

One day my cousin was at our house and asked my maternal, Jewish grandmother why the Jews killed Jesus. She was indignant and quizzed my cousin on where he had heard this nonsense. He reported that one of the teachers in our Catholic grade school had taught it in class that day. In a rush my grandmother was out the door, telling my mother that she had a meeting with the pastor of the parish to set him straight. My grandmother was a force to be reckoned with, and, fortunately for the pastor, he was somewhat enlightened and immediately set out to correct the errant teacher spreading this hate-based message. Not surprisingly, the pastor and my grandmother became lifelong friends.

It was only as an adult that I fully understood my grandmother's actions. She told us then, and

repeated often, that intolerance, hatred, and bigotry could not be allowed to persist for even a moment.

My grandmother's family had emigrated from Russia in 1904, well before the pogroms of Hitler and Nazi Germany, but that did not mean that she was not deeply affected by the Holocaust. Her relatives all died in the camps—family members whom she never had the opportunity to meet. She represented the lessons of their death through her life—lessons she taught her children and grandchildren by the way she lived. For that I am grateful—and am committed to helping HERC continue to keep these lessons alive.

Thank you for tonight, and I look forward to working with my fellow honoree, Bruce Peckerman, and the board, so that HERC will have the resources to continue its mission. ■

John Gurda

"My Library"—The Evolution of a Milwaukee Institution

In October 2015, Marquette Law School hosted a conference, "The Future of the American Public Library," in partnership with the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and with support from the Law School's Lubar Fund for Public Policy Research. (See the news article on page 4.) Milwaukee historian John Gurda was among those addressing the conference. His numerous books include *The Making of Milwaukee* and, most recently, *Milwaukee: City of Neighborhoods*. These are Mr. Gurda's remarks at the conference.

A public library was the very first place I was allowed to go without holding an adult's hand. I spent my early years in Milwaukee on S. 34th Street, not far from Jackson Park. By the age of five, maybe six, my parents gave me permission to walk from our little postwar prefab to the Layton Park branch library at 2913 W. Forest Home Avenue. The route took me past a bathtub factory, over a footbridge above the North Western railroad tracks, past Gilbert & Eileen's tavern with its wishing well out front, and finally to the cramped storefront library. The journey covered more than a half mile, uphill both ways (or so it seemed), and I made it so often that I must have worn out more than one pair of PF Flyers.

That was back in the 1950s, a time either genuinely safer or perhaps just less fearful than our

own; it's hard to imagine the same permission being granted today. I recall the Layton Park branch as a narrow, fairly spartan place—light in front and dark in back—but it had all I needed. I devoured stacks of easy readers and enough more-challenging fare to remain a member in good standing of the Billy the Bookworm Club.

Even before I'd outgrown Billy, my family had moved with hundreds of other south siders to suburban Hales Corners, and the Layton Park branch ►►



John Gurda

had moved to another small storefront, on 43rd Street and Forest Home Avenue. That remained my library through grade school and well into high school. It was there that I discovered, entirely on my own, fondly remembered titles such as *The Kid Who Batted 1,000*, *Kit Carson: Frontiersman*, *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*, and the rather wicked short stories of Roald Dahl. In those days before digital self-checkout, you had to write your library card number on a slip tucked inside the front cover of the book you were borrowing. I used my card so often that I'll go to my grave remembering 54-13940.

As an adult, my focus shifted to Milwaukee's Central Library. I've earned my living as a freelance historian for more than 40 years now, and no resource has been more important to me than Central, especially the collections in the Frank Zeidler Humanities Room. Without those collections, and without the librarians who keep them organized and accessible, I'd probably be teaching high school history or selling life insurance.

I tell the story of "My Library" not because the story is unique but rather precisely because it's not. Many of us, I suspect most of us, have always had a sharp sense of "my library," a strongly personal connection with a purely public institution, perhaps because what we do there is largely self-directed. We look back on the friendly librarian of our youth, or perhaps the grumpy one, and we look ahead to the next book, the next DVD, the next program. We recall the dizzying feeling that all this was ours for the borrowing, and we take for granted that it still is and always will be.

Reduced to its essential function, the public library is like a sort of curated Internet—without the ads, without the dross, without the sprawling anarchy. The library is an open door, carefully measured but generously proportioned, to the gathered knowledge of the world and the cultural output of our own

civilization—for everyone and for free. That makes it one of the greatest and most democratic institutions on Earth.

In Milwaukee's case, the institution dates to the city's infancy. In 1847, just one year after Milwaukee incorporated, a group of Yankee pioneers decided to start a lending library. It was no coincidence, in those pre-railroad days, that they organized in December, after winter had closed the shipping lanes and put Milwaukee literally on ice until spring. Starved for books, the group resolved to raise \$1,000 "before the opening of navigation" to make sure that the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Ralph Waldo Emerson would be in the holds of the first ships headed west from Buffalo.

The group called itself the Young Men's Association, and the founders' names include some that are still familiar today, luminaries such as Rufus King, Edward Allis, and the incomparable Increase Lapham. So-called regular members paid a two-dollar initiation fee, and graybeards older than 35 shelled out five dollars—about \$150 in today's currency. What they received for that sum (plus two dollars in annual dues) was unlimited access to a small but growing collection of books. Members could check out one large book, or two small ones, for a period of two weeks, with a one-week renewal privilege.

Using income from initiation fees, dues, and a popular lecture series, the Young Men's Association rented a succession of downtown rooms and began to build its collection. After two or three decades, however, the group's energy flagged. The Young Men were no longer young, interest in the lecture series had waned, and there was no longer adequate revenue to buy books in quantity. The collection became so tired that circulation plummeted.

At the same time, there was a rising tide of sentiment for a tax-supported system open to everyone,

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Milwaukee's Central Library

VisitMilwaukee.com

not just young swells—now middle-aged swells—who paid dues for the privilege. The Chicago Public Library opened in 1873—part of that city’s dramatic rebuilding after the great fire two years before—and Milwaukee’s newspapers took up the cause. “If a library is a good thing,” the *Sentinel* declared, “and all of us believe it is, it is best as a public library.”

The breakthrough came in 1878, when the Young Men’s Association offered the city its collection of 9,958 books as the nucleus of a free library. The group had already shed its early Yankee cast. This being Milwaukee, nearly a third of the collection was in German. The city wisely accepted the offer. The association’s reading room on Milwaukee Street was remodeled, the first city librarian was hired (at \$1,200 a year, roughly \$30,000 today), and the newly public library reopened to a brisk business at 9 a.m. on July 8, 1878. The *Sentinel* saw it as evidence of higher civilization: “Few advantages of a city can be greater than those conferred by a public library, and it is altogether cheerful to see a disposition to patronize one so well manifested as in this case.”

Just two years later, its holdings swollen to 15,000 volumes, the institution moved to the second floor of the brand-new Library Block, at Fourth Street and Wisconsin Avenue. The reading room there was open to “all well-behaved persons” from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. every day but Sunday, when the doors closed at 2 p.m. Unlike Milwaukee’s

saloons or private clubs, the room was an early bastion of gender equality. “A separate space is set aside for the exclusive use of women,” a library official noted, “without any prejudice against their making use of any other part of the room, if they see fit.”

But this was not the library as we know it today. The stacks were closed at first, and all books were retrieved by staff members. Soon, however, Milwaukee tried a bold experiment. Theresa West, the city’s head librarian in 1892, described it: “The Milwaukee Public Library . . . threw its reference shelves absolutely open to visitors, with simply the check of the presence of an attendant in the room.” It was, she wrote, “regarded as a somewhat radical and dangerous step,” but West noted proudly that only six volumes were lost in the first 10 years. Her hope was to some day “throw open the shelves of the whole library, for some hours of the day, at least, to any visitor.”

There was no card catalog to guide those visitors. In 1885 the library simply published a book listing the 35,000 volumes in its collection. The book was instantly out of date, of course, and the library printed an index of additions every quarter. In time those volumes filled an entire shelf, which must have been extremely frustrating to anyone trying to find information about Roman history or the habits of woodpeckers. ▶▶

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One thing oddly lacking by modern standards was popular fiction. In his annual report for 1879, the library director stated Milwaukee’s acquisition policy in no uncertain terms: “As to the poor, trashy, and ephemeral productions of novels which seem to be the delight of the vicious and vulgar, they should be rigidly excluded from our shelves, and this, I may safely say, has always been the policy of your board.” A decade later, the director was pleased to report that fiction had dropped from 59 percent of circulation to 48 percent in just four years. Librarians have long since decided that reading is better than not reading; Danielle Steele and Jackie Collins now sit on our shelves alongside Louise Erdrich and Margaret Atwood.

With pulp fiction or without it, Milwaukee’s collection continued to grow. By the early 1890s, the holdings of the Milwaukee Public Library (MPL) had mushroomed to 65,000 books, reflecting what Theresa West called “a catholic, yet scholarly taste.” The Library Block’s reading room was attracting 75,000 patrons a year, and space was soon at a premium.

The city decided to solve the problem by building a combined library and museum just a few blocks up the street, at what is now 814 W. Wisconsin Avenue. If Central Library looks like Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry, it should. The Columbian Exposition of 1893, for which the Chicago building was erected, created a new vogue for the neoclassical, and Central Library is Milwaukee’s outstanding example of the style. The landmark opened in 1898, and it was universally hailed as a milestone of civic progress. Along with City Hall itself, built three years earlier, the library-museum was a bold and confident statement of Milwaukee’s place in the vanguard of America’s cities.

The museum took over the west wing, while the library occupied the east. The marriage flourished

through the first decades of the twentieth century, and there was an appealing synergy in the shared quarters. Patrons could see an actual mummy or a stuffed elephant on one side of the building and borrow a book about pharaohs or pachyderms on the other.

It wasn’t until the 1930s that MPL encountered any serious headwinds. With unemployment nearing 40 percent by 1933, circulation skyrocketed—as always happens in hard times—but the budget went in the opposite direction. Funds were so scarce that enterprising librarians created makeshift “books” by clipping serialized novels out of popular magazines and gluing them together. No sooner had the Depression ended than World War II began, and once again high demand was matched by scarce resources.

It wasn’t until the late 1940s that the smoke had cleared enough to see the real state of the system. Central Library had a great many virtues, but space was not one of them, especially when you consider that the library occupied only half the structure. By the mid-1950s, all books published before 1940 were in storage, and 15,000 eventually rotted beyond repair. The museum was expanding, too. The institutions were like twins developing in the same womb, and both displayed some rather sharp elbows as they grew.

The solution to the library’s space problem was a massive addition. No thought was given to historic preservation or even historical continuity. If you’ve ever wondered why there was so much architectural mayhem in America after World War II, the library’s argument for its addition speaks volumes: “There is more wasted, unuseable space in the rotunda, inner courtyard, ground floor, halls and high-ceilinged corridors than there is useable space for books in the central stacks.” What our parents saw as hugely

inefficient we now consider beautiful. Tours of Central are quite popular today, and they begin in that “unuseable” rotunda.

With the active support of Mayor Frank Zeidler, a rather utilitarian addition to Central Library, covering half a square block, became a reality in 1956. The



museum chafed a bit at having to wait, but that institution moved to a spacious new home across the street in the next decade.

The branches, meanwhile, had shortcomings of their own. Despite its scale and majesty, Central Library had never been a sealed-off fortress. The Milwaukee Public Library has always reached out aggressively to its patrons. For much of the 20th century, small collections—almost mini-libraries—were maintained in schools, factories, union halls, hospitals, even grocery stores. A system of genuine branches slowly took shape. The first was a stately building on 10th and Madison streets, erected in 1910, to serve the south side; today it’s a St. Vincent de Paul Society center. By 1950 there were 17 branches in all, only 3 of them built as libraries. The rest were makeshift quarters in rented spaces, including those Forest Home Avenue storefronts I patronized as a child.

Richard Krug, who had been library director since 1941, announced what he called a “new deal” for the branches. He planned a system of “regional” libraries within the city, each serving a population of about 60,000. Krug envisioned the branches as supermarkets of knowledge, with convenient locations, high visibility, and full service.

There were two problems: money, as always, and geography. Money was no particular obstacle at the high tide of postwar prosperity, but geography was. In order to serve the city most efficiently, Krug planned to close five branches, a rather risky strategy for someone whose budget was set by politicians. The affected aldermen howled, but Krug prevailed. By 1968, Milwaukee had a dozen branches, most of them new or extensively rebuilt. The buildings have changed, some radically, but their locations still conform to the

template adopted during Krug’s “new deal” more than a half-century ago.

MPL enjoyed a few decades of relative calm, but starting in about 1990, we entered rapids that have been roaring ever since. I say “we” because I joined the library board in 1993. In 2014, after ducking the job for at least 15 years, I became president.

The past two decades have been an interesting time to help guide the state’s largest system. There have been departures, from the circulating art collection to the Bookmobile to the card catalog. We said goodbye to paper cards in 1995 and went all-digital. I couldn’t begin to count the number of times I bloodied my cuticles pawing through those cards. Now, I suppose, we’ve traded torn cuticles for carpal tunnel problems.

But the larger story has been financial stress. Let no one doubt that these are challenging times for public libraries. We are in a period of diminished resources and widespread aversion to new taxes. In constant dollars, MPL’s annual budget has, from its high point in 1999, dropped nearly 24 percent. As a direct result, our total weekly service hours are down 18 percent from 2004, and our spending for materials dropped from 12 percent of the budget—our long-term target—to 6.6 percent in 2009, before rebounding to 9.3 percent today.

In 2003, having few other choices, we made the painful decision to close a branch library. That decision became an unexpected catalyst. Public outcry was so intense that we revisited the issue and ended up building Villard Square, a pioneering mixed-used development with a library on the first floor and “grandfamily” housing on the three floors above for grandparents raising their grandchildren. The mixed-use model saves money and strengthens community connections, a combination so powerful that it’s become the template for most of our future capital projects.

Villard Square is just one example of how MPL has responded creatively to the challenges it faces. Under Kate Huston from 1991 to 2006 and under Paula Kiely since then, the system has completed a ▶▶

glorious restoration of Central Library, installed one of the nation's first vending libraries, launched new programs ranging from Books 2 Go for preschoolers to Teacher in the Library for grade-school kids, and opened four new branches, including two mixed-use facilities, with two more on the way. We still have a great deal of lost ground to make up, but MPL is moving in the right direction.



89.7 WUWM Milwaukee Public Radio

There's an even larger question that touches libraries of all kinds and conditions. It's become the proverbial elephant in the room whenever two or more librarians sit down to discuss the future. The root of the word "library" is *liber*, which is Latin for "book." Books, however, at least of the paper variety, are a diminishing part of what libraries are all about. As we speed headlong down the information superhighway, as we go from books to bytes, what are the implications for the public library? What is our place in the digital age? When every smartphone is a data portal, when even the cheapest tablet allows you to read Tolstoy or study the Civil War, why bother with bricks and mortar?

American library historian Wayne Wiegand has answered that question eloquently in his book, *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library*. Drawing on historical precedents and contemporary studies, Professor Wiegand demonstrates that public libraries are still places where we learn, where we connect, where we find the guidance and resources to grow on our own.

But it's obvious that libraries have had to adjust. It's sometimes said that the nation's great passenger railroads died because they forgot they were in the transportation business. Instead of adapting,

they rode the rails to oblivion. Libraries aren't making that mistake. In Milwaukee, we're committed to providing our patrons with twenty-first-century library service where they live and how they want it. That means e-books, which have exploded from fewer than 12,000 in 2010 to nearly 135,000 today. That means access to electronic databases, which now number well over 100. And it means computers. MPL has 648 public-access computers in its system, including laptops, compared to 372 in 2005; that's a 75-percent increase in 10 years.

The Milwaukee Public Library has changed enormously since the days when a group of young men huddled around a woodstove in a forgotten hotel lobby to talk about books. It will continue to change in the years ahead—and more quickly than any of us can imagine. But it's the media that change, not the mission; it's the forms, not the philosophy. Libraries are one of the great constants in American life. Like its counterparts across the country, MPL has been "my library" for generations of grateful patrons.

As "my library," we play a multitude of roles. We are the level playing field. We bridge the

digital divide. We house the common wealth of our civilization. We provide for free what patrons cannot buy for themselves. We open the door to larger worlds for everyone, regardless of class or background. Along with the public schools, we hold a place at the very heart of American democracy. We stand as a beacon of opportunity for all who would see its light, a

gateway to riches for all who would enter in.

That is an exalted mission. It's one MPL has been pursuing for nearly 140 years now, and it's one we'll continue to pursue into a future whose technologies we can't begin to imagine, but whose needs for information, inspiration, and connection will be identical to our own. ■

Judge Diarmuid F. O'Scannlain

The Supreme Court and the Future of Religion in the Public Square

On October 8, 2015, the Hon. Diarmuid F. O'Scannlain, judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, delivered the keynote address at the annual Red Mass Dinner of the St. Thomas More Lawyers Society of Wisconsin at the Milwaukee Athletic Club.



Judge Diarmuid F. O'Scannlain

The Red Mass, as we in this room know, is an annual tradition in which the Church marks the beginning of the judicial term by invoking God's blessing on the judiciary and on members of the legal profession. For those of us within the profession, it is a time to reflect on the

connection between our private faith as Catholics and our public work as lawyers. As we are well reminded by the Church, to live fully and truly—to flourish as God commands—that connection must be robust. Shortly after his appointment to the papacy, Pope Francis instructed that religion should not be “relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society.”

But, for many of us, our public lives often do exist with a certain degree of detachment from our private

faith. As legal professionals, we feel this detachment acutely. In the law, we are called to read, to interpret, to argue, and to shape civil rules and regulations, an enterprise conducted through the force of logic, intellectual rigor, and rhetoric, but typically not through appeal to religious values. In my particular work as a federal judge, even where such values may be implicated, their influence must be sharply constrained.

While law and religion are often apart in this way, thankfully the two are not usually at odds. I want to focus my remarks, however, on a Supreme Court opinion that recently has driven a wedge between the two and brought to our nation's consciousness the underlying tension between our ever-secular society and traditional religious values.

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I am speaking, of course, of the United States Supreme Court's decision this past June in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. As I am sure many gathered here well know, in that case, a five-Justice majority of the Court held that the United States Constitution includes a fundamental right to same-sex marriage. For those, like me, who subscribe to an originalist understanding of our Constitution, this was a ►►