

Profile of an Indiana Career in Libraries:**Florabelle Wilson**


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Mrs. Florabelle Wilson played an important part in Indiana librarianship during her twenty eight years of active practice. On July 6, 1986, Dr. Susan A. Stussy, Head Librarian of Marian College, interviewed her at the Marian College Library in order to preserve the wisdom Mrs. Wilson acquired as a librarian.

Born in 1927, Mrs. Wilson gained a B.S. in Education from Indiana Central University in 1949. She earned an M.A. in Library Science from Indiana University in 1961.

Mrs. Wilson was an elementary teacher for the Indianapolis Public Schools from 1949 to 1957. She was Assistant Librarian at Indiana Central University from 1957 to 1971 and Director of the Library from 1971 to 1985.

Mrs. Wilson is a longtime member of both the American Library Association and the Indiana Library Association as well as of Beta Phi Mu. She is listed in *Who's Who in the Middle West*. Her community activities include life membership in the N.A.A.C.P. and membership in the Zonta Club.

Q. What was your undergraduate major?

A. Education. A B. S. in Education.

Q. From where?

A. Indiana Central University. That was an effort to combine books, I guess, with children. Actually library work was my first love, but it was more practical economically to become a teacher. One of the things my mother seemed to want more than anything else was for me to become a teacher. "I want Flora to be a school teacher," she would say. And I could understand that, because in the Black community at that time when I was growing up and prior to that time, one of few jobs that women could aspire to was that of being a teacher. A teacher was looked up to as a role model and as a leader, and I think in my mother's eyes that was the kind of position she wanted for me. So as a result, I completed my work in education at Indiana Central. I opted for teaching and did for some time in the elementary schools. But I was teacher for my mother for some time. Then I decided it was time to be a librarian for me.

Q. Were you a library student assistant in college?

A. Yes I was. I worked at Indiana Central. Just through casual conversation when I was charging out some books one day there, I said to the librarian, Miss Edna Miller, "I used to work in the elementary library." She said, "You did?" I forgot about it, but not long after she said, "Would you be interested in working here?" I was very pleased to get a chance to work in the library, both because I loved books and because I needed the money.

Q. When you decided to become a librarian, where did you go to library school?

A. I went to Indiana University, and that was because of circumstances, I think. While I was teaching elementary school, the Indianapolis Public Schools, I guess, created a system in which they aspired to putting libraries in all of the elementary schools. Of course, when I heard about it, I thought, "Well, if they are going to put it in my school, I am going to be a librarian." From Bloomington they sent teachers here to Indianapolis, and they taught classes at Central Library. So when they began to send the teachers, I enrolled in the very first classes, and I took all the classes they offered here (Indianapolis) in the evenings after school. Then I decided to go to campus (Bloomington) in the summer to go all out for the degree, since I had already begun.

Q. Where have you worked as a librarian or library director?

A. Only at Indiana Central University.

Q. What problems arose in your library career because of your sex?

A. I suppose one of the major problems was that librarians are considered quiet females of gentle spirit and soft voice, and less than aggressive, and the problems arose

because I'm afraid I don't fit that image very well. Quiet, I'm not. I became progressively aggressive when I discovered that, because of my sex, I was expected to do certain things, like be secretary of the committee each time, have some cookies and coffee ready, be quiet in meetings, and not have too many opinions about what was going on and to agree, and that just isn't my nature, not to question. And because those were the things that, as I say, [I] progressively learned to do, I guess just because of being female. I guess I created the problem, and it kind of invigorated me and kept things lively.

Q. What problems arose in your library career because of your race?

A. There were some that occurred unwittingly maybe. For example, since I had been a student at Indiana Central, when I returned to work there and became a member of the faculty, some of the persons who had been my teachers were still teaching, because less than ten years had passed since I had graduated. Of course, when I was in school there they addressed me, as they did all of the students, by their first names, and it was Marybell, or Florabelle in my case, which was all well and good. But when I returned as a faculty member, at the same [professional] level as my former teachers, there were still some who, I'd like to say unwittingly, referred me to their classes as "Florabelle in the library." This was misleading, because it meant that students in the classes would come to the library and instead of addressing me as Miss Williams, which I was at that time, they wanted to address me as "Florabelle in the library," and this simply could not be. So that very first year I had to go to battle to help them realize that number one, I was Miss Williams, and number

two, persons who addressed me by my first name, were persons who were my friends. And another problem I often had was that people came to the library and asked for the librarian, and I came to the desk, and they looked past me to see if the librarian was coming, because they simply did not expect to see a Black woman. All of the staff for most of the years I was a librarian and for all the years I was an assistant, were all White. I was the only Black person on the staff, and only for a few years after I became a librarian was there another Black person on the staff.

[When I became librarian] I made a special effort to have a multiracial staff. One summer we had Africans, Afro-Americans, Chinese, Taiwanese, and a fellow from India [as well as White students]. Finally that job became kind of a mission, because I was the only contact most of those students were going to have with a Black person in authority. Some of them had come from areas where they had not encountered Black people except on television or in a magazine. It was obvious in their reaction, in their response to your questions, in the way they looked at you, in the way they were surprised that if you cut yourself, you bled. I guess that's just true of Americans.

I think that you could find that on any campus anywhere if you met enough people. But here I was kind of on the bubble. I represented a whole race of people, and sometimes I had to remind people who came to ask me questions about Black people that I could only speak for myself. I couldn't speak for how many million Black people in this country. But sometimes they would come and say,

"What do you think?" I would say, "Well, I can only give you my opinion or what I think as a Black person."

During the Civil Rights Era, often the ones with the courage would ask me questions. I remember when Martin Luther King was killed and a woman working in the library asked in all seriousness, "Do you equate Martin Luther King with Jesus Christ?" And she was serious, and she wanted to know my answer, and I gave it to her, which was, "I don't equate any human being with Jesus Christ, but Martin Luther King was a great man." But she was perfectly serious, and yet I don't think that I would ever have asked any White person if some White person had been killed if they would equate that person with Jesus Christ. It would never have occurred to me, and I have no idea what brought that on, but she wanted to know.

- Q. It helps to know how your experiences have affected your life.
- A. Well, let me tell you about my experience in conventions, because we haven't touched on that. I was lucky in that Miss Edna Miller, who was the librarian who hired me, and the person whose job I later assumed when she retired, was a real professional. She knew her job, she knew her collections, she knew her books, and she was a professional in that she belonged to professional organizations, and she attended meetings so that she took me to the local meetings, to the ILA. We went to the conventions, and then she gave me the opportunity of every other year going to the national [conventions]. She'd go one year, and I'd go one year. I belonged to the state library association [ILA] and the national library association [ALA] the entire twenty-eight years without a break.

That's what you are supposed to do. That's the way I was trained, you see, and that was valuable to me. It armed me in one respect to be a professional, but it disarmed me in another in that I assumed because of her attitude that I would meet the same attitude in meetings, but I didn't. So I had to learn to adjust to that. Because you see you are talking about "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter," and I was the only Black one in the meetings, especially at the local level.

The other Black persons who were in the Indianapolis area at that time were simply not in evidence. I don't know why. One factor was that their position wasn't anywhere like this, because I was an assistant administrator; therefore I was qualified to go. Many of the Black people that I knew were over in the [public library] branches, but none that I know of were in the college libraries.

I was the only Black academic librarian in the state of Indiana and maybe in the Middle West. The national conventions, and oh, I looked forward to it, and most of them were from the South. But through the years there were ones from Chicago and from Detroit, and from other cities.

Q. How should a woman manage differently from a man? Should they?

A. I don't think we should, but I think because of the ways our lives are structured as females and as males, we have to. A woman and a man could have the same goals and head for them in the same manner, but persons who must help them attain these goals will react in one way to a man and another way to a woman. So that a man is taken to be "getting the job done," and a woman is too often taken to be "pushy."

Q. Do you think a minority [person] should manage differently, and if so, how?

A. I don't think you should have to, but I think you have to, especially if you are in the situation where you are the chief administrator and everybody answers to you. [As] Americans [we] are victims of our culture and of our ways of thinking. Somehow you can't just block that out when this is an unusual situation. And there are a lot of differences in feeling there. Many of the times when I felt it most strongly or most acutely were when I was interviewing persons for a position. In most instances, these were clerical, not professional, positions. The business manager would interview the applicant first and then bring the applicant to my office. I have seen applicants physically step back two steps, because he hadn't bothered to explain to them in the office that they were going to talk to a Black woman. I don't think that they were aware that they physically stepped back two steps, they just did it.

Q. What do you see as the future for female and minority managers?

A. I see a future as bright as they are willing to help make it. It's like anything else: nobody's going to give you anything. Nobody is going out and pull you into a job of administrative level, because you are a woman and because you are a Black or either or both. Now during the sixties there was a time when it was a plus on your listing of employees to have a Black and/or a woman, but let's face it, that is past. We're in the eighties and almost in the nineties. If you are a qualified person who wants that position you are going to have to go and fight for it. I'm not saying you'll get it, but once you get your toes in the door, you not only have

to fight to get it, but you have to fight to keep it, because you have to stand up for what you know is the right thing to do and with your credentials behind you, you do it. It won't be an easy job, and I guess it never has been really, but I think it is as bright as you intend to make it. There are some smart women, Black and White out there, who are extremely capable. I venture to say some [are] as capable, and some of them more capable than some of the men who have these jobs, and they should go get them.

Q. What can the library profession do to encourage [the development of more] women managers?

A. I think women's library groups are helpful, where the women administrators and women staff people get together and share their problems. Networking, as much as some people negate it, I think is important.

One of the things I gained from attending conventions was talking to somebody else who had the same problems. That made me feel that I was not alone with whatever my problems were. It gave me a strength that I needed, and I came back kind of refreshed and renewed, because I knew somebody else was having the problems. We had a governor's conference on libraries here, and we had the little group sessions, and one of the questions that came up was, "What do you do when your library has a book that someone says shouldn't be there, and yet it is a part of the collection?" I remember one person said, "Well, what I did was to put the book on my library shelf and indicated in the card catalogue that that is where it was." I tucked that away and forgot all about it. But many years later a similar problem arose for me. A book on photography had been

ordered by a professor. Each professor of our school had funds and he or she decided what it would be spent for. Well, it so happened that the photographs had been taken by a person who worked for *Playboy*. I did not censor what the people ordered and had no right to, and felt no need to. But one of the women on the clerical level who was supposed to mark the outside of the book, saw some photographs that she felt were offensive to her.

I had to explain to her that it was not her choice nor mine as to what books the professor ordered. That was their choice. Then I had to call to her attention the Library Bill of Rights. But what I also pulled from my memory was this idea of not pulling that book and hiding it. I did talk to the professor who ordered it, and asked him if he wanted it in his department and he didn't. He said, "No, put it on the shelf." So I did, but I put it on the reserve shelf. All the cards were in place, all the information was there, and the book was available.

But that was something that I had tucked away many years ago and it came back and stood me in good stead. So that book as far as I know, is still there. It is available for any person who wants it. I'm not sure everybody would agree with it, but that was the way I dealt with it, and it was the result of a meeting many years earlier. That was one of the tactics. That was a survival tactic for librarians.

Q. What can the library profession do to encourage the [development of more] Black managers?

A. I suppose scholarships would be helpful. And there are some good ones for people to go onto library school for advanced degrees. I think the profession can make information about jobs available in the usual media and also be sure

that the information reaches groups like the [Black] Librarian's Caucus or publications that are Black oriented. By the same token, Black librarians who are seeking managerial positions have a responsibility to seek employment in libraries wherever their credentials are suitable. Many times to seek a position in a library at a great distance from where you are used to living or in a culture that is entirely different, it is kind of intimidating. Most of us are more comfortable in familiar surroundings, but if you are just going to stay in familiar surroundings you are going to miss a lot of opportunities, and this is coming from a stick-in-the-mud staying in the same place for these twenty-eight years. By the same token, I would encourage those who wish to become administrators to actively compete, if they have the qualifications and they are capable, to go for it.

- Q. How do you feel that you had special interests as a Black woman that you might not have had otherwise?
- A. One particular one was in terms of being sure that included in the library holdings were books by and about Black people that gave a true picture. We made an effort, not only using Title II funds, but using book funds from the Indiana Central Library book budget to build up a good collection. The thing that validates my opinion is that in using the OCLC system and calling for books by different authors and by different titles, ours would be one of the libraries that usually would have the book.

Another area, too, of special interest to me was Black books for Black children written by Black authors. [I developed] a list of Black books for Black children. This was one of Indiana Central's

efforts to be of service. Our motto was, "Education for Service."

Another thing that I am proud of in my association with Indiana Central is the development of an annual Black History Program to which national figures are invited. Gwendolyn Brooks, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, was our speaker one year. It was the same year that she spoke at Marian College, and she came to our school and spoke, and was there for an evening seminar, and so she kind of made a circuit in this area. Another [year] Mayor Richard Hatcher came, and that was good because of the kids from Gary, and we had quite a few, and it really did something for them.