

# A Capital Librarian!

## *The Life and Times of Forrest Spaulding*

by Timothy Walch

**F**orrest Spaulding isn't much remembered these days. Some may recall him as the genial fellow who guided the Des Moines Public Library during the early and middle years of the 20th century. For the most part, the job wasn't onerous or controversial, and Spaulding successfully ensured the smooth operation of library services in Iowa's largest city. As a result, his name occasionally appeared in the pages of local newspapers on matters related to reading and publishing.

But as important as this service was to the people of Des Moines, it is not the most important reason to remember Forrest B. Spaulding. He deserves major credit for his work in developing the public library as a center for civic engagement. In particular, Spaulding should be remembered as the author of the "Library Bill of Rights," a document that is a touchstone for intellectual freedom in this country. In fact, it was that specific achievement that led the American Library Association to include Spaulding on its list of the hundred most important library leaders of the 20th century.

So what do we know about Forrest Spaulding? He was born in Nashua, New Hampshire, in 1892, the son of Hollen and Lucille Spaulding, and attended the prestigious Phillips Exeter Academy and the Williston Seminary. His academic record was mixed. One colleague recalled that he left both institutions under questionable circumstances. He went on to attend the Library School of the New York Public Library, graduating in 1913. From all accounts, this was the extent of his formal education.

Spaulding was a restless man in the decade after he finished library school. Immediately following graduation, he became a library assistant and then a branch librarian in New York City. By 1915, he had become the head of the Traveling Library Department of the New York State Library System and worked with the YMCA to provide books to U.S. troops along the Mexican border.

It was also during this time that Spaulding courted Genevieve Anderson Pierson. He married her on August

26, 1916, and they would eventually have two children.

Less than a year after the couple married, they moved west to Des Moines, where he became city librarian and also took on the responsibility of maintaining a library for the troops stationed at Camp Dodge. Spaulding had high hopes for his work in Iowa. About a year after he arrived, he wrote a brief article for the *Des Moines Daily News* under the title "What the City Library Means to Des Moines." Most important to Spaulding was that the citizens "of the finest city, in the finest state, in this wonderful land" embrace the library as their own. He described his "dream of the future which I always have before me" and asked the people of Des Moines to help him make their public library "the best, most patronized, and helpful" library in the land.

Spaulding was confident in this quest and hoped to rally his constituency. "It can be done," he wrote, "and it will be done when all citizens take an active interest in the affairs, not only of their nation and their state, but of their city and its institutions." It was quite an ambitious vision.

But wartime presented at least one unusual challenge for librarians such as Forrest Spaulding. That issue was access to publications in the German language. There were some Iowans—even public officials—who believed that the German language should not be spoken in public or even on the telephone. And then there were the hundreds of books written in German, as well as books written in English that could be considered sympathetic to the German war effort. Should these books be removed from public libraries? That was a matter that must have crossed Spaulding's mind as well as his desk shortly after he arrived in Des Moines.

But Spaulding had nothing to say publicly on this controversial issue. On the contrary, he seemed to devote his time and energy during and after the war to civic boosterism. He eagerly joined local social clubs as well as state and national professional organizations. In fact, by April 1919, he proudly reported that he was a member of at least 14 different organizations—more, he believed,



**By his activism and involvement, Forrest Spaulding showed that a library can be a civic force in a community and nation.**

than even the mayor of Des Moines. Spaulding was quoted as joking that membership was easy, except when it came time to pay annual dues.

And he was no slouch when it came to participation. He told the *Des Moines News* that he was the president of one organization, the vice president of another, and the secretary of three others, all at the same time. All of these memberships reflected Spaulding's diverse interests—poetry, drama, libraries, hiking, the fine arts, and anything related to Des Moines. More important, he indicated if only by his memberships that he believed that as

the city librarian he should be actively involved in the life of his adopted city.

**I**n his second year as city librarian, Spaulding had his first brush with the question of intellectual freedom and libraries. In the years after World War I, the so-called Red Scare gripped the United States. The federal government was on the hunt for socialists and communists who were seen as threats to the American way of life. During this time, some Americans could not speak openly and critically of the federal government without fear of arrest for perceived disloyalty.

In such a climate, Spaulding faced a decision about intellectual freedom and, frankly, he blinked. When the controversial socialist lecturer Kate Richards O'Hare came to Des Moines in March 1919, Spaulding refused to allow her to use the public library auditorium for her speech. He said that the auditorium had been reserved for the speech under false pretenses, which may have been true. That having been said, there is no question that Spaulding also was bending to public pressure. "In taking this action," Spaulding told the *Daily News* on March 3, "I believe that I have the support of the large majority of citizens of Des Moines whose interests I am endeavoring to serve as their city librarian."

Local socialists were outraged and threatened a lawsuit. Martin Johnson, a member of the organizing committee, told the *Daily News* that the committee had incurred considerable expense to bring O'Hare to Des Moines; the committee would hold Spaulding and the City Library Board responsible for these expenses. "Spaulding knew what the meeting was for," Johnson told the newspaper. "We told him at the time the auditorium was secured." But the socialists never followed through on the lawsuit. The committee scrambled to book the Workers of the World Hall on West Third Street for the evening of March 6. O'Hare delivered her speech, no thanks to Spaulding and the library board.

The O'Hare incident was a rare controversy for the city librarian during those years. He did, however, generate a lot of attention for the library, although sometimes the press reported on trivial or humorous matters. In the weeks following O'Hare's visit he remarked to the *Daily News* that his library card catalog was the "largest, most consulted and most comprehensive encyclopedia in Des Moines," with more than 800,000 cards that referred to subjects in 110,000 books. These facts, he believed, should be shared with the community as a matter of local pride.

Given his active involvement in city life, many presumed that Spaulding was in Des Moines to stay, but this peripatetic librarian had other plans. In fact, his wanderlust got the best of him; in 1920 he accepted a position with the Merchant Marine Department of the American



BOTH PHOTOS: SHSI (DES MOINES)

The American Library Association library at Camp Dodge in 1918. Spaulding directed similar ALA libraries for U.S. troops.

Library Association. The department was an outgrowth of the work that the ALA had done for troops during World War I. Spaulding had had a taste of this work before he had come to Des Moines and apparently could not resist the call. He moved back to New York City to take charge of the operation. "These 'special libraries' have proven that they fill a definite need," Spaulding wrote in the pages of the ALA journal *Special Libraries* in 1920, "and therefore the Merchant Marine Department feels itself warranted in seeking the interest and approbation of the members of the Special Libraries Association."

But serving the library needs of those at sea did not satisfy Spaulding any more than being a librarian in Iowa apparently had. In 1921, he moved to Lima, Peru, where he became the director of the Peruvian national library and museum and worked as a part-time correspondent for the Associated Press. He left no record of what attracted him to such an exotic locale, and he didn't stay long. By 1922, Spaulding had moved back to the United States to work as an editor in a publishing firm in New York. He never quite forgot Des Moines, however, and he returned to his previous position in 1927. This time he would stay for a long time.

It is surprising that Spaulding's return did not warrant much mention in the city's newspapers, nor did his many activities and innovations in the following years. In addition to his day-to-day responsibilities managing the library during financially hard times, he expanded the library's art and music departments and added a telephone reference service. "This is YOUR public library," the

staff would say in answering the phone. "How may we help you?" It was vintage Spaulding.

That Spaulding was proactive about reaching his constituents is evident in his use of the relatively new technology of radio. Starting in October 1928, he hosted his own program called "Radio Book Talk" on WHO; the station's powerful signal reached most of central Iowa. Each week, he would lead a discussion of new books and publications recently received by the library. The program continued for a number of years and featured a wide variety of topics. He also hosted a quiz show called "Is That So?" and appeared on just about every forum that invited him to be a panelist.

**S**paulding also reached out to the African American community. Within a year after his return to Des Moines, he began a series of lectures and book discussions on topics of special interest to African Americans. He spoke on great works of "Negro art" and emphasized that African Americans had been deprived of opportunities to share and express their creativity. He commissioned his staff to review books by and about African Americans. He opened the local literary society and book forums to people of color and invited them to take leadership roles in the discussions. Several of these discussions were also featured on his weekly radio program. His tolerance and compassion would later be reflected in a major award from the National Conference on Christians and Jews.

Times were tough in the 1930s. By 1935, Spaulding had absorbed a 36 percent cut in his budget from what it had been in 1930. Just about every department had been reduced in size; the book budget was decimated; staff salaries were cut; and branch libraries were closed. Only the reference department was spared the librarian's axe. "How may we help you?" continued to be the mantra.

Spaulding realized that the public library was a haven for those who had few prospects and no other place to go. In 1934, therefore, he opened what he called a "waterfront university" in the basement of the library as a safe place for the homeless to spend their days. Thanks to assistance from the Works Progress Administration, he funded and later expanded a variety of educational, vocational, and recreational programs at his "university." He offered training classes on book mending and storytelling as well as field services for the visually impaired. Thanks to additional funds from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, he refurbished other public spaces in the library.

During the 1930s, Spaulding became increasingly concerned about the growing intolerance and censorship that seemed to be spreading from Europe to the United States. Although no documentation survives, it is clear that by 1938, Spaulding saw the need to set forth a statement on the right of every citizen to have access to information without restriction. The result of his concern is what we now refer to as the Library Bill of Rights.

It is not clear that Spaulding was the sole author of the document that he presented to the Des Moines Public Library board on November 21, 1938. It is possible that he consulted with staff and colleagues; he was active in the Public Library Division of the American Library Association as well as the Iowa Library Association. Library historian Christine Pawley has speculated that he may have been influenced by his friend and professional colleague Ernestine Rose, an important leader of the urban library community. It is logical to assume that Spaulding discussed the idea of a statement on censorship with others before he presented it to the board.

The document, which Spaulding titled "The Library's Bill of Rights," included a general introduction that decried the growth of totalitarianism around the world and the increase in censorship, and then articulated six points:

I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves.

II. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

III. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and histori-

cal issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

IV. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

V. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.

VI. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.

VII. Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of groups requesting their use.

One can only wonder if Spaulding had given thought to the action he had taken nearly 20 years earlier when Kate O'Hare had come to town.

**T**he library board considered the document and apparently approved it without fanfare. There is no evidence that there was any controversy or even much discussion. The board reiterated what Spaulding had written in the opening paragraph: "that the Board of Trustees of the Des Moines Public Library reaffirms these basic principles governing a free public library to serve the best interests of Des Moines and its citizens." As far as is known, there was no story in the *Des Moines Register* or the *Des Moines Tribune* about the matter.

After the board approved the document, Spaulding likely shared it with Rose and other ALA colleagues. He must have received congratulations and kudos from those colleagues over the next few months because as early as April 1939 press accounts refer to him as the "author of the Library Bill of Rights." In fact, on April 13, the *Register* ran a front-page story headlined "Spaulding in Line for U.S. Library Post." Written by Richard Wilson, the paper's veteran Washington correspondent, the story reported that Spaulding had come to President Roosevelt's attention as the author of the Library Bill of Rights and was being considered for the vacant position of Librarian of Congress. The paper suggested that Spaulding was one of three top contenders. The job would eventually go to a close confidante of the president, but Spaulding could not have been anything but pleased at such speculation.

Perhaps even more important to Spaulding was the validation that came his way at the annual meeting of the American Library Association in June. At that meeting in San Francisco, Ernestine Rose, his friend and the chair of the ALA Adult Education Board, moved that the ALA Board adopt Spaulding's work as its own. Of course, changes were needed to make the bill less specific to Des

Moines, but the spirit of his original Bill of Rights remained embedded in the final ALA document.

Spaulding must have been gratified. Certainly he must have been honored that the ALA Executive Board appointed him as chair of a special committee on censorship. The committee was charged with looking into the banning of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* by a number of libraries. He and his colleagues were to report back with an assessment of censorship in the United States.

On May 27, 1940, Spaulding and his committee recommended that the ALA establish a standing committee on intellectual freedom. Its function was to "recommend such steps as necessary to safeguard the rights of library users in accordance [with] the Bill of Rights of the United States and the Library's Bill of Rights as adopted by the Council."

The ALA Council approved the recommendation, and from that day forward, the committee has continued to meet and recommend appropriate changes in ALA policy on intellectual freedom. The Bill of Rights first proposed by Forrest Spaulding in 1938 has been amended numerous times by the ALA as conditions warranted. Yet the spirit of the first document continues—a testimony to Spaulding himself.

**S**paulding's work on censorship issues continued, but most of his time was taken up with his duties as director of the Des Moines Public Library. As had been his practice through the 1930s, he was a presence in the community during the war years. Des Moines Mayor Mark L. Conkling appointed him to be the director of civil defense information and publicity for Polk County. He worked for the American Red Cross and the Midwest Institute of International Relations, among other organizations. And he continued to work closely with his professional colleagues and served as president of the Public Libraries Section of the ALA.

When Spaulding marked the 20th anniversary of his second tour in Des Moines in December 1947, the *Register* saluted him for his service. "Under his leadership," noted the editorial, "the library has not been a mere passive repository for reading materials, but a university for the people." Spaulding's many professional activities exemplified "his conception of the library as a living, participating force."

It seems that the people of Des Moines agreed. Over 350 people attended a reception in honor of Spaulding's 20 years of continuous service. They had come not only to pay homage, but also to hear what Spaulding had to say about his time in Des Moines. The city librarian did not disappoint. "The first attribute of a librarian is not to be a great lover of books," he said, "but a great lover of people." The press agreed. "This expresses not only his

personal philosophy," noted the *Register*, "but the touchstone of his administration as well, for service to people—not to books—is his first administration at the library."

But all good tenures come to an end. A little more than four years later, Spaulding left Des Moines for a second time. On February 26, 1952, he announced his plans to give up his post as city librarian and move back to Nashua, New Hampshire, to take a similar post. "In 28 years," Spaulding said, "I feel that I have given all that I can to the Des Moines library. I don't want to retire from active work so I welcome this opportunity to use my experience in a smaller library where as I grow older, the pressure won't be so great."

The *Register* published the story about Spaulding's departure at the top of its front page. "Spaulding Quits Post at Library," intoned the headline. The library board was bereft. "It is not only a blow to the library," noted board president Paul Atkins, "but [also] to the community and everyone interested in education in central Iowa." Atkins went on to note the numerous organizations and activities that Spaulding supported. He had been much more than a librarian.

Spaulding returned to New Hampshire later that year, and retired for good in December 1958. A story in the *Register* indicated that he had been in poor health for the previous two years.

He lived on in New Hampshire until he passed away in 1965. "Ordinarily," commented the *Register's* editorial board, "a community is not greatly stirred by the death of a man who has been away for 13 years, but it is different with Forrest Spaulding. He made himself so much a part of the life of Des Moines that the thought of him is warm and pleasant."

It has been more than half a century since those words were published. No doubt there are a few elderly residents in Des Moines who still can recall Forrest Spaulding for his work as their friendly city librarian. But for most Iowans today, appreciation of the man and his work rests with his compassion for people as reflected in the Library Bill of Rights. Thanks to that extraordinary document, he stands shoulder to shoulder with every librarian and every library patron who speaks out against censorship and in favor of intellectual freedom. That makes Forrest Spaulding an Iowan worth remembering. ♦

*Timothy Walch volunteers at the State Historical Society of Iowa in Special Collections and in Publications.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Thanks to Jan Kaiser of the Des Moines Public Library and historian Christine Pawley for assistance with this article. Research materials are housed in the Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files (SHSI-Iowa City).