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# Oral history interview with Louise White

Louise White

Lee Swedberg

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**LOUISE WHITE  
IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS FROM  
LEE SWEDBERG  
EWU Women's Oral History Project  
EWU 984-0094 # 93  
SEPTEMBER 20, 1982**

**L. WHITE:** This is Louise White, formerly Louise Stearns for the Cheney Women's Oral History project. My topic concerns the founding of the Cheney Public Library. Today is September the 20th, 1982, and the founding of the Cheney Public Library took place around 1966 and '67.

I lived in Cheney from 1963, in the fall of 1963, to the spring of 1966. I came there because my husband at that time, Brett Stearns just started teaching as a Philosophy professor at Eastern Washington State College. That was the name at that time. I had my first baby in that first year that we lived in Cheney, and I had been a librarian in other cities.

I was very interested that there was no public library in the city of Cheney but that the townspeople used the college library and the children used their school libraries and a lot of people went into Spokane to use the public library there. But a good many of the faculty wives and I and townspeople also began talking together and a lot of them had children. They could see that if they had a public library right there in town, the children could use books a lot more, and pre-school children would have story books their parents could read them at night.

So a good many of us got together and began having little get-togethers. We would always get several women to donate cookies, and then the hostess, whoever had the meeting at their house, might serve coffee and tea. I can remember in many, many, many occasions calling up my friends and acquaintances, ask them to please make up a batch of cookies for the next library meeting. We consumed hundreds of cookies before we ever got the public library off the ground.

I see that one of the questions of interest in this project is: What was the general reaction of the men in your family toward the women's or my project? My husband was very supportive and so were the husbands of the women that were getting together all these little meetings to promote the public library in Cheney. There were a few men. It was mostly women that had time to carry on such a campaign. There were a few men who joined in and were active in the group.

One was the professor who taught in the education department. He specifically taught, How To Teach Reading. I believe that was Fletcher. His wife, Vee Fletcher, was very active in the public library committee, and Jane made a speech at one of our public meetings about how little children, or children, learn to read, and one big factor was: Have they been read to in the home? As they're growing up as tiny children, does reading seem to be a thing that is fun to do in the home? To have plenty of books for the youngest children that's one big thing that the public libraries can do for them.

So that was one of our big, big selling points to the community. I make scrapbooks over the years, and I have a scrapbook in which I have a list of supporters of this public library

for Cheney campaign in which we have typed here 154 names. Then we have added by hand a few more names, there are 161 citizens of Cheney at that time all supporting the public library. Now there were a few people who didn't like this idea or who were afraid to let their name be printed in such a list. We made lots of copies of this list of 154 people. But some of the business people, I might. . . I'd call up the wife of a person who ran a Cheney downtown business, and I remember one who told me that she was frightened to be in such a group or let her name be used in any way because it would probably be bad for her husband's business, so right away I would never bother her again. Some of the trade's people thought that having a library would somehow hurt their business, and other townspeople thought that it would be just fine for their business or be neutral. So we got several townspeople in the committee, but then there were individuals here and there who preferred to be left alone, so we certainly exceeded to their wishes and left them alone.

We had heard that in the tax structure of the city of Cheney that there was a lot of money that was sitting there and not being used at all. So we started this campaign and made ourselves a slogan and we called it: A Public Library for Cheney with No New Taxes. I sat in many of these public meetings and talking it up among citizens in general, I and maybe one or two others, it was always women, would go sit in on the city council meetings and bring up very politely, bring up the subject and the city council would always tell us they didn't have the money. It was fine but they didn't have the money. So we would just go to every city council meeting and listen to what they were saying and at every other council meeting or once in a while we would mention the library again, and we got more and more facts about how much money it would take from the city to start a public library.

We investigated all the angles and decided that the most realistic way to have a public library for our town was to start a branch of the Spokane County Library. Other suggestions had been made. For example: Get a room in the College Library and just have a little collection of books for the townspeople and the children. Another suggestion had been made to just get up money from the city and donations and from wherever, and have a little city library not connected to anything else. Not connected to the college, not connected to the Spokane Public Library. So the group went over all these ideas and I remember most people, you know, were sort of fuzzy on this decision and the ones of us that got more and more informed about what it would take in these three alternatives, came to the decision that we really wanted to have a branch of the Spokane County Library. I can remember myself one day, I got very stubborn one day and I said, I'm not going to have anything to do with this campaign unless we choose the course of having. . . getting a branch of the Spokane County Library. So, anyway, this was . . . we did choose that alternative. So a couple of us would go to the city council meetings, and they didn't take too kindly to our slogan of, Public Library for Cheney with No New Taxes, with the insinuation that there was a slush fund of money that was just sitting there not being used for any useful purpose. But we went on with this campaign and we carried it on for one full school year, which was 1964 to 1965, that school year. At the end of which, we could not get the city council to agree to this. So we officially announced that this campaign had failed, and that we were going to start a new campaign and the new campaign was called: A Public Library for Cheney. . . implying that we would have to

have a new village right and raise taxes for the citizens to fund a new public library. We had it all figured out financially. It would cost each citizen \$3 for one whole year, and with that rate of millage, we could have enough money to start this branch of the county library. We would have enough money to rent or rent a place and provide heat, light, and janitor service. As we would say in our public meetings, "That is merely the cost of one book per year." So we didn't think that would be a terrible hardship on anyone. It just so happens that that campaign was successful and later it just so happens that the city of Cheney did decide to have a public library with no new taxes. Somehow they did find the money and they did not raise the millage fund, but I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

In attending the city council, which was all men, these two shy women would be you know attending the city council, they seemed to be getting irritated the city councilors, seemed to be getting irritated over the months and years of me always showing up at the city council and listening to everything they were saying. Finally, one man said to me, now this is the highlight of my career, this city councilor said to me, "Mrs. Sterns, what would you rather have? Sewers or a library!?", and I said without thinking twice or batting my eye, I said, "Sewers." Somehow, that seemed to change the whole scene. They seemed more friendly and accepting of me after that.

As time wore on and we got more and more citizens to sign the petition and the city councilors had more and more pressure on this line, and it happened that there was a physical education professor from the University had gotten elected to the city council. I cannot remember his name. He was not one of our supporters, but he wasn't terribly hostile either. We had been doing research as to how public libraries are started in the state of Washington, and we had it figured out that what we really needed to do was bring it to a public vote and to do that we would have to get the city council, or somehow involve the city council in putting such a question on the ballot in some election sometime. So we had this in the back of our minds and one person who went to the city council meetings with me was Helen Allen, and another one that went with me was Joan Tracy. I can't remember who was with me that particular meeting, but we had it in the back of our minds that we wanted to ask the city council to please put this question on the next ballot for the next election. When, low and behold, this physical education professor up and got, up and started talking in an irritated way and saying, "These women have been coming to these meetings for months and over a year and there's so much talk about this city council. I'd like to get it settled once and for all," and he indicated, "and get them out of our hair." He said, "I want this question placed on the next ballot." Well, we were so delighted we couldn't stand it, but I think we kept our poker faces and pretended that, "Oh dear. Here you've called our bluff." So we were delighted that he wanted . . . that he felt like the idea that he was going to allow the question to be put on the public ballot. So they got it all set up that it would be put on the ballot on September the 20th, 1966. Well, my husband was leaving there and going to teach Colorado, so we left town late spring, 1966 at which time it was already all set to be on the ballot.

Then we lived one year in Colorado, then we moved to Missouri. It was while I was living in Missouri, which gets it . . . I guess . . . to 1968. . . yes. I'm turning to my other scrapbook now and trying to get some other dates on this. Jan . . . in the fall of '67 and on into '68 was when the public library was really finally started. The public vote on September the 20th, 1966 was successful. We needed 60 percent of the vote . . . of the

people voting to vote yes, they wanted a public library. We got well over the 60 percent, I'm sorry I can't remember the percent. But it was on into 1967 before the wheels could turn and things could really begin to happen. In that first year, when the library was voted in, they didn't go out and rent a storefront, they used the county used a book mobile. They would park a bookmobile in Cheney, I think twice a week and I have a picture from the Cheney Free Press from March 30th, 1967. It shows the Spokane County Library bookmobile, and waiting to get into the bookmobile door are Jeff Miller, Mrs. David Holmes, and Jill Holly. A wait of 20 minutes for some people was necessary because of the crowd inside the book van. As soon as that, I kept hearing, my friends would write me while I was living in Missouri that every time the bookmobile would stop there would be lots of people actually using it. Oh, wait a minute.

Going back in 1966, December of 1966, I have a piece in my scrapbook it says, "A contract for library service from a Spokane County rural library district was signed by the Cheney City Council at their regular meeting on November the 22nd, 1966. At the same time, an ordinance was passed to establish a public library in Cheney and to create a board of trustees of 5 members. Then it has a picture here. "The committee members of the group . . . the community members were informed that almost 35 thousand dollars had been granted by the Washington State Lottery Commission to start the Cheney Public Library. Second from left, Debbie E. Vents of the Spokane County Library trustees, Stan Pierce, Mrs. Keith Tracy, that's Joan Tracy, and Ron Lemmon." These last three are Cheney Library board members. Oh, going even further back in history it looks as if this thing is chronological. A majority vote of almost 2 to 1 favoring the proposal for public library service in Cheney was passed at last Tuesday's primary election when less than half . . . [surprised] . . . less than half of the registered voters in Cheney's four precincts went to the polls. The headlines are: Public Library Proposal Gets Favorable Nod Tuesday. That's September the 22nd, 1966. The actual vote was 333 for the library and 177 against it. Then on into January, 1968, I have a picture from the Cheney Free Press, which shows the library board of directors. "Organizing the open house and tea at the Cheney Public Library's official opening last Saturday. . ." it doesn't say where this opening took place. They couldn't . . . they didn't have a room yet, I don't think. . . . . was Stan Pierce, Mrs. Keith Tracy, chairman," that's Joan Tracy, "Jan Eugene Fletcher," the very man who made the speech about preschool children and reading, "Ron Lemmon, and Mrs., Mary Johnson."

Joan Tracy wrote a piece for some Washington State Library Journal called, "The Cheney Story" and the subtitle is, "Happiness is our own Public Library." This piece begins, "On September the 19th, 1966, Cheney was the largest town in Washington without public library service (population 4166). This situation was especially surprising because Cheney is the home of Eastern Washington State College and a large part of the population consists of highly educated college professors and their families. On September the 21st of that year, the whole picture changed. The people had voted overwhelmingly for the establishment of public library service. The favorable vote was the result of an aroused public opinion and the determined efforts of the citizen's committee." Then the piece goes through some of the details of how the public library campaign came along. . . "After several appeals to the city council had failed, library supporters invoked RCW 27.12.030. They collected the signatures of 100 property

owners in town to place a library proposition on the 1966 primary ballot. 5 or 6 people, few enough to confer frequently by telephone, organized the larger campaign. They were able to summon the enthusiastic support of dozens more.” Then it goes through many details. All the mimeographing, all the types of people who entered in, housewives, hobbyists, businessmen, young people, children, and retired citizens. There was no public library service at all for preschoolers in Cheney. Just to read a bit more of Joan’s piece, “From the beginning, library supporters had envisioned contracting with the Spokane County rural library for service. They realized that adequate library service would be impossible for the independent library on the budget the city was likely to provide. Soon the city council took steps to contract with the county library at the cost of one mill of assessed evaluation. By signing the agreement before the end of 1966, the county library could apply for a federal establishment grant. The possibility of a federal grant was a stunning and delightful surprise to the friends of the library. The question had not been used in the library campaign because no one in Cheney had known about it. But it came true to the amount of 34,439 dollars to be used for books, furniture, and other expenses for the new library. Late in 1966, the mayor and city council appointed a 5-member library board. The board included two housewives, a college professor,” that’s Jan Fletcher, “a pharmacist, and the operator of a nursing home,” that was Mr. Vetts I believe. “The board’s first task was to find a place for the library. Fortunately the problem was solved when the Owl Pharmacy moved to a larger building. The board sub-leased the old drugstore premises. Although the building was perhaps not quite as roomy as could be desired, it was ideally located on the main shopping block of Cheney and required a minimum of remodeling for library use. In the meantime, the county library provided book mobile service to Cheney beginning in February. Circulation reached a peak of 834 in July.”

Oh, I skipped one of my little Cheney Free Press pieces. It says, “City Library Sets Circulation Record. Circulation records were broken again in July. .” that’s in 1968, “when 2182 books were borrowed from the Cheney Public Library. Today, August the 8th, the last story hour of the summer will be held. The popular story hours will resume in the fall at a time to be announced.”

So to continue with Joan’s piece, this “Georgiana Smith of Cheney was hired by the county library to be the part-time librarian of the Cheney branch. Hopes of an early fall opening for the library out of the bookmobile and into a real building were shattered when the new drugstore construction was delayed. The Owl Pharmacy couldn’t move as soon as planned. But the delay proved a blessing in disguise when the college library moved to its new building in September. The public library board was able to acquire a circle of shelving, a card catalog, and a charging desk at a very low cost from the college. Volunteer labor moved the equipment, refinished the desk, and made a children’s table from part of it, and erected the shelves. The board also purchased two ranges of freestanding steel shelving for the center of the room. A small rug and comfortable cushions contributed by local clubs provided floor seating in the children’s’ area. The women of the board had the fun of selecting the furniture to be purchased from the Federal Grant. In December of ‘67, the library board took possession of the building. A contract to make the necessary alterations. Board members, their families, and friends spent many hours erecting the shelves and painting. Early in the new year, 1968, the

county library started moving in books. Many people, including several who were just passing by and came in to see what was going on, helped unpack the books and place them on the shelves. A colorful exhibit of artwork from local schools was arranged on the walls above the shelves. Happiness is our own public library. This slogan appeared again on a large cake, decorated with a picture of Charlie Brown and his friends. The cake was the center of attraction on opening day, January the 20th, 1968. All the children wanted a bite of Snoopy, and as for Cheney, the happiness will go on and on." They sent me a picture of this cake, and there's Snoopy, Charlie Brown, Linus, and Lucy, all looking very happy with the slogan at the top: Happiness is our own Public Library, and a picture of four women who presided over this grand opening of the library. Vy Nichols, she was a professor's wife, Helen Allen, she was the wife not of a professor but of a minister employed to work at ... on the college campus, Joan Tracy, who was an English professor's wife and she was a trained librarian who had worked in other cities but she was at that time managing young children, and the last, Vee Fletcher.

Now this Joan Tracy had been a trained librarian and was raising young children, and she did a lot of work like she wrote this piece I just read you. She, in a year or so, not too many years, began working full time at the college library and last I heard, she still is and is head of all the technical services at the college . . . pardon me, University library. I forgot it changed from college to University after I left town.

Some other people who were most active in the public library campaign besides Vy Nichols, Vee Fletcher and Joan Tracy, and Helen Allen are Woody Thorpe, Woody Johnson. I've already named Eugene Fletcher, Vee Fletcher and Eugene Fletcher were man and wife, Sue Barkley, Cecil Dryden, Poleen Westermen, Mary Hamlin, Norma Smith, Frank Nichols he was a professor, Jane Pitts and Howard Pitts. Howard was the Methodist minister, and George Allen, who had the distinct of being Helen Allen's husband, George was the minister to Stevens on the campus but not employed by the college.

Two questions of interest to the project are: What did you find most fulfilling about your project... your topic, and what did you find most frustrating about your topic? One thing I found sort of like, you might say, fulfilling was that as we were starting out with this happy, innocent campaign, these people would say to me, "It will never succeed! Don't be ridiculous, this is a conservative place!" I said to them, or mostly I said to myself, "Don't tell me what's conservative. I grew up in Georgia, and that's extremely conservative." So the greatly fulfilling thing was we were able to succeed when they said it couldn't be done; and the most frustrating thing about it? There wasn't any. Even . . . there wasn't any really, terribly frustrating thing. The fact that our first campaign that lasted a whole year failed, to me, that was just a tactic of ours to proclaim that it failed. It was a tactic of ours to soothe the ruffled feelings of the city council. There were a few people that opposed us to soothe their feelings and they can feel like, "We've won!", and then they could more gracefully accept this sort of thing. So to me it was just one of the greatest things of my life. That it was. . . I just went into it with the attitude that I'm going to try. I'm going to narrow down my wishes and ambitions to one topic, to one issue, and see if it will work. There probably . . . there may be factors working against me that I can't predict and I'll just try and see if it works. If it doesn't work, I won't feel defeated, and it just happened to work. A lot of factors were in our favor. It was the '60s and





C.S. Hendricks, Mrs. C. S. Hendricks. Miss Loreena Holshoy, Mrs. Archie Hornfeld, Phyllis Hossom, that's Mrs. Ken Hossom. Mrs. Fred Hoyt, H. Winfield Hubbard, Mrs. H. Winfield Hubbard. Leroy Isherwood, Melvin S. Jones, Segade Jones who is Mrs. Melvin S. Jones. Don Kallom, Pat Kallom who is Mrs. Don Kallom. Henry Kass and Rossie Kass, that's Mrs. Henry Kass. Henry was one of the college professors. Miss Clara Kessler. She was a college professor. Margarie Kidd who was Mrs. Vil Kid. S. R. King, Mildred King who was Mrs. S. R. King. Bernard Kingsly, Catherine Kingsly, that's Mrs. Bernard Kingsly. Mrs. Vera M. Kliner. Florence Krepsbact, that's Mrs. Ray Krepsbact. That name is connected with the college. James S. Lane, Mrs. James S. Lane, Leanna Lass, that's Mrs. Robert Lass. He was one of the senior English professors at the college, but his name didn't appear on the list. Mrs. Bill Lee, Adelle Maggs, that's Mrs. Daniel T. Maggs. Patsy Manson, that's Mrs. Donald Manson. Innes McConnell that's Mrs. Dell McConnell. Clifford E. McCullough, Mrs. Leroy C. McDermott. William McDonnough, Betty McDonnough, that's Mrs. William McDonnough. Jim McKeehan, Mrs. Jim McKeehan. Donna McKee, that's Mrs. Earnest McKee. Mrs. Nancy L. Miller, Mrs. P. J. Miller, she. . . Richard F. Miller, and Mrs. Richard F. Miller who was the vote. Richard was an English professor. Roy Miller, Irene Mons that's Mrs. William Mons. Miss Bernice Moriarty, Erra Morrow, that's Mrs. Robert Morrow. Hazel Newsome, that's Mrs. William Newsome. The Reverend George Nichols and Mrs. George Nichols, I can't remember what denomination he was the reverend of. Frank Nichols, college professor and Vy Nichols, that's Mrs. Frank Nichols. Now, he was a college professor and she was one of our most, most active members. Helen Ogden, that's Mrs. Alan Ogden. Mrs. A. E. Ogestrom, Mrs. Miralla Patterson, that's Mrs. Don S. Patterson. Mrs. A. W. Phillips, Donald F. Pierce, Mrs. Donald F. Pierce. Howard Pitts, Jean Pitts, that's Mrs. Howard Pitts. Ella May Poor, that's Mrs. Loel Poor. Miss May Powell, Mrs. Mertle Powers, that's Mrs. Walter Powers. Minnie Ratcliffe, that's Mrs. S. L. Radcliffe. Marian Radcliffe, that's Mrs. Mark Radcliffe, Ronald Rain, Mary Jane Rain who was Mrs. Ronald Rain. Hazel Reid, who was Mrs. Robert Reid, Donald A. Ross, Mrs. Donald A. Ross, Josephine Rudolph who was Mrs. Cole Rudolph, Miss Florence Rue, Frank Shaddig, Betty Shaddig who was Mrs. Frank Shaddig. Virginia Shultz who was Mrs. Ray Shultz. Mary Scott, who was Mrs. Seth T. Scott. Ethel Small, that's Mrs. B. L. Small, Bob Smith, Mrs. Bob Smith, Earl Stuart, Florence Stuart who was Mrs. Earl Stuart. Lexie Strunnoch who was Mrs. H. M. Strunnoch. Mrs. Bernice Thomas, who was Mrs. Grant Thomas. Ann Thompson who was Mrs. Robert Thompson. Keith Tracy and our biggest supporter, Joan Tracy who was Mrs. Keith Tracy. Bill Trokler, Carole Trokler who was Mrs. Bill Trokler. Mrs. Jon Teethenbront, Mrs. Lloyd that is Ethel Vandenberg. Her husband was a college professor. Billy Warrington and Belle Warrington. Bill was a college professor. Mrs. Yvonne Waggoner, that's Mrs. E. H. Waggoner. Loren Westerman, and Poleen Westerman, that's Mrs. Loren Westermen. Now he ran a drugstore and she was in the AAUW. They were supporters. Ray Whitfield and Margaret Whitfield, Mrs. Ray Whitfield. Mrs. Jean Whitney, Mrs. William L. Wilkerson, Joyce Wills, who was Mrs. Jim Wills, Mrs. Bob Wilson, William C. Wilson, and Mrs. William C. Wilson who was June. Other names added in pencil are Robert Heineman, Martin D. Austed, Mrs. Martin D. Austed, Larry Krandell and Mrs. Larry Krandell. Don R. Waldo and Mrs. Don R. Waldo.

So that is the list of public library supporters as the list was drawn up in 1966. I'd just like to add that among my souvenirs, my 11x14 scrapbooks, is an 11x14 poster, and I am sure it was done by Helen Allen, and it has a very happy smiling picture of Charlie Brown and it reads: Happiness is Our Own Library, Vote September the 20th. Of course, that's 1966 which I have carried around with me as we moved to Missouri, to Colorado, then to Missouri then to Winnipeg Canada and now I have moved to St. Augustine Florida. So, best of luck to the Women's Oral History Project.

>>>>>>>>>>**End of Recording**<<<<<<<<<<<<