

The Old "Vincennes Library"

By JANE KITCHELL

William Henry Harrison arrived in Vincennes in January, 1801, to assume his duties as Governor of the vast district then known as Indiana territory. The capital, a town founded about three-quarters of a century earlier, was a place of much interest. There Frances Vigo, Father Gibault, Colonel George Rogers Clark and other men of intelligence and courage had made history. During the Harrison régime, Vincennes continued to be a center of activity. From this old French village, orders were despatched over a wide area. Here conferences with Indians were held and treaties made. Legislators and judges met here to adopt or frame laws and render decisions. The annals of the period contain such names as William Clark, Henry Vanderburgh, John Griffin, John Gibson, John Badolette, Benjamin Parke, and John Rice Jones.

The people who lived in the capital of Indiana territory were not without interest in the means of education. The first regular school in what is now Indiana was probably that conducted by Father Rivet in 1793.¹ A school system was of very slow growth and little was accomplished in the territorial period. It was far easier to start and maintain libraries which for years provided a road to a degree of education for many persons. A meeting was held at the William Hays Inn of Vincennes on July 20, 1806, from which came into being a circulating library which survived for seventy-seven years. The present public library of Vincennes² is an outgrowth of the idea which led to that conference over which Governor Harrison later to be President of the United States, presided on that July day of 1806.

Vincennes University has preserved the book containing the minutes of the Vincennes Library Company (later known as the Vincennes Library Association) which existed and played its part from 1806 to 1883. The Minutes of the first meeting carry interesting matter:

¹ Logan Esarey, *History of Indiana*, I, 181.

² There is no direct connection between the Vincennes Public Library of today and the old Vincennes Library. The modern institution was initiated in 1888 and formally opened on April 18, 1889. The old Library Company was dissolved in 1883 and the collection of books and other property sold to Vincennes University. In a more fundamental sense, however, the Vincennes Public Library is the heir of the older institution of revered memory, the Vincennes Library.

At a meeting of a number of the citizens of Vincennes and its vicinity at Wm. Hays Inn on the 20th July 1806 who were desirous to promote the formation of a circulating library, Governor Harrison was called to the chair and Benjamin Parke appointed secretary.

Dave McKee offered to the consideration of the meeting the form of a constitution for a Library company, which being read, upon a motion made and seconded it was

Resolved: That an agreement should be entered into by such as would subscribe thereto, to engage each to the other to comply with such rules and regulations as a majority of the said subscribers should finally adopt for the government of the said company—

On motion made and seconded it was ordered

That John Badollet, John Johnston, Dav. McKee, Dav. McName and John R. Jones be a committee to prepare the form of a constitution for the said company.

Ordered

That the said committee do make report at the next meeting of the said citizens and then the meeting adjourned to the second day of August next at three o'clock in the afternoon.

The meeting arranged for August 2 was held at the appointed hour. The minutes show the following citizen subscribers: "Governor Harrison, J. R. Jones, John Badolett, R. Buntin, Henry Vanderburgh, Dav. McKee, Dav. McName, B. Bedkes, F. Bullitt, H. Hurst, I. V. Hay, A. Badollet, D. Smith, Thomas Jones, P. Jones, Col. Vigo, and B. Parke." These men were present at the second meeting, with Governor Harrison in the chair and Benjamin Parke acting as secretary. The committee appointed at the first meeting to draw up a constitution made a report. The draft presented was considered, amended and adopted. The Library Company was to sell one hundred shares at five dollars each "payable in specie, or in such books" as the President and directors should judge proper for admission and at such values as the President and directors should determine. Each shareholder was to pay annually two dollars on each share held. Yearly meetings of shareholders were provided for, and the officers were to consist of a President, seven Directors and a Librarian. These were all to be chosen annually by the members of the Company. The shareholders were empowered to increase the number of shares from time to time in response to increasing demand.

The duties of the Librarian were outlined in Article 4 of the Constitution:

It shall be the duty of the Librarian to receive all monies, fines belonging to the society and pay the same on an order signed by the President and directors or a majority of them. He shall act as secretary to the general meetings and to the President and Directors and shall keep a regular account of his receipts and disbursements and shall exhibit the same annually to the general meeting and also whenever thereto required by the President and directors. He shall take good care of all books and maps belonging to the company and shall keep a book properly ruled in which shall be noted the times of delivery of books to those share holders or their agents and their return, noting also all delinquences as to loss or damage of books and as to the time of returning them. He shall also receive, keep and arrange in systematical order as well all such specimens of ores, minerals, fossils and other natural curiosities as shall be delivered him as also all such essays and communications as may tend to throw light on the natural and civic history of the western country and of the aborigines thereof.

The Library was to be open on each Wednesday and Saturday from 10:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. "for the delivery and return of books to and from subscribers." Each share was to entitle a subscriber to one book at a time. It was possible for the same person to own more than one share. The minutes of August 2, 1806, contain the names of eighty-seven shareholders, six of whom owned two shares each, while the remaining eighty-one owned a single share each. Smaller volumes could be held for one week, and larger ones for two weeks. No shareholder was permitted to lend any book drawn from the library "to be read out of his own house". For any book "so lent out" a fine of twenty-five cents was to be collected.

John Badollete was chosen President of the Company, and Benjamin Park Librarian. The President and Directors were requested to seek an "act of Incorporation" from the Legislature of the territory. At a meeting of the President and Directors on August 9, 1806, it was arranged that shareholders should be notified that books in payment for shares would be received on August 23. Presumably many of the subscribers paid not in coin but in something even rarer and more acceptable—printed volumes.

By March 24, 1809, there were two hundred forty-five volumes in the Library. The minutes of this date show but forty-six shares owned by forty shareholders. Evidently many who started in the venture had grown faint-hearted and fallen by the wayside. At this meeting, the Librarian was asked

to destroy "Calipoedia" (one volume) and "Peggy Black" and "Wilmot Bond" (in five volumes), which were in the opinion of the committee of "immoral tendency" and "unfit to be found in the possession of an institution the object of which is to diffuse useful knowledge and correct moral principles"

The Librarian of 1809 met with some of the same problems and criticism as librarians of today experience. The years have brought a different point of view—the realization that a public library is not a moral institution. People must be met as they really are with no thought of reforming them. Library workers endeavor to cultivate the attributes of a liberal humanity.

The location of the books in the earliest period—the place from which they were delivered and to which they were returned on Wednesdays and Saturdays—is unknown. It is held that the Library was housed in the Harrison Mansion in the period following the departure of Governor Harrison to take command of troops in the War of 1812.³ His eldest son, John Cleves Symmes Harrison, occupied the home for a time. There is some evidence that the Library was located in a rear room of the building which served as Courthouse and Jail at one time.⁴ This building stood where the J. P. L. Weems home now stands at the corner of Fourth and Buntin Streets.

In the minutes of May 26, 1812, there is a statement to the effect that a committee was named by the directors to inquire as to the possibility of housing the Vincennes Library in the University building. Evidently, since this was before the books were kept in the Harrison Mansion, the efforts of the committee did not bear fruit.

After the books were removed from the Harrison House, whenever that may have been, they were kept in rented quarters for many years. In the minutes of a meeting of February, 1830, an interesting resolution occurs: "Resolved that the

³ Henry G. Cauthorn, *History of the City of Vincennes* (Terre Haute, 1902), p. 27. Cauthorn says: "The Vincennes Library was kept in the mansion during the time it was occupied by Symmes Harrison, and it continued to be the resort of the elite and cultured of the place." Governor Harrison left Vincennes to assume command of troops in the war with England in the early summer of 1812. Soon afterward Mrs. Harrison and the younger members of the family were transferred to Cincinnati. The Harrison House was given to John Cleves Symmes Harrison, the eldest son of General Harrison, before the close of the year 1812, who occupied it for a period.

⁴ See an article in the *Vincennes Sun* of May 31, 1919, by Margaret Holland, quoting from a Mr. George Sparrow. The article appeared at the time of the dedication of the building now occupied by the Vincennes Public Library.

Librarian be authorized to pay the rent of the room wherein the library is kept out of Library funds provided the same does not exceed One dollar per month." In February, 1837, the Directors tried again to find a place for the Library in the "Academy building." In October, 1839, the Catholic College was "authorized to take the cases containing the Books in the Vincennes University at such valuation of the same as may be agreed on." It would seem from this motion that the Library had been placed in the University for a short time. New cases were now purchased and the library was installed in a room belonging to a Mr. Crosby which was rented for "twelve dollars per annum". The cost for the shelving plus the charge for the moving of books and furniture was \$28.07. Two years later, the stockholders' annual meeting was held at the library room in the Town Hall, which means that another shift had been made. In 1856, the Library was still in the Town Hall, since the minutes show that "stockholders assembled in the City Council Room over the Library."

A list of books furnished by the minutes of 1813, includes the following titles: "Leland's *Philip of Macedon*; Robertson's *History of America* (2 vols.); Maimbourgh's *History of America*; *Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (5 vols.); Reid's *Essays* (3 vols.); Atwood's *on Rectilinear Motion*; Guthrie's *Grammar* (2 vols.); Blair's *Lectures* (2 vols.); Vattel's *Law of Nations*; Morse's *Geography* (2 vols.); Witherspoon's *Works* (2 vols.); Miller's *Retrospect* (2 vols.); Pinkerton's *Geography* (2 vols, with maps); Robertson's *Charles V* (3 vols.); Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* (with appendix); Ossian's *Poems*; Andrews' *Views*; Goldsmith's *Animated Nature* (4 vols.); Varlow's *Husbandry* (2 vols.); *Ladies Companion*; *Eloise*; *Mirabeau's Gallery of Portraits* (2 vols.); *Lectures on Female Education*; *Mysteries of Udolpho*; *Gil Blas*; *Beggar Girl*; Carver's *Travels*; *Introduction to the History of Denmark* (in French); *Principles of Literature* (in French).⁵

Various means were resorted to in order to obtain books or funds with which to buy them. Book drives and book showers are today found useful in adding volumes to libraries

⁵ This must have been a selected or partial list, since the total number of volumes mentioned is 48, whereas, four years earlier there were 245 books in the collection.

to supplement what can be purchased with money income. In 1810, the Legislature of Indiana territory authorized the Vincennes Library to raise some funds through a lottery. Numbered tickets were prepared and sold, a part of the returns being used for prizes to those drawing the lucky numbers.

The Vincennes Library Company was quite modern in regard to the transaction of business. In 1832, "duplicate copies" of books and "all such works as it may be expedient by the decay of the binding to sell" were disposed of at an auction, with a credit of one year. The sale resulted in clearing the shelves of twenty-five volumes. The aggregate selling price of the several works auctioned off was \$16.15. A set of Hume's English History (5 vols.) brought \$5.08. It is to be hoped that it was possible to collect the entire amount of the sale at the end of the year. Transportation charges constituted no small part of the cost of books purchased by any western library before the time of railway connections with the East. Books, like other commodities that could stand the cost of shipment over the mountains, were carried westward by overload freight companies. Most of the books that were bought for the Vincennes Library were ordered from Philadelphia. A record of May 11, 1811, indicated that the freight charge on seventy-nine pounds of books was \$7.90, or ten cents per pound.

On April 10, 1828, the Librarian was ordered to purchase of Moses Tabbs twenty-nine volumes of the *Edinburg Review* at a cost of \$58.00. This was the first move in the direction of supplying the Vincennes Library with files of periodicals for reference purposes.

A portrait of Colonel Francis Vigo, painted by Augustine von Smith, was purchased in 1839. For this, the Directors of the Library Company paid the artist \$25.00. In addition he was presented with one share of stock and freed from the obligation to pay the annual dues of \$2.00. The said portrait was "handsomely framed" and hung on the wall of the library room. This seems to have been the initial step in committing the Library to the useful purpose of preserving pictures.

No minutes of the Vincennes Library Company have been found for the decade extending from 1861 to 1871. Possibly the gap in the records was occasioned by activities and in-

terests of the Civil War. Some time within the period of missing records, the books were placed in a room at Vincennes University, as a minute of February 6, 1871, proves: "On motion of Nathaniel Usher it was ordered that the librarian permit the officers and teachers of Vincennes University the free use of any books in the library in consideration of the use of the library room."

The last meeting of the shareholders of the Vincennes Library Company, or Vincennes Library Association, of which there is a record, was held on February 5, 1883, at the library room in the University building. Officers were elected as at every annual meeting, but, at the same time, a committee was named to investigate the possibility of selling the accumulated books and furniture. A special meeting was arranged for the first Monday in April following, but there are no minutes of such a meeting in the record book of the Association.⁶ Records of Vincennes University show that the books and cases of the Vincennes Library were purchased by that institution on May 22, 1883, for the sum of \$190.00. As a condition of the transfer of the Library, founded more than three-quarters of a century earlier, the shareholders of the Vincennes Library Association were to retain the privilege of borrowing the books. This brought to an end the career and work of the Library Company organized in the frontier capital of Indiana territory in 1806. Softly we draw the curtain and silently we bow our heads in reverence as we contemplate the founders of the old Vincennes Library. It would be difficult to estimate the influence of this Association. The great movement to which its members gave origin and direction goes on in an ever wideing current.

⁶ This pre-arranged meeting was very probably held, since the Library was sold to Vincennes University in May. It is not likely that such an action would have been taken unless sanctioned by the Association in such a meeting as that scheduled for the first Monday in April.