

When The Library Was Above The Saloon

by Lynne Belluscio

I was asked the other day about LeRoy's early libraries. It's hard to imagine a time when books were so scarce that often the only book was the family Bible. There is mention of a library in the schoolhouse on Asbury Road in 1821. And Erastus Bailey in Roanoke was known to have a "farmer's library" in his home.

One of my favorite stories about a library in LeRoy was written by Edward Bangs who wrote about his father's library: "In regard to my father's books – he had a law library of between four and five thousand volumes which failed to hold my interest but he had an extremely general library of about the same size that took a good deal of my time. He selected these books on a straight individualistic basis. He had no Book of the Month Club to guide him so he just went ahead and bought the books that he wanted by the simple process of going into Scranton & Wetmore's Book Shop in Rochester and browsing around until he saw one that he liked. He then started at once, while it was hot, to read it – partly in the store – partly on the street car – but mostly on the Rochester and State Line R.R. where time was forgotten.

This reading on the cars, it was freely predicted would end inevitably in the ruination of his eyes, but nothing of the kind happened even after he added the practice of reading in bed. He not only loved books per se as a bibliophile does, but he also wished to know what was in them.

In those days most books and magazines came with uncut leaves and he would read with a paper cutter in one hand, slashing through as he finished each page. This made an excellent way of marking his progress and was less destructive than the practice of a man I once knew who would tear out a leaf after he had read it. My father was born with his love for books but it was intensified by the scarcity of books in his youth. He always kept the first book that he bought."

There were other early libraries. There is a brief mention of a circulating library at the book store

for young men in 1832. Ingham University maintained a library as early as 1837, with 2,600 volumes. Mrs. Emily Ingham Staunton maintained a private library of 640 books which had been collected by her husband, Phineas Staunton, primarily dealing with art and art history.

Later, two Ingham organizations established libraries: the Altonia Society had a library of 450 volumes which was established in 1854. A published list of the books included topics of science, history, poetry, travel, fiction, biography, and religion. In 1865, the Concordia Society had a library of 375 volumes.

Other people associated with the University included Reverend Parsons who had 800 books and Dr. Van Lennop whose library of 739 volumes were written in eleven different languages.

Across the street, at the LeRoy Academic Institute, Principal Russell had established the Lyceum Library and the LeRoy Academy had a library that had been donated by J.R. Anderson. There is an account of a circulating library in 1870 with 500 books, but a fire destroyed all but 60.

Then in the winter of 1873, "there passed over the Village of LeRoy a great wave of apprehension as anxiety felt mainly among the mothers regarding the future of their sons and daughters. The anxiety was well founded for intemperance and immorality stalked boldly through the streets of the Village and not only attracted the youth of the Village but intrigued them with false visions of personal liberty and freedom. ... Awakened to the possible danger of this evil influence on the young people of LeRoy,



a group of women recognized in their day as able instructors, devoted mothers, capable home makers, and loyal church women, took upon themselves the different tasks of trying to alleviate the condition."

One of the solutions was the establishment of a new library although Albert Bangs' account doesn't describe a very good situation. It seems that the library was on the second floor in the back of a building on the south side of Main Street. Unfortunately "one of the saloons was under it and it was thought that the drunks instead of lying normally in the gutter as was their want, would defy gravitation and hole up in the library, although obviously not a member. I had the irregular job of collecting and transporting reading matter to the library. Later when Mel King, the constable had taken up the matter with the drunks, it was thought possible to lengthen the hours and my job was given

over to a larger boy who was impervious to night air. We called him Narley, which could not have been his name, but he answered to it."

The library moved from the Annin Store in the Lampson block, to the LeRoy Times building in 1896, then to Steuber's Store in the Arcade building, and then to the back of the old Post Office building. Finally in 1907, through the generosity of Mrs. M.W. Heal, the library moved to the house on the corner of Bacon Street and Lake Street. The library was located in two rooms heated and lit by gas. Miss Katherine Cameron was the librarian and it was open Monday evening, Wednesday afternoon and Saturday afternoon and evening. In 1908, the library received its absolute charter from the New York State Department of Education.

In 1930, the Woodward Memorial Library on Wolcott Street opened.

Happy New Year