

Meeting under the Dome: The ALA Holds its 1928

Conference in West Baden

By Jean Preer and Lydia Spotts

When the American Library Association held its annual conference at the West Baden Spring Hotel, Indiana libraries and librarians took center stage. Hosting the ALA's 50th meeting since the organization's founding in 1876, the Indiana library community could boast of its own remarkable half-century of progress. From the selection of the site to the conference's closing session, Indiana librarians played key roles in promoting libraries in their home state to a national audience of library leaders and practitioners.

The choice of West Baden was finalized less than six months before the conference was to convene. Resting in the hands of the ALA Executive Board, the decision involved a complex calculus of regional balance, past meeting sites, costs, the location of other meetings, weather, transportation options, and the internal politics of ALA leadership. After the Toronto conference in 1927, thirty localities vied to be the 1928 site with Chicago, Memphis, Chattanooga, New Orleans, Des Moines, Iowa, Estes Park, Colorado, and West Baden surviving to the final round (The Toronto conference, 1927, p. 225). Chaired by ALA President Carl Roden, director of the Chicago Public Library, the board could not identify a clear favorite. Roden favored meeting in Chicago, but the ALA headquarters city, and Roden's hometown, was eliminated on the first ballot. Throughout the discussion, he strongly opposed West Baden, saying at one point, "If I cast the deciding vote, it will be against West Baden" (ALA Executive Board, 1927, p. 191). Other committee members leaned to Memphis. Two participants in the discussion had Indiana ties, although they did not act on behalf of West Baden. Carl Milam, executive secretary of the ALA, had headed the Indiana Public Library Commission from 1909 to 1913, during the heyday of Carnegie library building (Sullivan, 1976, pp. 66-70).

Carl Rush was the director of the Indianapolis Public Library and a recognized national library leader.

Among the competing locations, West Baden offered a resort destination, centrally located. Starting as an inn, in 1855, to take advantage of the mineral waters of Orange County, Indiana, the West Baden Springs Hotel was renowned for its massive freestanding dome, built in less than a year after a disastrous fire in 1901. When completed, the hotel's atrium extended 200 feet in diameter and 100 feet to the dome (Bundy, 1999, p. 38). Luxury guest rooms on six floors surrounding the atrium featured private baths, hot and cold running water, telephones, steam heat, and electric lights (Bundy, 1999, p. 34). The building quickly became known as the eighth wonder of the world. A mile away, the French Lick Springs Hotel, owned since 1901 by Democratic Party powerhouse Thomas Taggart, featured a modern establishment with all the amenities desired by well-to-do vacationers and well-heeled business travelers.

Both West Baden and French Lick sought to expand their commercial and conference trade; in 1927, the Indiana Library Association had held its annual conference under the West Baden dome. Those in the know on the executive board argued that this resort setting would appeal to ALA members who could relax and focus on association activities without the usual distractions of big city conference sites. Charles Rush said, "Everybody will want to come. They have heard about Tom Taggart and West Baden" (ALA Executive Board, 1927, p. 181). Nonetheless, the board failed to reach a consensus and charged Roden and Milam to investigate both Memphis and West Baden further and to choose a site based on available dates and hotel rates. Finally, the January 1928 issue of the *ALA Bulletin* announced the selection of West Baden, pending the finalization of arrangements (A.L.A. news, 1928, p. 2).

In the late 1920s, Americans still took the train, and the ALA was experienced in arranging special rail cars to bring attendees to its annual conference. Conference updates in the *ALA Bulletin* announced that all the railroads would grant a special fare-and-a-half convention rate to the conference; attendees could book accommodations on reserved rail cars that would bring them from the four corners of the country to the train station in West Baden. Leaving from Boston, New York and Washington, librarians could travel together, picking up colleagues in Baltimore, Pittsburgh and Chicago. Reserved cars brought West Coast librarians from Seattle and Los Angeles (Travel announcements, 1928, pp. 86-88). A network of interurban trains in Indiana brought Hoosier librarians to West Baden where from the opening general session they heard the warmth of their hospitality extolled and the development of their libraries lauded.

Plenary sessions were held under the colossal dome of the West Baden Springs Hotel. Vendor displays ringed the room, and refreshments were served there after all-conference functions. Carl Roden, overlooking his own opposition to the West Baden site, welcomed attendees and praised Indiana. "If the conference was to be held in the Middle West . . . there was no state in which it could be more fittingly held than in Indiana. . . . Ever since there was a library movement, Indiana has been a leader in it. Our hosts of tonight are among those of our colleagues to whom we like to look for leadership" (Roden, 1928, 279). On behalf of the local arrangements committee, the legendary Mrs. Elizabeth Claypool Earl welcomed attendees to Indiana. Widowed at an early age, Earl devoted her considerable energy and organizing talent to the cause of Indiana libraries, helping to establish the Indiana Library Commission on Libraries which she headed from 1916 to 1925 ([Obituary], 1932, p. 160). In her remarks she praised the commission's progressive support of libraries and its illustrious secretaries Merica Hoagland, Chalmers Hadley, and Carl Milam (Earl, 1928).

Next up for the Hoosiers was Meredith Nicholson, best-selling author of such fictional works as *The House of a Thousand Candles*. Indeed, Indiana had experienced a literary renaissance over the previous three decades, with its authors, which Mrs. Earl said the state produced in abundance, outselling those from every other state except New York.

Along with Nicholson, Theodore Dreiser, nature-writer and novelist Gene Stratton-Porter, Pulitzer prize-winner Booth Tarkington, and poet James Whitcomb Riley had inspired editorial writers to hale Indiana as a state of writers as well as readers. As the *Indianapolis Star* observed, "Indiana is a book-reading state and the meeting of this great national organization within its borders will no doubt stimulate both the faithful workers as well as the readers in the field of literature" (Libraries in Indiana, 1928, 6). Indiana also led the nation in the number of Carnegie libraries. Its total of 156 Carnegie libraries, built between 1901 and 1918, outpaced the second place total of 142 in California (McPherson, 2003; Jones, 1997).

At the first general session, Nicholson alluded to Indiana's library and literary tradition extending as far back as the 1825 settlement in New Harmony which had its own library, lecture course, the first kindergarten and the first woman's club in the country. Countering this progressive tradition, however, Indiana had been a leader in the resurgent Ku Klux Klan with Klan members sweeping into statewide and local offices in 1924. In the French Lick newspaper, Nicholson is quoted as saying:

You have probably asked yourselves why a state so strong on the cultural side should have fallen prey to the enticements of the Ku Klux Klan. I assure you that that was only the play spirit running away with the sober judgment of our people. To play hallowe'en games in corn fields under the Hoosier stars all dressed up in pillowcases and sheets is only the eternal spirit of the mischievous boy who puts tick-tacks on the neighbors' windows (Ku Klux, 1928).

Completing the Hoosier welcome at the first general session was Mary Eileen Ahern, perhaps Indiana's brightest library luminary. Born in Seymour, Ahern had taught school before being named assistant Indiana State Librarian in 1889. Believing the position should be a non-political one, she declined to serve another term and enrolled, instead, in the Armour Library School in Chicago. Before completing her degree she was invited to edit the new journal, *Public Libraries*, published by the Library Bureau. With an audience of small town public librarians, the journal grew and thrived during the expansive years of Carnegie library building.

As editor, Ahern infused its pages with her own lively personality and single-handedly made it an essential voice for the grassroots of the profession (Dale, 1978, p. 5). In her remarks, she praised the Hoosier librarians who had inspired her, including Eliza Gordon Browning, past director of the Indianapolis Public Library, and hailed women librarians of the Midwest for their pioneering work in the extension of library service (Ahern, 1928, pp. 318-32).

The 1928 conference theme, chosen by president Carl Roden, was "Library Retrospect, Introspect, Prospect" (Proceedings, 1928, p. 356). The ALA was nearing end of a remarkable decade of activities in education for librarianship, adult education, and library extension funded by the Carnegie Corporation. In his opening address, "Ten Years," Roden reflected on the successes in these areas. Several of the conference's major addresses explored these new possibilities. At the Second General Session, Charles Compton, director of the St. Louis Public Library, described how people from all walks of life were reading serious literature (Compton, 1928, pp. 321-326). Speaking to the American Library Institute, Harry Lyman Koopman, Brown University librarian, explored "Reading, The Unsociable Act," and urged libraries to provide opportunities for adults to listen together to books read aloud (Koopman, 1928, pp. 799-801). And in a presentation before the Lending Section, Meredith Nicholson discussed the role of libraries in promoting good citizenship (Nicholson, 1928, pp. 426-428). Another speaker at that session was Harold Brigham of the Nashville Public Library, who, in 1942, would become director of the Indiana State Library (Interlaken Mills, 1950, p. 517). The ALA itself was proud to announce additional titles in its Reading With A Purpose series of pamphlets that enabled serious readers to pursue interests in areas as diverse as architecture, farming, and music. L. L. Dickerson, who as head of the ALA's Adult Education division had led these efforts, was to become director of the Indianapolis Public Library on October 7, 1928 (Downey, 1991, p. 51).

Similarly, in the area of library extension, the ALA had spurred a period of activity and change. As the United States entered the war in 1917, the Carnegie Corporation concluded its program of library construction and turned to the improvement of library service.

In part this was to be accomplished by the professionalization of librarianship through education programs on university campuses rather than training programs offered by large public libraries. But service was also to be improved by the creation of larger units of library service. The meeting of the League of Library Commissions at the conference stressed the importance of library service to rural areas through bookmobiles and county library systems (League of Library Commissions, 1928, pp. 612-613). In Indiana, Vanderburgh County had pioneered bookmobile service (Stark, 1928, pp. 204-205), and its book wagon was on display at the conference.

Thanks also to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the 1928 meeting of the American Library Association welcomed a delegation of distinguished Mexican librarians (A.L.A. news: Mexican librarians, 1928, p. 74). En route to West Baden, the group was introduced to American libraries with stops including Houston, St. Louis, Indianapolis, and Fort Wayne, where they viewed the work of the public library serving new Americans. Over the decade, public libraries had enlarged their service to newly arrived immigrants, and at West Baden, Vera Morgan of the Indianapolis Public Library described her library's activities serving the foreign born (Morgan, 1928, pp. 669-670).

The selection of the year's Newbery Award book also introduced an international perspective. The winner was *Gay-Neck, The Story of a Pigeon*, a story set in Northwest India and published by E. P. Dutton. Its author was Dhan Gopal Mukerji, an Indian writer who came to the United States at the age of 19 for study and stayed on (The West Baden Conference II, 1928, 668). The author of the Newbery Honor volume, *Downright Dencey*, a story set in early 19th century Nantucket, was Caroline Dale Snedeker, a Hoosier native and great granddaughter of Robert Dale Owen, the founder of the New Harmony settlement where she had grown up (Mahony, 1956, p. 85). The Newbery Award itself was a gift of Frederic Melcher, editor of *Publisher's Weekly*, who as a young man had resided in Indianapolis while working for the W. K. Stewart book shop. Quoted in the *Indianapolis Star* before the conference, Melcher described himself as "Hoosier-for-a-Time." Attesting to the genuineness of Hoosier hospitality, he recounted his travels in Indiana to district conferences and college campuses.

His departure for New York was described as a local misfortune (Nicholas, 1928, 6).

The ALA meeting at West Baden was not all work, and, indeed, attendees took advantage of resort's amenities and conference social activities. On Thursday, former Indianapolis mayor and U.S. Senator Thomas Taggart hosted an all-conference reception at his French Lick Springs Hotel where a crowd of 2,000 enjoyed its Japanese garden (Thomas Taggart host, 1928, p. 9). Taggart had followed his father into the hotel business before embarking on a notable career in politics. At West Baden, the atrium under the dome could be transformed from meeting room to ballroom. Large receptions followed each general session. On the final night of the conference, attendees reveled in a masked ball with a pageant of characters from books of all kinds (Proceedings, 1928, p. 355). Following the conference, attendees took in other Indiana sites with visits to New Harmony and Lincoln's birthplace and an expedition to the Marengo Cave, led by Rowene C. Compton of the Indiana University School of Law (Librarian guests, 1928, p. 9).

In the aftermath of the meeting at West Baden, *Libraries* published comments of conference goers. Carl Roden observed that though there were fewer meetings, they were unusually well attended and, on the whole, exceptionally profitable. "Over all there dwelt a delightful spirit of informal Indiana hospitality which, without the aid of special social events or features, succeeded in imparting to the week's proceedings a pleasant air of comfortable and unhurried sociability" (Proceedings, 1928, p. 358). The conference also attracted a good bit of national publicity. The *New York Times* gave detailed reports of the conference, noting particularly the visit of the Mexican delegation (2,000 librarians, 1928; Says wage earners seek, 1928; Unity on libraries, 1928).

In future years, the ALA continued to struggle with the selection of its annual conference sites. Having welcomed the library world with Hoosier hospitality and showcased the state's libraries and library service, Indiana librarians no doubt hoped that this would be just the first of many such national conferences. But with the economic collapse of the Depression, and the contraction of ALA resources, future meetings emphasized constraint and frugality. The meeting of the ALA in 1928 was its last annual conference to be held at a resort and the last to be held in Indiana.

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In her opening remarks, Elizabeth Claypool Earl had expressed the wish that the attendees might all return, but when ALA holds its annual meeting in Indianapolis in 2021, as scheduled, it will have taken nearly a century.

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