agricultural Experiment Station, South Dakota State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, 1928), 9, 20, 24.

87. South Dakota's bookmobile system, sponsored by the South Dakota Congress of Parents and Teachers and implemented through a Works Progress Administration project, began operating in South Dakota in 1938. In that same year the South Dakota Library Commission reported a total of eighty-two libraries, tax-supported and private, in South Dakota. *Thirteenth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre: The Commission, 1938), 6, 16.

88. Keith Arbour, *Canvassing Books, Sample Books, and Subscription Publishers' Ephemera, 1833–1951, in the Collection of Michael Zimman* (Ardsley, N.Y.: Haydn Foundation for the Cultural Arts, 1996), xii.

89. Richardson, "Plea for County Libraries," 63. Richardson pursued her love of books throughout her career, first as a country schoolteacher and then as a librarian. She headed the library at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion from 1907 to 1941.