



How Shall We Make Beatrice Grow!”—Clara Bewick Colby and the Beatrice Public Library Association in the 1870s

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Article Summary: For a young frontier town like Beatrice, a library wasn’t just about books. It was also a means for propagating social values, and it created pathways for women to exercise leadership in the community. The town’s first privately funded library faced challenges of censorship, public indifference, and competition from an unexpected rival.

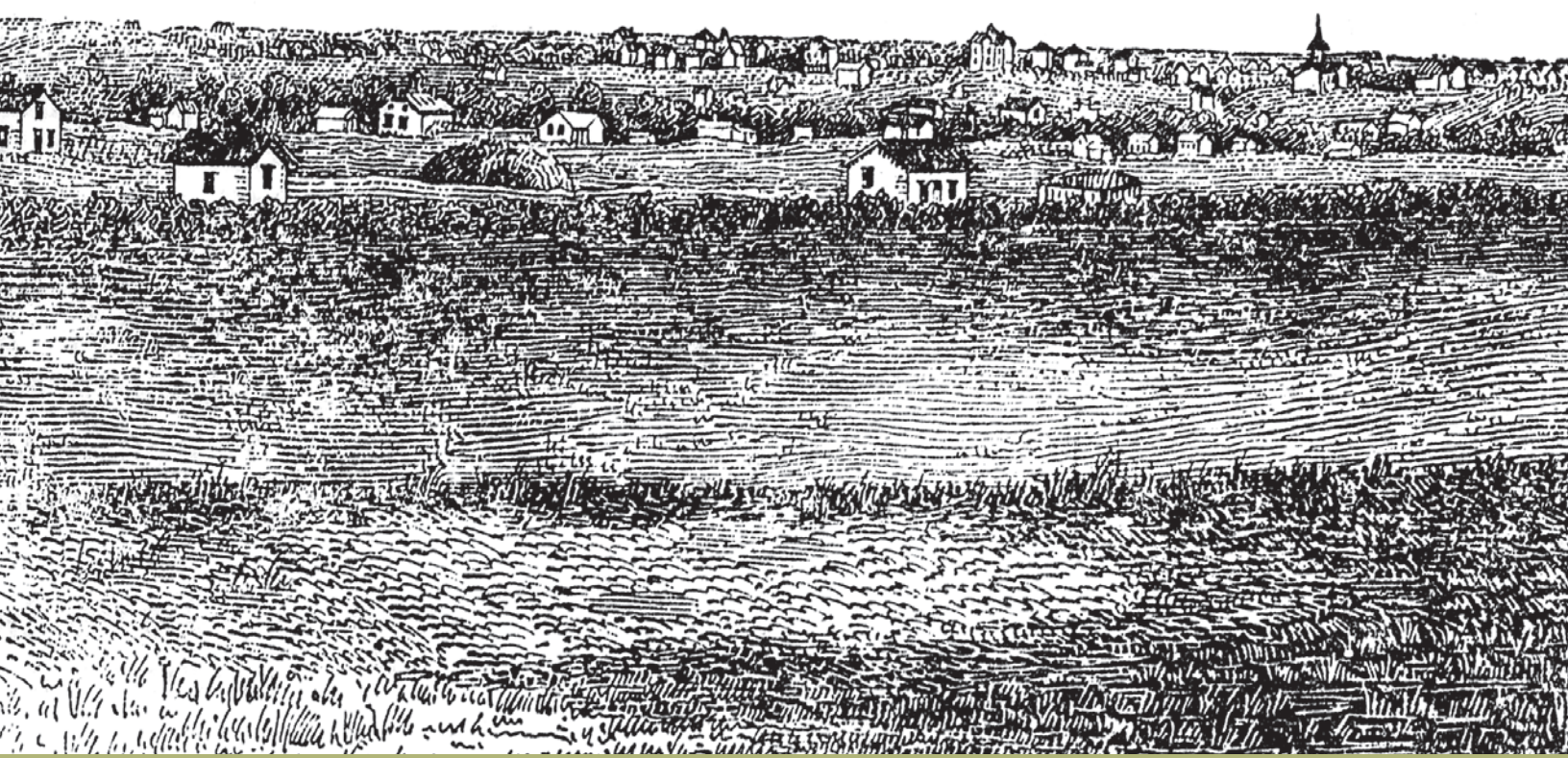
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Photographs / Images: Beatrice, as pictured in A T Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 1882; Clara Bewick Colby; article, “How shall we make Beatrice grow!” *Beatrice Express*, March 27, 1873; Leonard Colby, 1887; the Colbys’ house in Beatrice (from A T Andreas); Court Street, looking west from Fourth Street; advertisement for Colby & Sale, attorneys and counselors at law and real estate agents, *Beatrice Express*, April 3, 1873; view to the east from Fourth and Court streets; nameplate for the *Beatrice Express*; John B Finch; William Lamb



“How Shall We Make Beatrice Grow!”

*Clara Bewick Colby and the Beatrice
Public Library Association in the 1870s*

BY KRISTIN MAPEL BLOOMBERG



The decade of the 1870s was a period of enormous growth and prosperity for the city of Beatrice. Founded in 1857 in Gage County on the Big Blue River, the “Queen City of the Blue” grew slowly until the arrival of a reliable stage route in 1868, and rail in 1871. Organized as a city in 1872, by 1873 the population had increased to more than 1,000.¹ Occupying the county seat, Beatrice boasted its permanence in fine stone and brick buildings, upscale residences, and vigorous mercantile and industrial districts. Churches had taken root; the common school enrolled 260 pupils and was taught nine months of the year. The county courthouse and the land office for the southern portion of the state were located in town, and commerce and trade boomed. The production of lumber, coal, and flour employed many residents,

and the *Beatrice Express* boasted that citizens could patronize “six general stores, two drug stores, three hardware stores, two furniture stores, one agricultural depot, five blacksmith shops, two harness shops, two shoe shops, two jewelers, four milliners, six carpenter shops, two wagon shops, two tin shops, two butcher shops, one barber shop, one bakery, one brewery, two banks, two livery stables, half a dozen or more boarding houses, three restaurants and two saloons.”²

These businesses were not, as Nebraska historian A. T. Andreas explained, “built for temporary use by capitalists expecting to soon reap an abundant fortune and return in a few years to the East to enjoy it, but on the contrary, by men who have located here permanently, for the purpose of making this their home.”³ But permanent prosperity

Beatrice, Nebraska,
in A. T. Andreas,
*History of the State
of Nebraska* (1882)

for Beatrice also meant it would need to design itself as a place where the best women and men of this new America in the West would want to stay. Business, industry, and agriculture put food on the table, but left the improved mind hungry for more. Not surprisingly then, the wives of men intent on building business determined that Beatrice would have amenities to build the town's society and culture—and within a short period, there sprang up a variety of clubs and organizations designed to edify residents. Among those groups was one focused on establishing a public library.

As historians of libraries in the West have shown, public libraries were an important benchmark of respectability, especially in the emerging West in the years preceding the establishment of professional public librarianships and government-run public libraries.⁴ The social institution of the library reflected a community's progressive cultural values in that it provided democratic opportunities for recreation, self-improvement, and Americanization. Libraries were also seen as a civilizing influence and as a vehicle for civic reform—especially during the early years of the temperance era when many positioned libraries as an institution that could support moral order and serve as an antidote to the scourge of liquor and other less wholesome pursuits.

Clara Bewick Colby.
Wisconsin State Historical
Society, WHi-26612



Women's associations served an important role in culture-building and reform throughout the West during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era; however, in comparison to historical work on other cultural institutions, there have been few studies of what historian Paula D. Watson notes as women's "massive, nationwide influence on the growth of one of our most important public institutions, especially outside of the urban areas of the northeast."⁵ Similarly, historian Anne Firor Scott has called for an examination of women's roles in the early years of the public library movement in order to better understand "the tremendous social change represented by the education of women, the development of women's organizations, and then the movement of women into public political activity."⁶ In other words, educated, civic-minded women used public libraries for building community and fostering municipal pride through cultural enrichment. Libraries were also a means for propagating social values and creating pathways for women to enter into civic dialogue and larger social roles. The public library of Beatrice fits this model; as a result, the history of the earliest years of public library activity in Beatrice is best told by beginning with the association of women who were instrumental to its founding and development. Especially important is one woman at the center of that activity: Clara Bewick Colby, Beatrice's first librarian, whose vision and volunteerism sustained library activity during the 1870s.

Clara Bewick Colby and her husband Leonard Wright Colby, both recent graduates of the University of Wisconsin, newly married, and intent on building their lives in a prosperous and progressive western town, emigrated to Beatrice in the fall of 1872 where Leonard established a law practice.⁷ Within months of her arrival, Clara Colby and a group of like-minded women joined together "for the purpose of taking action with regard to the formation of a public library."⁸ These women represented town leadership from both pioneer families and newer elites. Included were the wives of some of the earliest Beatrice residents such as William Bradt, John Fitch Kinney, I. N. McConnell, and Ford Roper—men who were active in both government and business. Indeed, the city's progenitor Kinney was responsible for naming the town "Beatrice" in honor of his eldest daughter. Also included at that meeting were the wives of more recent residents such as J. E. Smith, president of Smith Brothers Bank; and W. H. Somers, who was active in real estate and later receiver for the U.S. Land Office.⁹

Assembled at the Smith residence, the women chose the name "Ladies Library Association of

Beatrice,” establishing for themselves the task of soliciting books, periodical subscriptions, and association memberships from the community.¹⁰ Clara Colby co-wrote the association’s constitution and by-laws, which was approved within two weeks of the ladies’ first meeting. There, the women outlined an expansive mission, stating as their object “to establish and maintain a public library, a free reading-room, and a museum of antiquities and natural history.”¹¹ Thus it was understood that the library would serve as a hub for social and intellectual life, and as a depository for classical and current texts. In addition, the women would promote cultural activities through lectures and other edifying entertainments. Officers consisted of president Mrs. Smith; first and second vice presidents Mesdames Roper and Kinney; secretary Mrs. Colby; treasurer Mrs. McConnell; and the yet-to-be-elected librarian, whose duties included taking charge of the library, leasing books, keeping detailed collection records, enforcing borrowing rules, tracking fines, and reporting patron scofflaws to the treasurer.¹² Within the month the women decided it was in the association’s best interest to become an incorporated body duly recorded with the county clerk under “The Library Association of Beatrice,” naming Mesdames Bradt, Roper, and Somers as trustees, and Colby as clerk.¹³

Recruiting Members and Materials

The association had secured the labor of its founding members; however, to truly establish a useful library it needed materials, funds, and patrons, which would be obtained through an expanded organizational list. Membership in the association was initially open to “any lady” who paid a subscription fee of one dollar. Wives of local clergy and newspaper editors were presented with certificates of membership—and although a rationale was not reflected in the minutes, one assumes these certificates were issued gratis in the association’s effort to reach out to socially prominent residents and garner support for the library.¹⁴ While the association was ostensibly ladies only, their husbands participated in fundraising and other events, and both men and women were encouraged to become paid library patrons.

Their organizational charter in place, Colby and her colleagues began canvassing for memberships and book donations. Their first stop was the office of the *Express*, which happily endorsed their cause:

We had the pleasure of receiving a call, Tuesday, from Mrs. J. E. Smith and Mrs. L. W. Colby, whose mission was to solicit aid for the public library. They were very hopeful of succeeding

HOW SHALL WE MAKE BEATRICE GROW!

Editors Express:

This is a question the citizens are now asking in good earnest. The project for a handsome park has been forcibly advocated in the columns of our live *EXPRESS*,

in obtaining enough books and ducats to open the library within a short time, and we are of the opinion that their hope is well founded. The intellectually inclined, enterprising people of Beatrice have too high an appreciation of the value to this town of a public library, where the best of reading may be obtained for nothing, including all the newspapers published in the state, besides many other published in other states, and where, too, the privilege of listening to lectures by the distinguished men and women whom it is the intention of our lady managers to induce hither may be enjoyed—we say our citizens have too high an appreciation of these things, and too much gallantry, to allow these ladies to turn from any of their doors unburdened by a generous donation. . . . So mote it be.¹⁵

Their efforts paid off, raising that first day nearly \$100 worth of donated books, \$62 in cash, and “promises of books and money from some who were not then prepared to indicate the value of their subscription.”¹⁶

In their earliest arguments for support, association members embellished the boosterism already deployed by Beatrice advocates to include the promise of attracting emigrants interested in building city culture as well as business and industry. Supporters positioned the library on the middle ground between the two usual stations for self improvement—economic success or spiritual prosperity—by offering a third avenue for betterment that threatened neither business nor the Bible; indeed, proponents argued it would enhance both. Note, for example, this letter to the editor of the *Beatrice Express*, entitled “How Shall We Make Beatrice Grow!”:

But do we not need something more than either outward attractions or facilities for prosperous business, to give tone to the community while still in its youth, and to bring in more of those of whom we can never have enough, i.e., people who ask what opportunities the place affords for mental culture? Let us not forget that we must have these opportunities if we would attract the class of which we speak, to say

“How shall we make Beatrice grow! This is a question the citizens are now asking in good earnest...”

Beatrice Express,
March 27, 1873.



Leonard Colby in 1887.
NSHS RG2141-469

nothing of the necessities of those who are already here.

One great means of gaining this end is a *good Public Library*. Certainly no community in these days, can take such a rank as we believe the people of Beatrice wish for it, without such an institution. We *must* have it sooner or later. Why not now, when we can help to mould [*sic*] the community to a fondness for mental culture, and draw that element which is so necessary everywhere, but especially in a new country, where the pursuit of material prosperity is liable to become over-eager?

... let our citizens remember that these two things—the spiritual culture of the gospel, and the mental culture based on it (and we know the promoters of the library scheme desire only this) lie at the basis of our civilization and make it what it is. Let them not give less to their churches, but let them help the other also.¹⁷

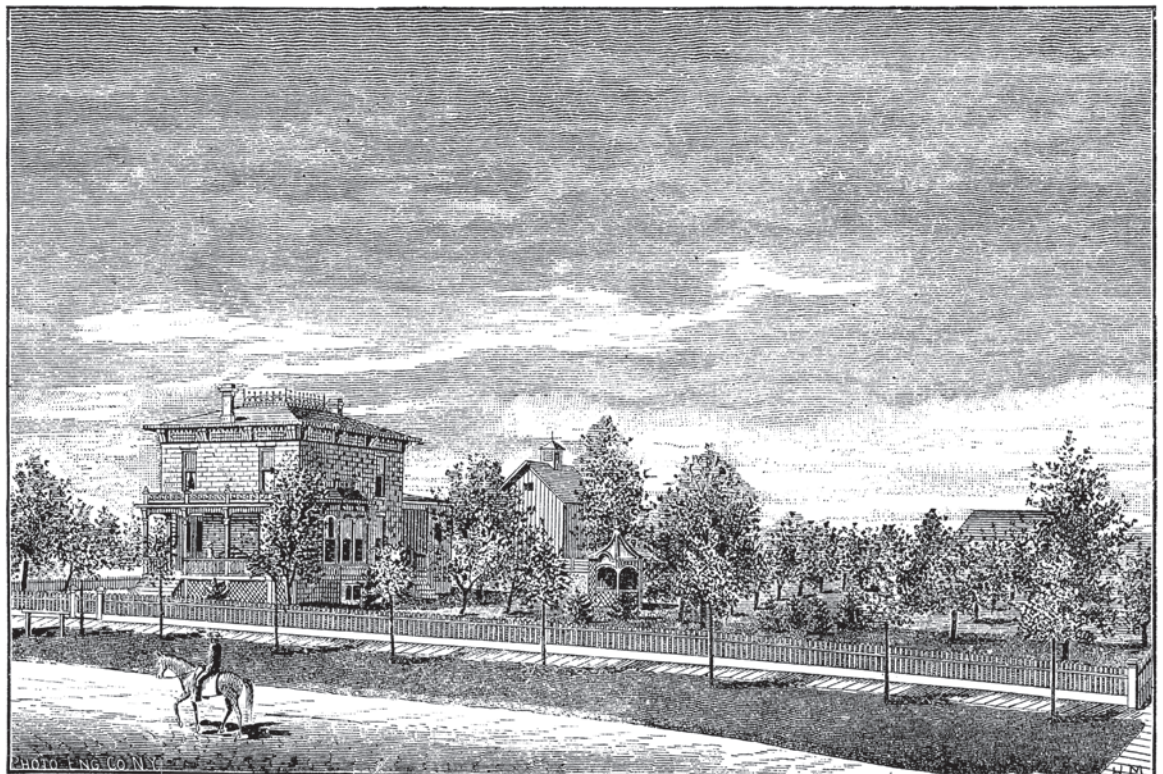
For supporters, the library was a social institution key to creating town respectability and status, for attracting the “right class” of people to the community, and for shaping the direction of social culture—especially to temper the materialism of the age. And surely, like-minded residents eager to attract those of a similar class would be eager to support it.

The Library Opens

Through the spring and early summer months of 1873, the ladies of the association procured materials and memberships with the goal of opening the library in the fall. Funds from a lavish literary entertainment boosted the treasury to more than \$80.¹⁸ Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Colby secured a donation of 130 books from Beatrice residents; donors were carefully noted in each volume. In consultation with association leadership, Colby placed an order for another 80 volumes from W. B. Keen, Cooke, and Co. of Chicago, who promised a 25 percent price reduction on their order.¹⁹

But the library’s collection development proved to be controversial. Clara Colby’s grandmother, Clara Chilton, with whom she was in regular correspondence, received numerous updates from her granddaughter on the progress of the library. Always free with her opinion, Chilton scolded, “I hope the selection of books are wisely chosen, and care taken not to circulate those Infidel books that abound so much in the present day which undermine the scriptures.”²⁰ Seemingly not satisfied with the Colbys’ response she wrote again to say, “be careful that you get first Class books, there are many too many which corrupt and lead the mind from God and are not for his Glory.”²¹ Certainly grandmother Chilton was not alone in her opinions.

Leonard and Clara Colby’s house in Beatrice, as pictured in Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*. While the book featured engravings of neat towns and prosperous farms, period photos show a less polished reality (right page). Residents like the Colbys were eager to transform the young town into a well-cultured city.



Libraries were often politicized sites of social conflict, forcing their founders to tread carefully.

So what was in the library's original collection? In addition to a selection of regional newspapers and contemporary periodicals, Clara Colby's report to the *Express* noted the library's original collection included "many of the most popular and high-toned works of fiction of the day," including fourteen volumes of works by Charles Dickens, another fourteen volumes of Sir Walter Scott's "Waverley" novels, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, James Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking" tales; biographies by Washington Irving, including those on George Washington, Christopher Columbus, and Mohammed; a variety of volumes by modern British essayists; as well as Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*.²² This was a list of works on which grandmother Chilton and doubtless others had mixed opinions. Chilton specifically noted the addition of Darwin's volume, writing: "I find your library affair is successful but disapprove of some of the selections, the present reading matter for the young is not at all calculated to improve their minds or lead them one step heavenward to know the way . . . Darwin for instance is not so dangerous (at least not to me) because no person with any sense would believe his dogmas, but the more crafty works of Satan are to be avoided."²³ Apparently not

everyone felt this way on the matter of Darwin. It eventually went missing from the library, prompting Clara Colby to place a notice in the *Express* requesting its return.²⁴

In spite of the association's strong beginning, as the library's opening date drew near, community interest and support faltered, threatening the association's ability to procure sufficient collection materials and volunteer labor. What was more, there appeared to be a lingering attitude that the library was reserved only for a certain group of citizens—not surprising considering the gendered nature of the association and the sharp class divisions found between its leadership and the majority of the Beatrice population. Hoping to dispel those suspicions, Colby penned a letter to the *Express*:

The ladies that are engaged in this enterprise ask contributions the more willingly because they are not for a private object, or one entitled to the interest of only a portion of the citizens, but for a public institution in which every man, woman, and child will have ownership, and which every citizen interested in the growth and prosperity of our beautiful town is bound to encourage. For we all know that people, before deciding in what Western town to settle discuss not only the natural and material advantages of a place, but those also of a social, religious, and

Court Street, looking west from Fourth Street, Beatrice, 1874. NSHS RG4396-13-68



literary character, and the most desirable class of people and those who will contribute the most to the success of the town when here, will be quite as much influenced to settle here by a flourishing public library, as well as by an artesian well and a good supply of coal. What we lack in numbers usually supposed to be requisite for the support of a library we must make up in energy and self-sacrifice, and it will add no little to our reputation abroad as an enterprising people if we succeed.²⁵

Her mixed arguments, however, tangled her call for contributions and volunteers with both booster rhetoric and a new argument that the library was a democratic institution open to families of any station—regardless of sex, including children—who were interested in affiliating themselves with “the most desirable class of people.” In doing so, Colby may have exacerbated the irritation of some residents and closed off potential identification with the library’s mission by those who did not see themselves as fitting into her vision of the community’s social, religious, or cultural character; she may even have offended some who saw themselves as among “the most desirable,” but not particularly

serious conversation about a western town’s amenities, noting that the business of a library would bring opportunities for women to step out of the church basement into a society focused on mental culture and civic volunteerism. And while this picture was attractive to the women of the association, it might not have been to others.

Yet, Clara Colby’s plea connected with enough people so that an additional five dozen volumes were secured, topping off the library’s collection at 273 volumes. With a sufficient collection in place, the library opened at the end of October 1873 in the offices of Colby & Sale, owned by Clara Colby’s husband and his business partner Linus Sale. The Colbys believed support of the library was important, and by housing it in Leonard’s office, no charge for rent or winter fuel would be made.²⁶ Hours were 3:00-5:00 p.m. Wednesdays, and 6:00-8:00 p.m. Saturdays.²⁷ And in light of the fact that the library was housed in the offices of Colby & Sale, it was only natural that Clara Colby be elected librarian, a position she occupied for a majority of the time the library was under the control of the association.

Ticket Subscription Plan

While the library was an enterprise designed to serve the public good, the association did not see its work as charity; instead, it used a subscription business model designed to identify library patrons, protect its inventory, raise capital to procure additional library materials, and pay expenses. To this end, the association designed a comprehensive management plan that was initially based on a dollar’s membership granting members a “library ticket” valid for one year. This entitled the holder to withdraw one book at a time for two weeks, while overdue fees were set at ten cents per week.²⁸ Within the year, the ticket system had been revised to allow for more flexible ticket purchase plans, including a fifty-cent option designed to last three months, as well as an installment plan allowing patrons to pay an additional ten cents each time they borrowed a book, thus allowing them to secure a second library ticket and the ability to borrow two books. “Strangers” were welcome to borrow books without a ticket at ten cents each—provided they paid a deposit equal to the value of the book taken, which was refunded upon the book’s return. An important adjustment to the rules governing renewals were special provisions designed to assist library patrons residing outside of town. To that end, while others needed to apply for renewal during the initial borrowing period and show just

Beatrice Express,
April 3, 1873

L. W. COLBY.
L. B. SALE.

COLBY & SALE,

ATTORNEYS AND COUNSELLORS AT

A LAW, and Real Estate Agents

Soldiers

claims located, taxes paid for non-residents,

and prompt attention given to collections,

Beatrice, Nebraska.

30 tf

interested in community activities beyond business, agriculture, or government.

Furthermore, Colby’s argument exposed the association’s class-based assumptions regarding the availability of leisure and the choice of how to use it in that they assumed a preference for using free time for secular study or purely recreational reading. And by making the library open to the public, the association did hope to promulgate that value, possibly ruffling the feathers of more conservative residents. Gender also subtly underscored her rhetorical position. After reading her letter, one might imagine an educated husband and wife engaged in



cause, “a special exception” was made “in favor of parties living at a distance” for whom the librarian renewed the entry “without application.”²⁹

By 1877, library ticket prices were adjusted once more to reflect an option for a life membership set at ten dollars, while regular memberships were raised to two dollars each year. As the *Beatrice Express* explained, “while this may appear like a step in the wrong direction, it is in reality intended to benefit the public. The library relies for its growth entirely upon the sale of tickets, and every dollar so obtained is devoted to the purchase of books; so if more was to be paid for the privilege of taking books, more is added to the public fund, and thus the library is made more worthy of patronage.”³⁰ However, the increase in membership fees may also have been due to the fact that a number of books had gone missing—as the *Express* also noted, “All persons retaining library books are earnestly requested to return them at once, as several valuable volumes are kept from circulating, through the forgetfulness of the holders.”³¹ Later that same year, the association’s minutes noted the annual membership remained at one dollar; however, the second dollar would remain on deposit against which late fines would be charged. This, too, could be paid on installment by putting one dollar on deposit and paying ten cents for each book borrowed.³²

Plagued by insufficient funds, the association found it difficult to maintain the library anywhere other than the subsidized location provided by the Colbys. What was more, supporters were vexed by the task of procuring—and affording—property sufficient to house both the library and a free reading room, making the goal of establishing a museum of antiquities and natural history impossible. Years of drought and grasshopper plague meant hard times for everyone, including Colby & Sale, who dissolved their partnership in the summer of 1874, causing the library to close temporarily as well.³³ The association briefly considered and swiftly rejected the idea of removing the library to the newly established Lady’s Temperance Room, and with Clara Colby occupying the president’s chair, chose instead to focus on soliciting additional subscriptions to raise capital and continue the search for property suitable for both a library and reading room.³⁴

Several weeks of successful ticket sales—and the fact that Leonard Colby quickly reorganized his business and was thus able to continue subsidizing the library—saw the library reopen on October 1, 1874, with an explicit invitation for both women and men to join the association. In announcing the library’s relaunch, the *Express* underscored its successful first year by observing, “the Library has

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been of great service to the public during the past year. Over 650 loans of books have been made, beside many books consulted for reference. This fact shows that the Library is a necessity." The collection now contained more than 300 volumes, with a plan to add travel narratives, contemporary fiction, and histories. In addition, the association planned a special effort "to procure some books suitable for boys."³⁵ For now, the library appeared to be on solid ground, and the association turned its focus toward opening a reading room.

The Reading Room Opens

A combined library and reading room opened in January 1878. Until then, the library had remained under the auspices of the Colbys—housed in Leonard's offices with Clara serving as librarian. Thus it was no surprise to find the improved library and new reading room established one door north of the latest offices for Colby & Hazlett, renting property owned by Colby & Hazlett.³⁶ Renovations were completed by members of the association, led by Clara Colby, chair of the furnishing committee. Organized with the reading room in front and the library books housed in a second room, association members donated labor and materials for plastering the walls and building bookshelves, and painting and papering had been completed by Colby & Hazlett. Some furnishings had been purchased using association funds, including a desk, chairs, lamps, curtains and a tablecloth; donations by members included a clock, a shelf on which to mount it, and two framed prints. But the opening of the library and reading room was more than a community effort—it was a family one: Clara and Leonard Colby personally donated a rug, three framed prints, and a long reading table; Clara's sister Mary Bridges donated a second rug; their grandmother Clara Chilton donated a framed engraving.³⁷

So how was it that the association was able to achieve its goal of opening a combined library and reading room? First, they officially abandoned the ladies-only organizational style to better reflect association stakeholders, which included men.

To this end, the fall prior to opening the reading room the association took the name "The Public Library Association of Beatrice," and struck all female pronouns from the constitution, replacing them with more generic male ones. Men were now legitimately able to be elected officers of the association.³⁸ Second, the association continued to build their collection, which culminated in the spring of 1877 with a large donation of books and documents by U.S. Senator Algernon Paddock.³⁹ But most important, the association had worked diligently to secure memberships by raising the profile of the potential social good of a library and reading room.

The Colbys were instrumental in this process. In December 1876, Leonard Colby purchased the *Beatrice Express* and in the year preceding the opening of the reading room, threw the full weight of the paper behind their cause.⁴⁰ Clara Colby took point, researching successful models such as the public library and reading room at Lincoln. This was disseminated by means of a lengthy signed article in the pages of the *Express*, where she remarked that in contrast to Beatrice, the Lincoln facilities had only been open since 1876 and charged a much higher patron fee compared to the Beatrice library, which boasted a superior collection at a lower membership fee—including the purchase of more new books.⁴¹

But Clara Colby's argument for a reading room deployed a new argument—a moral one—which was not surprising considering the temperance fever that had taken Nebraska following the arrival of anti-liquor activists. "Will not our business men and all those interested in the preservation of good morals, take the matter in hand and assist in establishing a reading room?" she asked.⁴² The editor of the *Express*—presumably Leonard Colby—piled on additional arguments in the following week's issue, carefully weaving together the community effort of the enterprise, the democratic nature of collection use, and the enlarged moral benefits of the library to Beatrice society, all sure to result in civic pride:

A number of the enterprising ones of our city have expressed themselves lately on the subject



of a free reading room, and ventured to hope that something might be done even this winter toward establishing one. We could doubtless sustain one here much cheaper than they can at Lincoln, and we might be satisfied with a small beginning. The State papers could immediately be procured free of charge, and if the people of this town who take more magazines and papers than they care to keep, would either place them in the reading room, or else give the money, or a part of it, spent for them to the reading room fund, they would have just as much reading matter, and would have the satisfaction of contributing towards the preservation of good morals and the improvement of the public. Suppose ten families in Beatrice take the *Inter Ocean*, it is in all cases cast aside when read, and only the families so taking it and the *Chicago* editors are benefited. If the money were used in subscriptions for a reading room, the *Inter Ocean* and nine other prominent papers could be procured for the same money. Every man and woman in town would have the opportunity of reading them, and the papers would be kept on file for future reference. What we need is a commodious and attractive room, where the reading matter could be placed, and we should soon see the youth dropping in from the streets, perhaps at first from curiosity, or to look at the pictures, but soon to acquire a taste for solid reading, and dislike for idle longing and doubtful pleasures. The head quarters once provided, the interest and pride in the reading room, as an institution of our city, would rapidly increase, and our public library would then rest on a solid foundation.⁴³

Gone now were arguments focusing on attracting the “most desirable class of people.” Instead, the Colbys shifted to a position that addressed the library as a medium for building community ties and as a vehicle for civic reform.

This change in approach served the association well, so the Colbys fine-tuned their argument to leverage the bully pulpit of the *Express* to position the reading room as an enterprise in service to the Temperance cause. To that end, the article “Beatrice Public Library and Temperance” appeared in the pages of the *Express*. Earlier class-based arguments regarding leisure were leveled to play on the reform sympathies of Beatrice residents by deploying the argument that idleness of young men incubates vice—a social problem the library and reading room was positioned to solve:

Now to the citizens of this town who wish to save young men from forming bad habits, we want to say a word, which will also be a word for one of our public institutions whose interests we have most dearly at heart. When you win people away from the saloons what will you do with them? By *people* we mean *young men*, for we do not apprehend that men with the settled habit of forsaking the duties and comforts of domestic life for very questionable pleasures, can ever be turned from their evil courses by anything less than a moral earthquake; but what will you furnish the young men, many of them strangers, or without friends in the city, in place of the bright warm welcome that the saloons offer? Is it strange that the lights, and the music and good fellowship, and the magnetism of society entice the boys from their aimless loafing in the streets, or from the loneliness of their dismal and solitary rooms?⁴⁴

But the argument didn’t stop there. It was expanded to include all who saw themselves as Christian humanitarians eager to serve their fellow man, declaring, “It is our duty as a Christian community to provide a public place of resort when all who wish to meet friends socially or to pass a waiting hour, or to find improvement and self culture, shall be welcome. With an amusement hall and a reading room thrown open to the public, who can doubt that the influence of the saloons would very largely decrease, and that the tone of our society would be vastly elevated both morally and intellectually.”⁴⁵

For the Colbys, though, libraries were also about civic pride in action, and their editorial functioned both as a call to arms and as a scolding to others who were not—as they were—willing to sacrifice for the public good:

Of the large number of people who will assent to our propositions, how many have the good of this community so much at heart that they are willing to make some personal sacrifice to that end? Actions, not words, are what avail in all attempts to reform the world, and despite the hard time we can have a free reading room here just as soon as the good people are willing to take hold of the matter in earnest.

The Public Library in its inception was very materially aided by the then editors of the *EXPRESS* with money, books, and influence. And this paper considering the library an institution which would materially aid the business interests of the town has always endeavored to

“Who can doubt that the influence of the saloons would very largely decrease, and that the tone of our society would be vastly elevated both morally and intellectually?”

present it to the favorable notice of the public. The present editor has for nearly four years given the Public Library rent, fuel, and light, and attendance, to accommodate those for whom the regular hours were inconvenient. This is said not as a matter of boasting or to place the service performed in any other light than as a pleasant duty owed to our city and the cause of morality, but simply to assure the public of the hearty co-operation they may expect from the EXPRESS whenever they feel prompted to take hold of the library and extend its scope and usefulness toward the mark which its founders had in view.⁴⁶

The plea worked, and a sufficient number of residents took hold of the idea of a public library and reading room so that its opening revitalized the association. The library and reading room were now open each evening (excluding Sundays) from 7:00 to 10:00 p.m. as well as Wednesdays and Saturdays from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. What was more, the association's treasury was plump enough to hire an assistant librarian at \$4 per week to lend a hand to patrons during the reading room's expanded open hours.⁴⁷ In addition, the association was able to move on an ambitious lecture program. In January 1878 the association secured popular author and humorist Eli Perkins, and reported the following month that noted educator Helen Potter, suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and General Judson Kilpatrick of Civil War fame had all been engaged for the lecture series.⁴⁸

Temperance Troubles and the Demise of the Association

No sooner had the association achieved success by opening the reading room, than their jubilation was cut short. Trouble brewed in that the Red Ribbon temperance movement had mobilized Nebraska residents after anti-liquor activist John B. Finch arrived in the fall of 1877, organizing Red Ribbon temperance clubs that were encouraged to establish libraries or reading rooms as suitable replacements for saloons. Spreading across the state from his headquarters in Lincoln, Finch's ideas caught fire among Nebraskans, who established a network of fifty thousand club members who subscribed \$20,000 to furnish reading rooms around the state.⁴⁹

To their pique, the association learned of "the fact that persons wearing the Red Ribbon were planning to organize a club and start [a] reading room"⁵⁰ just one month following the opening of

the library and reading room. The *Express* noted the competition as well, marking the fact that nearly \$200 had been subscribed on behalf of the Beatrice Red Ribbon Club for a new reading room. "We hope this will not be done," the *Express* declared. "If the present reading room is not sufficient let it be made so with the funds that have been subscribed, instead of inaugurating a new enterprise to engender ill feeling and jealousy. The ladies who have worked faithfully for a number of years, and chief among these is Mrs. Colby—to put our library in good condition and establish a reading room are entitled to greater credit than they have received and should be allowed to share in the harvest that has ripened during the past fortnight."⁵¹

In a spirit of civic collaboration, the association hoped to entice the Red Ribbon Club to "unite and cooperate with the reading room already established."⁵² Dispatched to bring an offer of union to the nascent Red Ribbon Club—and maybe to apprise themselves of the club's intentions as well—a delegation of association members including Clara Colby attended the organizational meeting of the Beatrice Red Ribbon Club, which that evening adopted a constitution presented by Finch himself who had come down from Lincoln. Clara Colby was elected to the club's executive committee; another committee was established to meet with the officers of the Library Association to discuss the possibility of establishing a union reading room.⁵³

The following week, the Library Association received members of the Red Ribbon Club, who proposed this plan: "The Red Ribbon Club would procure a reading room and retain the sole management of it. The Library Association were [*sic*] to turn over to the Red Ribbon Club all the property pertaining to the public reading room, place the public library in the Red Ribbon reading room, and bear half the expenses of carrying on the latter. The books belonging to the public library were to be loaned and managed according to the rules of the Library Association." Furthermore, the Red Ribbon Club would reimburse the Library Association for the expense of obtaining periodicals that had already been procured for the public reading room.⁵⁴ But the Library Association felt the club's plan was not acceptable, and voted to continue negotiations.

The Red Ribbon Club, however, refused to move beyond its original proposal. In frustration, the Library Association forwarded this counter proposal:

The Public Library Association would cordially invite and welcome all who have



John B. Finch, founder of Lincoln's Red Ribbon Club in 1877. *Nation's Anchor* (Lincoln), February 22, 1896.

subscribed for a reading room, whether of the “Temple of Honor” of the “Good Templars,” of the “Red Ribbon” or of any other society, sect, or denomination, who are interested in the cause of temperance, religion, or morality and think that these objects will be promoted by a public library and reading-room, to become members of the Public Library Association and devote its funds and books to those objects in a public reading room and library under such name as will best promote the interests of the Association.⁵⁵

This proposition, signed by the association subcommittee of Leonard Colby, J. E. Cobbey, and W. J. Pemberton, received no action from the Red Ribbon Club. As a result, Clara Colby, J. E. Cobbey and W. S. George were empowered by the association to attend a meeting of the Red Ribbon Club and try to negotiate a satisfactory plan for union.⁵⁶

Sensing it had the upper hand, the Red Ribbon Club stalled. In the meantime, the *Express*—no longer owned by Leonard Colby—jumped into the fray and proposed that the association and the club take advantage of newly passed legislation authorizing “incorporated towns and cities to establish and maintain free libraries and reading rooms.” To this end, the editors of the *Express* published a lengthy summary of the act, noting, “We have not consulted with any of the officers of the Library Association in regard to such a plan, but we believe that they would be willing to have the present library and reading room merged into a similar enterprise under the control of the city government, where everyone could be benefited, ‘without money and without price.’ What say you citizens?”⁵⁷

Apparently Beatrice citizens chose to say very little, preferring instead to patronize both or neither reading rooms. Through the course of the spring and the summer, each side dug in, refusing to take action on either the proposals for unity made by their competition or on that made by the *Express*. Over time, the Red Ribbon Club’s competition increased, especially in that under the patronage of influential Beatrice resident William Lamb, the club’s reading room—complete with an organ—“became a popular place for spending evenings.”⁵⁸ The association’s library, for the time being, kept its reading room open afternoons and evenings as well.⁵⁹

But the fate of the association’s library had been sealed. In October 1878, rapidly dwindling financial support and competition from the Red Ribbon Club’s reading room forced the Library

Association to make the drastic decision to abandon its subscription library and attempt to place it in the hands of the city. To that end, the association recalled all its books and offered the complete collection—as well as the library furniture—to the Beatrice City Council, hoping it would assume financial responsibility for the library and reading room, which carried an indebtedness of about \$100.⁶⁰ The city council refused; in a last-ditch effort to keep the library afloat, the association scrambled to find cheaper rooms. Eventually space was found at the back of Sower & Shell’s Land Office. Under these conditions the library was reopened in early November.⁶¹

Of the total debt yet to be paid upon the library’s removal to Sower & Shell’s, more than half of it was due to Clara’s Grandmother Chilton, who had covered the \$50 deficit on the association’s lecture fund. Colby & Hazlett claimed the library furniture in lieu of remaining rent, yet debt remained.⁶² The struggling library limped along, and by soliciting donations and raising funds through entertainments during the winter, the debt was eased and remaining bills paid. The library closed shortly thereafter, and the Colbys removed the books to their home. The final minutes of the association were entered May 24, 1879, where one of the few items of business was the payment of \$19.56—the entire balance of the treasury—to the assistant librarian.⁶³ For a time, Clara Colby operated the library out of her home; however, this soon proved unworkable, and the library was closed altogether.⁶⁴ Somewhat ironically, the reading room sponsored by the Red Ribbon Club closed shortly after the demise of the association’s library and reading room when Lamb had an opportunity to rent his property to a profitable enterprise.⁶⁵

Conclusion

While Clara Colby’s original enterprise failed, her careful maintenance of the association’s collection resulted in what would ultimately form the nucleus of a permanent public library. Under the patronage of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, a third version of a public library and reading room was launched in the 1880s, and in January 1882, Clara Colby was convinced to loan 384 volumes of the Library Association’s books to the WCTU library.⁶⁶ The WCTU maintained control of this library until 1893, when it was “disposed” of by the Union in light of the fact that it “had grown to be an elephant on the hands of the Union, crippling it seriously in Dept. work.”⁶⁷ This time, with the support of business leaders, the WCTU was able




William Lamb, an influential Beatrice citizen, provided space for the Red Ribbon Club’s reading room, which rivaled that of the Beatrice Library Association.
Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*.

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to successfully lobby the Beatrice City Council and establish a free public library. Thus in November 1893, the Public Library of Beatrice, Nebraska, became a municipal enterprise governed by a city library board.⁶⁸

It wasn't until the public library was truly public—that is, a governmental affair—that it became permanent. Colby's thesis that a public library would serve as a beacon for mental culture and progressive society was flawed perhaps in that it held true for only a small percentage of the population. While the idea that a library and reading room could be marshaled in service of temperance carried further, it too, failed for the same reason. As a result, the story of the Public Library Association in the 1870s is a story about the idealism of young, educated emigrants to Nebraska and their inability to truly connect their ideals to a larger audience.

While the association's history is less of a triumphalist narrative and more of a story of the harsh realities of economics and social politics that could confound the idealism of the optimistic urban elite of the post-Civil War West, it does reveal a number of successes. For example, Clara Colby and the women of the association were able to work within socially approved roles as guardians of culture and morality in order to achieve some public power and promote their values of cultural enrichment, municipal pride, social unity, and civic reform through the public library and reading room. In addition, women like Colby gained knowledge of how to effectively collaborate with men on a public enterprise, and in doing so, learned valuable lessons about how to work in the crucible of small-town politics. 

NOTES

¹ "Beatrice Nebraska," *Beatrice Express*, May 29, 1873.

² Ibid.

³ A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), 900.

⁴ See, for example, Elaine M. Doak, "Books Were Basic: Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory, Public Libraries, 22 April 1889-23 May 1903," *Journal of the West*, 30.3 (July 1991): 35-44; Daniel Goldstein, "The Spirit of an Age: Iowa Public Libraries and Professional Librarians and Solutions to Society's Problems, 1890-1940," *Libraries and the Cultural Record*, 38.3 (2003): 214-35; Leslie A. Manning, "The Public Library in the American West: A Bibliographic Essay," *Journal of the West*, 30.3 (July 1991): 90-91; Louise Jackson and Michael Day, "The Wyoming Literary and Library Association, 1870-1878," *Journal of the West*, 30.3 (July 1991): 14-24; Joanne E. Passet, "Bringing the Public Library Gospel to the American West," *Journal of the West*, 30.3 (July 1991): 45-52; and Suzanne M. Stauffer, "In Their Own Image: The

Public Library Collection as a Reflection of Its Donors," *Libraries and the Cultural Record*, 42.4 (2007): 387-408.

⁵ Paula D. Watson, "Founding Mothers: The Contribution of Women's Organizations to Public Library Development in the United States," *The Library Quarterly*, 64.3 (1994): 238.

⁶ Anne Firor Scott, "Women and Libraries," *The Journal of Library History*, 21.2 (1986): 404. See also Joanne E. Passet, *Cultural Crusaders: Women Librarians in the American West 1900-1917* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), as well as Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

⁷ See *Beatrice Express*, Sept. 26, 1872, and Oct. 17, 1872. The Colbys were married in Madison, Wisconsin, on June 23, 1871.

⁸ Minutes of Feb. 22, 1873. Constitution and Minutes of the Ladies' Library Association of Beatrice, Nebraska. Beatrice Public Library, Beatrice, Nebraska (hereafter Constitution and Minutes).

⁹ According to Laureen Riedesel, the current public librarian of Beatrice, John Fitch Kinney and his family resided in Beatrice c. 1870-1873 before settling in Nebraska City (Laureen Riedesel, personal interview by the author, Aug. 12, 2010). See also *Beatrice Express* for June 12, 1873. Interestingly, the Smiths, Sommers, and Colbys all arrived in 1872—see biographical profiles in Andreas. Unfortunately, the author was unable to determine the first names of many of these women, or the current occupations of several husbands of the women at that meeting due to the fact that Colby recorded their identity only as, for example, "Mrs. Norton," making these subjects difficult to research.

¹⁰ Minutes of Feb. 22, 1873, Constitution and Minutes.

¹¹ Adopted Mar. 8, 1873, Constitution and Minutes.

¹² Article 2, Section 6; Minutes of Feb. 22, 1873. Constitution and Minutes.

¹³ Minutes of Mar. 18 and Apr. 1, 1873. Constitution and Minutes.

¹⁴ Article 3, "Membership." Constitution and Minutes.

¹⁵ "Library," *Beatrice Express*, Mar. 6, 1873.

¹⁶ Minutes of Mar. 8, 1873. Constitution and Minutes. Also "Ladies' Library Association," *Beatrice Express*, Mar. 19, 1873.

¹⁷ "How Shall We Make Beatrice Grow!" *Beatrice Express*, Mar. 27, 1873. Emphasis in original.

¹⁸ See "The Beatrice Public Library," *Beatrice Express*, May 22, 1873, and "The Public Library Entertainment," *Beatrice Express*, June 5, 1873.

¹⁹ Minutes of July 26, 1873, Constitution and Minutes.

²⁰ Clara Chilton to My Dear Children, Nov. 9, 1873. Wisconsin Historical Society, MSS 379, box 1, folder 11 (hereafter WHS).

²¹ Clara Chilton to My Dear Children, Dec. 21, 1873. WHS MSS 379, box 1, folder 11.

²² "The Public Library," *Beatrice Express*, July 31, 1873.

²³ Clara Chilton to My Dear Children, Aug. 10, 1873. WHS MSS 379, box 1, folder 10.

²⁴ *Beatrice Express*, Feb. 10, 1876. The announcement noted the book had been missing for a while, and that there was no record of it being checked out.

²⁵ "The Public Library," *Beatrice Express*, July 31, 1873.

²⁶ Nov. 7, 1873, Constitution and Minutes.

²⁷ See advertisement in *Beatrice Express*, Oct. 30, 1873+, Nov. 11, 1875+. Later, open hours were changed to Wednesday and Saturday evenings from 7:00-8:00 p.m.; see *The Beatrice Courier*, Nov. 2, 1875.

²⁸ Adopted Mar. 8, 1873, Constitution and Minutes.

²⁹ [Adopted Nov. 5, 1873], Constitution and Minutes.

³⁰ "The Beatrice Public Library," *Beatrice Express*, Jan. 4, 1877.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Minutes of Nov. 6, 1877, Constitution and Minutes.

³³ An announcement of the dissolution of Colby & Sale can be found printed on the letterhead "Office of L. W. Colby," WHS MSS 379, box 1, folder 12.

³⁴ See minutes of May 25 and Sept. 3, 1874. Constitution and Minutes. The Ladies Temperance Room was among the earlier incarnations of temperance reading rooms in southeast Nebraska, and was sponsored by a temperance organization that predated the Beatrice's Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). In Beatrice, there were several temperance associations through the period of the 1870s and 1880s, including the Beatrice Ladies' Temperance Association established in 1874 (*Beatrice Express*, Apr. 9, 1874), and the Red Ribbon Temperance Club, organized in 1878 (*Beatrice Express*, Feb. 18, 1878). The Beatrice chapter of the WCTU was organized in 1880 (Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 903). For more information on temperance activities in southeast Nebraska see Patricia C. Gaster, "Signing the Pledge: George B. Skinner and the Red Ribbon Club of Lincoln," *Nebraska History* 91.2 (Summer 2010): 66-79.

³⁵ *Beatrice Express*, Oct. 8, 1874.

³⁶ Minutes of Jan. 15, 1878 and Jan. 23, 1878, Constitution and Minutes. Leonard Colby entered into practice with Alfred Hazlett c. 1876 and maintained their partnership for a number of years.

³⁷ Minutes of Jan. 23, 1878. Constitution and Minutes. See also *Beatrice Express* for Jan. 28 and Jan. 31, 1878.

³⁸ Minutes of Nov. 6, 1877. Constitution and Minutes.

³⁹ *Beatrice Express*, Apr. 5, 1877. Paddock settled in Beatrice in 1872, the same year as the Colbys. He served as Senator 1875-81 and 1887-93. See biographical note to the Papers of Algernon Sidney Paddock RG1451.AM, Nebraska State Historical Society.

⁴⁰ *Beatrice Express*, Dec. 11 and Dec. 21, 1876. Hugh Jackson Dobbs notes that Colby was proprietor of the *Express* for approximately one year. See *History of Gage County, Nebraska* (Lincoln: Western Publishing & Engraving Company, 1918), 247.

⁴¹ C. D. Colby, "The Lincoln Library," *Beatrice Express*, Jan. 18, 1877.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ "Reading Room," *Beatrice Express*, Jan. 25, 1877.

⁴⁴ "Beatrice Public Library and Temperance," *Beatrice Express*, Mar. 22, 1877. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Minutes of Jan. 23, 1878, Constitution and Minutes.

⁴⁸ *Beatrice Express*, Jan. 31, 1878. Eli Perkins was the pseudonym of Melville Delancey Landon; Feb. 11, 1878, Constitution and Minutes.

⁴⁹ A. T. Andreas, "The Temperance Movement," *History of the State of Nebraska*, 212.

⁵⁰ Minutes of Feb. 11, 1878, Constitution and Minutes.

⁵¹ *Beatrice Express*, Feb. 11, 1878.

⁵² Minutes of Feb. 11, 1878, Constitution and Minutes.

⁵³ *Beatrice Express*, Feb. 18, 1878.

⁵⁴ Feb. 18, 1878, Constitution and Minutes.

⁵⁵ Feb. 20, 1878, Constitution and Minutes. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *Beatrice Express*, Feb. 18, 1878.

⁵⁸ "The Public Libraries of Beatrice, Gage Co., Neb.," Fifth Annual Report to the City Council of Beatrice, 1898. Beatrice Public Library, Beatrice, Nebraska (hereafter Fifth Annual Report).

⁵⁹ *Beatrice Express*, Feb. 25, 1878.

⁶⁰ Oct. 1, 1878, Constitution and Minutes.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Minutes of May 24, 1879, Constitution and Minutes.

⁶⁴ "The Public Libraries of Beatrice, Gage Co., Neb.," Fifth Annual Report.

⁶⁵ Ibid. This report also notes that the organ was removed from the reading room and placed in service at the Beatrice High School.

⁶⁶ Ibid. See also the minutes of Oct. 20, [1880] and Mar. 9 [1881], Minutes of the Beatrice Women's Christian Temperance Union. Beatrice Public Library, Beatrice, Nebraska.

⁶⁷ "History of the Women's Christian Temperance Union of Beatrice," n.d. Beatrice Public Library, Beatrice, Nebraska.

⁶⁸ "The Public Libraries of Beatrice, Gage Co., Neb.," Fifth Annual Report.