

■ THE WOMEN OF LIBRARY HISTORY PROJECT

von Katelyn Browne

Women of Library History (WoLH) is a project of the Feminist Task Force (FTF) of the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association. At an FTF meeting in January 2013, task force members were discussing some past collaborative projects, such as surveys of sexist marketing strategies in the ALA exhibits hall. The possibility of a recurring, crowdsourced project appealed to many at the meeting, particularly if it could raise the profile of the task force and engage the library community in conversations about feminism and gender equity.

"Women of Library History" began to take form. We all had valuable mentors in our lives whose work we wished to celebrate, and we were eager to hear similar stories from our peers. We also knew that many communities had legendary women library workers, or portraits of women whose stories were largely forgotten. We predicted that other members of the library community would be enthusiastic about sharing similar stories if we created a venue in which to share them. A focus on women's work in library would also build on the existing work of groups such as FTF and the Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship (COSWL), who strive to bring attention to gender disparities and sexist practices in our profession.

Because all work done by FTF – and, indeed, all work done by SRRT – is volunteer, we tried to design a project that could be easily maintained. WoLH would run on submissions from library workers and other interested parties; we would not push through our own list of notable women, nor would we exclude any relevant submissions. Charlotte Gerstein and Erin Ziegenfuss volunteered to help with proofreading and editing for the 2013 season, and Diedre Conkling has consistently taken the lead with soliciting submissions and publicizing the posts. And, for four years now, I've done the rest: I set up the Tumblr, created an annual call for submissions, and then sorted, proofread, formatted, and scheduled over 150 posts. March is Women's History Month in the United States, so that seemed like a logical time for the website to go live. In our first year (2013), we received enough submissions to post daily throughout March, and then every Wednesday for the rest of the calendar year. In subsequent years, we've been able to sustain healthy posting throughout March.

I am absolutely delighted by the stories that have been shared with us, and I feel honoured to be the first reader on so many fascinating tales.

Our subjects have spanned from some of the most well-known women in our field (such as Henriette Avram, who developed the MARC format) to women who are known only locally. We've seen entire teams come together to write a tribute – for example, the staff and Friends of the Otranto Road Regional Branch of the Charleston County, South Carolina, Public Library worked together to celebrate long-time branch manager Deborah R. Harris. We received a post about Carla D. Hayden in 2014, two years before she would be nominated to the position of Librarian of Congress. We've had a bit of chaining – library science professor Kathleen de la Peña McCook wrote about Dr. Alma Dawson and Oralía de Garza Cortés in 2013, and then Alicia K. Long wrote about Dr. McCook in 2014! While submissions have predominantly been about women with connections to the American library world, we've featured Australian Ida Leeson and Briton Hilda Eileen Colwell. And, of course, controversy always plays well: two of our most popular posts were about Zoia Horn, a Russian-American librarian who was jailed in the 1970s in an effort to protect patron privacy from the FBI, and Celeste West, a feminist librarian, lesbian activist, and alternative publisher who also happened to pose mostly-topless for *Synergy* magazine, holding a sign that reads "Happiness is an Uncensored Library."

Every summer, I reflect on the previous year's submissions and wonder whether we can pull it off again for another March. It's a gift to have a project that is always time-limited and gets renewed annually based on our willingness to continue and our impression of whether submissions are out there. In January, we'll decide whether we open submissions again for 2017; in the meantime, I encourage you to read through our archives, available at <http://womenoflibraryhistory.tumblr.com>. As you do that, think about the women who have contributed to your own personal library history – I'm sure there are at least 31 more out there, and I hope they'll find champions to write about them.

Questions about the Women of Library History project can be directed to womenoflibraryhistory@gmail.com, an e-mail account that is checked with the leisurely pace of a volunteer project.

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