Reading Places
Literacy, Democracy, and the Public Library in Cold War America
By Christine Pawley

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In the 1950s, the state of Wisconsin decided to temporarily extend public library services to two rural counties, Door and Kewaunee. At the end of the experiment, citizens of one county voted to continue funding the service through local taxes, the residents of the other elected to discontinue it. Christine Pawley's *Reading Places* explores the many social and cultural reasons for the differing votes, relating greater social and political forces at large in the United States to the local and personal experience of the regional library experiment. Pawley draws on personal interviews to represent community members' recollections of working for or using the regional library service. Archived circulation records document the types and titles of books that women, men, and children were reading, and librarians recall the types of reference resources used. These sources combine to reveal the ways in which library collections serve information in a localized setting.

The Wisconsin experiment, Pawley writes, was largely fueled by a bookmobile. With physical accessibility issues removed, library circulation in both counties more than doubled. The library's mobility facilitated connections among community members, with resources not readily available without the library service. School teachers and students were especially grateful for access to supplemental education materials that school budgets could not afford.

The national political climate influenced those who voted against continued support of the library service. In contrast to today's prevailing view of libraries as cornerstones of democracy, some community members opposed the government funding of public library services because they were suspicious of state-funded information and feared government control over their lives. The perception that the library did not address serious matters such as politics and interests particular to men also strengthened the argument of the library system's opponents, as the primary patrons of the library were women and children. This remains true today.

Pawley's work is remarkable for its discussion of the development of public library services for children and the role of public libraries in the lives of rural women during this period in U.S. history. Library services for children were not as well respected and valued then as they are now. This lack of appreciation for the educational value of public libraries contributed to the numbers of opposing votes. Aside from the church, the library stood as one of the few places

in which women of the day were able to socialize and engage in activities outside of the home. At a time when government-sponsored venues such as homemakers' clubs were viewed as threats to the family and the farm, libraries raised similar suspicions among men who expected women to devote their days to home-based work.

Over the past several years, public libraries all over the U.S. have been closing with some city governments choosing to privatize the provision of library services. Should every citizen be guaranteed access to information, and must public libraries be funded by tax dollars in order to remain a cornerstone of democracy? *Reading Places* offers insights for understanding the place of these familiar institutions during this time of economic crisis and political fear of government interference in everyday life. Pawley's work is a valuable contribution to our collective understanding of public library history.

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