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Article Summary: A Library Association began providing lecture series and access to reading materials when Omaha was still an unincorporated village. That first Association lasted only three years, however, a victim of unstable financial backing, hard times and dissension among its members.

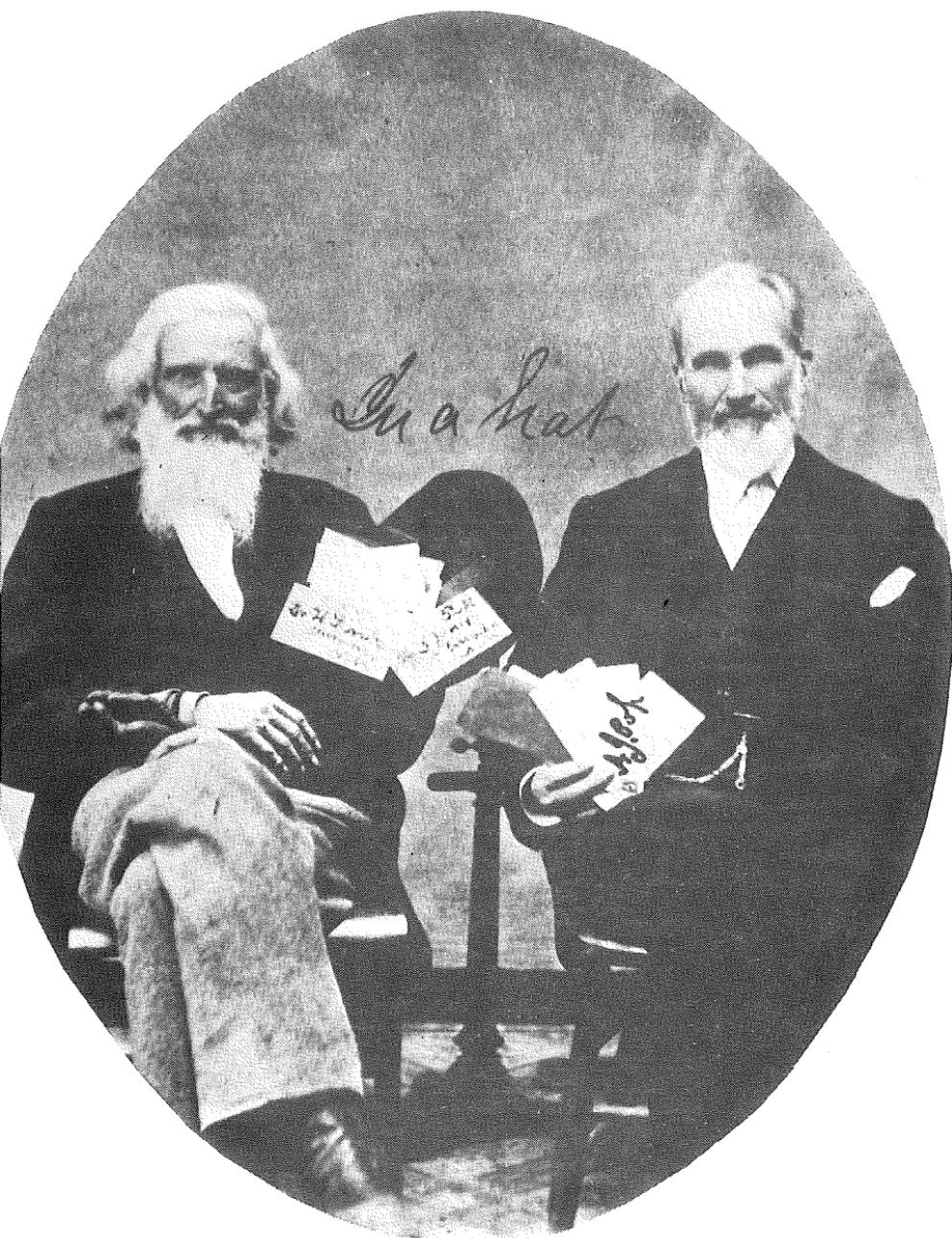
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Photographs / Images: Alfred D Jones and Dr. Harvey Link, early supporters of the Omaha city library program; Library Association lecturers Amelia Bloomer and James M Woolworth



*Alfred D. Jones, right, first postmaster (1854) of Omaha, assisted the city library program as lecturer. At left is Dr. Harvey Link, at one time president of the Nebraska Medical Association. The cards held in the men's hands and the phrase "in a hat" refer to the jocular contention that Jones at first carried on postoffice business from his hat.*

## HIGH CULTURE ON THE FRONTIER: THE OMAHA LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

By PHILIP A. KALISCH

THE FIRST LIBRARY in the Territory of Nebraska was established during the winter of 1856-1857 when the little community of Omaha, less than three years old, was still an unincorporated village optimistically claiming a population of eighteen hundred souls. Notice of a bill to incorporate the Omaha Library Association was given in the Council of the General Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska on January 7, 1857, by Samuel M. Kirkpatrick<sup>1</sup> and in the Territorial House of Representatives five days later by Jonas Seeley of Douglas County.<sup>2</sup> The institution was duly incorporated under the laws of the Territory of Nebraska.<sup>3</sup>

The establishment of a library in the village of Omaha at this time was indeed more than an ordinary event; it was an act of faith, of hope, and of vision. A small group of men, handicapped by meager capital and faced with the problems of making a living in a new country, chose to burden themselves with the further obligation of creating and maintaining a library.<sup>4</sup>

Their motives varied. Some wanted to promote a library for their children and for future generations. Others were motivated by civic pride and a desire to emulate the best features of the big eastern cities, while community leaders were anxious to use a town library association as a selling point to attract more settlers to Omaha. The desire to further adult education through the use of books, newspapers, periodicals, and lectures was also a factor. Reform movements such as

temperance and woman suffrage were sweeping the country in the late 1850's and there would be no better way of disseminating knowledge among the people of the community than by establishing a library and reading room, where for a small fee one could secure information concerning the present conditions and past achievements of mankind.<sup>5</sup>

A young men's association was directly responsible for the first Omaha Library Association. Dr. George L. Miller, who in 1865 became the founder and editor of the *Omaha Herald*, was elected president.<sup>6</sup> In an effort to raise money for the project, a course of nine lectures on "elevated subjects" was conducted. These were eagerly attended by audiences ranging in size from two hundred and fifty to four hundred of Omaha's early citizens. As a result of the wholehearted response to the lecture course, the Association cleared nearly eight hundred dollars.<sup>7</sup>

This money was used to furnish and supply materials for a reading room, which was situated on the second floor of the Western Exchange Bank Building located at the southwest corner of Twelfth and Farnam Streets. A collection of nearly one hundred publications, including a wide selection of newspapers, periodicals, and current literature of the day was assembled for the use of the people who had paid their membership fee in the Library Association. The room was open during the day and early evening hours.<sup>8</sup>

The *Omaha City Times* stated that the Library Association and its lectures represented the "high state of popular culture" that existed in the community.<sup>9</sup> A prominent businessman, James M. Woolworth, felt that the city rivaled "the best town of twice her population which . . . [could] be named in New York or New England." He cited as evidence the activities of the Library Association "which would do the highest credit to any eastern city."<sup>10</sup>

The lecture course, having been so successful the first year, was again offered the following autumn. The object of the lectures was to present a program on all subjects which were of general interest and profit. It was stated that no time would be given to individuals who hoped to further the

interests of a particular religion, a political party, or a politician.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the best local talent Omaha had to offer was secured. The opening lecture was presented by Judge Eleazer Wakeley who spoke on "Thoughts on American Government." He traced the origin and history of the country from the colonial period to 1857, referring to the elements of its stability.<sup>12</sup> Two weeks later the Reverend William Young Brown discussed "Our Constitution and Laws,"<sup>13</sup> while "Summer and Winter" was the subject of Judge Samuel Black, "the expression of whose countenance was oratory itself."<sup>14</sup> Continuing the second season, Dr. Gilbert C. Monell lectured on "Labor"; Joseph Barker talked on "Progress";<sup>15</sup> James M. Woolworth spoke on "Emigration";<sup>16</sup> General John M. Thayer orated on "Free Thought",<sup>17</sup> and Mrs. Amelia Bloomer of Council Bluffs gave her views on "Women."<sup>18</sup> All of the speakers received favorable comment by the press except Amelia Bloomer. She maintained that "women possessed not only the same intellectual entities with man but that these entities were capable of the same degree of development."<sup>19</sup> She concluded that the lack of education was the reason for women's inferiority.

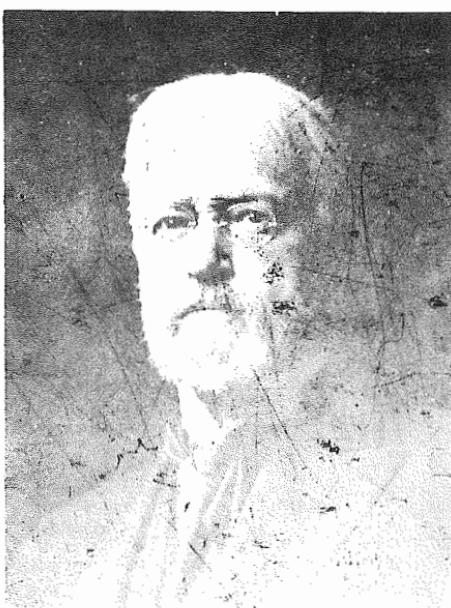
In reviewing the 1857-1858 season as a whole, the *Times* declared that the local speakers gave "positive evidence that we have among us those who are capable of delivering good lectures."<sup>20</sup> Much credit was given the lecture committee of the Omaha Library Association for showing a great deal of sound and critical discrimination in their choice of lecturers.

The Omaha Library Association grew and prospered during the following year. Gifts were donated to the book collection from such prominent citizens as Fenner Ferguson, the Nebraska Territorial Delegate to Congress, who secured a large collection of public documents. Included were bound volumes of the *Congressional Globe*, *Commercial Relations with Foreign Nations*, *Executive*, and *Patent Office Documents*.<sup>21</sup> Another gift of eight books came from the regents of the University of the State of New York.<sup>22</sup>

The executive committee of the Association publicly stated in April, 1858, that although the library was little more than



*Mrs. Amelia Bloomer, nationally known feminist of Council Bluffs gave her views on "Women" at Library Association sessions.*



*James M. Woolworth, ubiquitous Omahan, also spoke before its members.*

two years old, it had attained a stability of character and prominence in the community which was most gratifying. Due to the encouragement which the Association had received, it was anticipated that the library would soon be proclaimed the pride of the young city.<sup>23</sup>

A full time librarian, E. V. Smith, had been employed by the Association in 1857. In addition to attending to the collection of reading material, he also found time to make weather observations from the reading room. These were published in the *Omaha Times*. Although the editor pointed out that Smith's notes could not be published in their entirety, temperature readings at different hours of the day and cloud conditions were included along with the wind direction and the mean average of the thermometer.<sup>24</sup>

The Association held its annual meeting in October for the purpose of hearing committee reports and electing officers for

the coming year. At the second annual meeting in 1858, the members elected as officers were such prominent Omahans as Phineas W. Hitchcock, John H. Kellom, Gilbert C. Monell, and Andrew J. Hanscom. A new librarian, Alfred Sayre, was also chosen. The treasury was destitute of funds, but one hundred and eighty dollars of subscription money was outstanding.<sup>25</sup> It was decided that the Library Association would co-operate with the Historical Society and Emigration Society in sponsoring the 1858-1859 lecture season.<sup>26</sup> The *Times* reminded its readers that "being so situated and distant . . . from the great literary centres of the country . . . we are obliged to rely for instruction and amusement, upon the talent that we have in our midst."<sup>27</sup> The editor, however, felt that this was no disadvantage. He assured the readers that the talent was neither inferior, to that of the East, nor reluctant to exhibit itself.<sup>28</sup>

A third series of lectures was arranged. Albert G. Clarke discussed "Religion and Literature,"<sup>29</sup> and the Reverend H. W. Kuhns talked on "Mary, Queen of Scots."<sup>30</sup> Alfred D. Jones, the first postmaster of Omaha, lectured on "Aboriginal Customs,"<sup>31</sup> and was followed by W. Thomas Clarke who talked on the subject of "Poetry."<sup>32</sup> A large audience heard George W. Watson discuss "Lost Races and Their Monuments,"<sup>33</sup> and Judge Wakeley aroused the sentiments of the common folk with his address on "Andrew Jackson."<sup>34</sup> General Thayer continued with his "fine original thoughts and felicitous quotations" to a "large and appreciative audience."<sup>35</sup>

The large audience which had gathered at the Methodist Church to hear District Judge Augustus Hall of Bellevue was almost disappointed. The judge was delayed due to the collapse of a bridge. The lecture he delivered, however, proved to be of great interest to all. His subject was "The Destiny of Nebraska." The judge referred eloquently to the "gold mines" of the territory and the influence which such discoveries would exert on its future. He visualized in the drifts of sand and the beds of stone, which made the western part of the country so sterile, "a mine of wealth never to be exhausted."<sup>36</sup>

By the winter of 1859-1860, all was not well with the Library Association. The proceeds from the lectures were inadequate to sustain the library and reading room. The Panic of 1857 still held Omaha in its grip. A writer described the situation in general and the demise of the library as follows:

Man became poor, human nature settled itself into practising upon the rule of every man for himself, and the devil for the hindmost. The institution became the vehicle of private and personal rivalry and resentment, and finally, under the weight of circumstances, ceased to be a living thing among us.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the first Omaha Library Association went out of existence. It had lasted a little more than three years.<sup>38</sup> Some years later the editor of the *Omaha Weekly Herald* nostalgically recalled "the many evenings on which our Methodist Church was crowded by the patrons of the Library Association, listening to the men . . . who gave us intellectual enjoyment."<sup>39</sup> The Association sprang up quickly but was unable to survive in early Omaha due to its unstable financial backing, hard times, and dissension among the members.

#### NOTES

1. Territory of Nebraska. *Journal of the Council at the Third Regular Session of the General Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska* (Brownville, Nebraska: Robert W. Furnas, Territorial Printer, 1857), 23.
2. Territory of Nebraska. *Journal of the House of Representatives at the Third Session of the General Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska* (Brownville, Nebraska: Robert W. Furnas, Territorial Printer, 1857), 51.
3. The first Omaha Library Association (1857-1860) has been overlooked by Omaha historians. James W. Savage and John T. Bell, *History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska* (New York: Munsell and Co., 1894), 257, gave 1871 as the beginning of the movement to establish a library. Concurring in this assumption were historians Arthur C. Wakely, *Omaha: The Gate City and Douglas County, Nebraska* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1917, 295; Alfred Sorenson, *The Story of Omaha* (Omaha: National Printing Co., 1923), 638; and most recently, Richard Hewitt, *The History of Omaha 1854-1954* (n.p.: P. C. Doss and Co., 1954), 56.
4. *Omaha City Times*, June 18, 1857.
5. Sidney Ditzion, *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1947), 21-29.
6. *Omaha City Times*, June 18, 1857.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Omaha Times*, July 9, 1857.
9. *Omaha City Times*, June 18, 1857.

10. James M. Woolworth, *Nebraska in 1857* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1857), 95.
11. *Omaha Times*, December 30, 1857.
12. *Ibid.*, December 30, 1857.
13. *Ibid.*, January 13, 1858.
14. *Ibid.*, January 20, 1858.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, February 3, 1858.
17. *Ibid.*, February 16, 1858.
18. *Ibid.*, March 9, 1858.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, February 3, 1858.
21. *Ibid.*, March 31, 1858.
22. *Ibid.*, April 8, 1858.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, May 6, 1858.
25. *Ibid.*, October 21, 1858.
26. *Ibid.*, October 28, 1858.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, December 30, 1858.
30. *Ibid.*, January 20, 1859.
31. *Ibid.*, January 27, 1859.
32. *Ibid.*, February 3, 1859.
33. *Ibid.*, February 10, 1859.
34. *Ibid.*, February 17, 1859.
35. *Ibid.*, March 3, 1859.
36. *Ibid.*, February 21, 1859.
37. *Omaha Weekly Herald*, November 3, 1865.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*