

Sarah Byrd Askew: Yesterday's Model for Today's Librarian

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Sarah Byrd Askew, in a rare interview with *Holland's Magazine's* Grace Leake, summed up the role of the librarian in this short sentence. "We must encourage curiosity and interest. These often lead to achievement, to increased understanding, to happier living." (Leake, 1940) It seems like a simple mission but one she accomplished with humor, an acute political intelligence, and unflagging altruism. Askew's achievements serve as a model for modern librarians as she practiced readers' advisory, advocated for the forming of county districts, excelled in storytelling, instituted an interlibrary loan system, and championed the professional development of librarians in her adopted state of New Jersey.

Born in 1863 (with some records dated at 1877 (James, 1971)), Sarah grew up in Georgia as one of nine children near the home of Joel Chandler Harris, the collector of the Brer Rabbit tales. She reveled in her love of the South and later chose these stories for her library collection in a fishing village on the peninsula of New Jersey. She was a master storyteller and anyone who has tried to read the dialect in the original stories can admire her for her courage! She attended Dayton Academy but graduated high school when her family moved to Atlanta. She went on to business school to be a stenographer. (Severns, 1953) It was on a vacation, recuperating from a long illness and staying with a sister in Cleveland, when Sarah met the head of the Cleveland Public Library, William H. Brett. Impressed by her lively approach to library work and inspired by his enthusiasm, Sarah accepted a temporary position in one of the system's branch libraries. Under Brett's mentorship, she thrived in library work and soon decided to attend the Pratt Institute Library School in 1903. (Wynar, 1978)

After graduation from Pratt in 1904, she returned to the Cleveland Public Library for a few short months when she got an invitation to come to New Jersey in 1905 where they needed her to organize the newly-formed New Jersey Public Library Commission. (Tinling, 1986) Sarah commented that they wanted her “because I was cheap, being just out of school, and because I had no relatives in Jersey in politics. You see, this meant they could fire me without notice or unpleasant aftermath!” (Leake, 1940) She was given the job description to “get libraries going.” At that time, New Jersey had only sixty-six libraries in the state. Through her work as “organizer and missionary” she accomplished her tasks by inspiring groups to support the growth of libraries in extending resources from the more urban centers to rural areas in New Jersey. Her seemingly light-hearted way of speaking left the audiences with the essential message “We have got to have a library in this town.” She wisely drew the support of the State Federation of Women’s Clubs, the PTA, the State Teachers’ Association, fraternal lodges, and granges. With her hard work, twelve of New Jersey’s twenty-one counties established county libraries to fulfill legislation passed in 1920. (Wynar, 1978) The cajoling and politicking necessary to get tax levies passed for libraries did not come completely fret-free for Sarah. She described herself at the beginning of this period of her life as being very shy. She confessed “I used to circle the block each time before I would knock on a door and ask for something. In fact, I’m still a block-circler. I find it a wonderful device for summoning courage.” (Leake, 1940)

In building a county-wide library system, Askew’s vision reflected a keen eye for the geography and social history of the communities. In her article ‘Book Service for All the People in One State’, Sarah said that “we must combine all kinds of public libraries in our state and try to get for each district the kind best suited to its needs.” That led to a county librarian serving the

program needs of smaller outlying areas and responsible for maintaining rotating collection of books so that the people had a variety of choices. In 1906, Sarah began offering classes to librarians of smaller libraries to “learn to do a better job.”(James, 1971) She would drive her horse and buggy and later, a Model-T she specifically designed, to carry books to villages far from an urban center. She would ring a large dinner bell from the front seat and shout to the rural inhabitants “The pie wagon’s here!” (Leake, 1940) These services also supplemented school libraries. Sarah was aware of the difficulty in providing rural children with enough materials to support school achievement. In her *Library Journal* article “Equalizing Opportunities: New Jersey County Libraries” she cites the two years below average reading levels as a call for county and state support for rural libraries (Askew, 1927). “Stations” were set up in remote areas in places like stables and jails. She soon began an interstate loan system to borrow books not other held in New Jersey. (Askew, 1941)

During this organizational period, World War I broke out. Sarah’s attention turned to serving the men and women stationed in New Jersey’s 42 military camps and troopships. Almost all of the camps in New Jersey were demarcation points for the front lines overseas. As head of the New Jersey Library War Service, she organized a system to supply books to ships, patrol boats, and men at the front. Soldiers in hospitals were also served. These activities were the model for military post libraries later on in World War II., where Sarah was active in the Victory Book Campaign until she began a long fight against cancer (Severns, 1953). While serving at a New Jersey hospital, Sarah shared her dreams and plans for the county library districts with a mother whose son was wounded overseas. When he died, the mother donated his insurance money to help with the effort as a memorial to her son and the many other soldiers who died in the war.

That fund spurred developments for the “bookmobile” and the tax levies to come. In 1920, the citizens of Burlington County passed the first measure to establish a county library and it was, in her words, “the most thrilling experience I can remember.” (Wynar, 1978) In 1909, Sarah served a brief period as reference librarian of the New Jersey State Library returning to the New Jersey Library Commission in 1913. She served as secretary from 1930 until her death in 1942. (Wynar, 1978) By 1942, there were 316 libraries in various cities and towns in New Jersey.

Besides the work in establishing county-wide library systems, Sarah personally established a library for a village of 176 people who lived in a remote stretch of the New Jersey peninsula, cut off for six months in the winter from the mainland. Her narrative booklet, *The Place, the Man and the Book*, relates the care and preparation she took to choose a library for the fisher-folk. She met with the people in the village and through an exchange of stories and lively talk of the sea, she learned their reading tastes and interests. She chose books of primal forces and adventure. She also included her beloved Uncle Remus and included folklore, the supernatural, and nature tales. Next, she cross-referenced the titles, one to another to form a chain of reading. She pasted cards in the back of each book. A party was given to celebrate the opening of the library and its new collection. Sarah was asked to present the collection to the people and transfixed them with her telling of Dickens’ “Child’s Dream of a Star.” Breaking the silence at the end, old Cap’n Jed sighed with a deep breath “That sho is purty.” The next year, on her return in a raging storm, she met with the village folk and discovered that the average number read was a little over half of the titles. They were quoting parts from the books, making comments about the characters, and assessing their situations in the plots. Of the 472 books she chose, she felt she was successful in fitting the people to the books. Sarah declared that this was a rare opportunity to serve a finite

group of people with the luxury of getting to know them well. (Askew, 1916) This personalized project is certainly the essence of readers' advisory services!

During the Depression in the 1930's, Sarah helped establish work in libraries for many WPA workers who later found permanent jobs in libraries because of their skills gained in this work. She exhibited great empathy for these workers who wanted to be treated with dignity. (Severns, 1953)

The list of organizations that Sarah participated in is a testament to her hard work in advocating for library service. She was two-time president of the New Jersey Library Association in 1913 and again in 1939, vice-president of the American Library Association in 1938, chair of the children's reading section of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers in 1924 to 1929, and served on the Trenton Board of Education for ten years starting in 1923. In recognition of her contributions to the state, the New Jersey College for Women conferred its first honorary degree on the one name unanimously put forth-Sarah Byrd Askew. (Wynar, 1978)

Sarah Byrd Askew passed away in Trenton from pneumonia and was buried in her family's plot in Atlanta.(James, 1971) In 1956, Paterson State College named their new library building after her, providing information about her at their reference desk. (University, 2006) Her legacy of advocacy, attention to the reader, and dedication to providing library service to every reader in every town is a model for modern librarians. Her establishment of services we use daily- interlibrary loan, bookmobile service, county-wide districts, and readers' advisory- is a daunting measure of superb librarianship.

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Author Note

It is uncanny how Sarah Byrd Askew's life resonates with my own. After doing some preliminary research, I almost wondered if Dr. Bielefield knew enough about me to find me a muse! I have been working for two years in an arduous movement to establish a county-wide library system in Union County, Oregon. Many of Sarah's accomplishments are inspiring to those who dream but struggle. Taxpayers are reluctant to vote for a levy and naysayers think that library service is "good enough" as it stands. From reading about Sarah Askew, I realize that others have been down this winding path, too.

Sarah Askew found librarianship later in her life at the age of 42. I got a late start in the MLS program at the age of 55. Doors of opportunity open for everyone at different times. How fortunate we are that we found the profession in time to bring some of our ideas to fruition and hone our wish to serve. One of Sarah's early aspirations was to be an actor. She probably would not recognize that she was an actor in her public-speaking and her storytelling. I, too, enjoyed performing while I was a school librarian. Organizing puppet shows, using different voices and dialects while reading to children, and singing with the children all made my professional life colorful. Sarah's raconteur spirit is what drew people to her and her ideas for book service for all people in her state.

It was pleasure to read about her, think about her strengths, and her professional contributions to the people of New Jersey and the sphere of librarianship.

Sarah Byrd Askew

