

Myra Aggen

Oral History Interview

April 19, 1988

Narrator: Myra Aggen
Interview Date: April 19, 1988
Place of Interview: Home of Mrs. N. L. Archer,
8616 Austin Avenue, Morton Grove (where
Mrs. Aggen was a houseguest)
Interviewer: Yvonne Ryden
Transcribed for: Morton Grove Public Library
Tape Running Time: 47 minutes

Introduction

Mrs. Myra Aggen was Head Librarian of the Morton Grove Public Library from 1955 – 1971. Because this was a period of rapid growth in the village, it was also a time of challenge for the library. Mrs. Aggen saw the size of the library quadruple under her direction. She made a special trip from Colorado to help the library celebrate its golden anniversary on Sunday, April 17, 1988.

MA: Myra Aggen

Q: Question asked by interviewer, Yvonne Ryden

Tape One

Side A

MA: Hello to you all. I was delighted when I got the invitation from the Morton Grove Public Library commemorating the fiftieth anniversary. Because the mails seem to be so slow these days, I didn't receive it until Wednesday before the Sunday celebration.

Now, to tell you something about the association with the public library that I was involved with for many years. It started back in March of 1955. Actually, the possibility of serving as librarian began in the fall of 1954, when Mrs. Art Loutsch approached me to accept the duties that she had been doing on a

volunteer basis. At that time I was teaching in a private school in Chicago and I felt it was unethical to resign from a position that I had just started. And then again it was in early January that Mrs. Loutsch urged me to meet with her and Mrs. Edna Scott. We met at the Diner Café on Fernald Avenue. I've been told that the little café still stands there. After discussing all the pros and cons, I agreed to accept the duties with the condition that I would have to tell my board that I would stay until a substitute was found for my grades. And it wasn't until mid March when I was given the key to the Morton Grove Public Library.

At that time, the library hours were geared to the needs of the little community. I do not have total recall, but I do have memories of going to work at nine, but not opening the library until one o'clock. Also I believe we had a part-time attendant who worked the desk Monday and Friday nights. We would close at five; she would come at seven and work until nine on those two nights. Then, too, we had a janitor one day a week. I found that I needed to do a lot of janitor work in addition to what was done on that one day a week.

Those were the days when the fire whistle blew at noon and many businesses ceased to operate during the lunch hour. Baxter Pharmaceutical was the biggest industry in the community. Even the cornfields north of Dempster Street reflected a country atmosphere.

The elementary school, located where the present village hall now stands, began to recognize the influx of people. The increase in population was slow, but steady. And it wasn't probably until the late fifties when the momentum increased. Hammering and nailing was going on all over town with developments springing up north of Dempster Street, west of Waukegan Road, south of the library. These people started moving in as soon as the homes were completed.

And immediately, the people recognized the needs for new schools and fire protection, police protection. And the library, of course, also knew that they needed to provide services for the people who were moving to Morton Grove. Many of them were moving out of Chicago and had had the use of big-city libraries. The board contemplated at their board meetings, discussed and

rediscussed. And the years went on and I became disturbed, because I knew that something had to be done.

At the time, we were housed in a small building, which was about the size of a five-room house. I expect it might have been about twelve hundred square feet—I'm not sure. It was a lovely, charming building, but it did not have room. When I arrived there or when I started in March, they were just completing paneling the—what I call the basement. I suppose a prettier term would be the lower level. And they paneled it and used it.

I moved all the children's books to that level but then knew there was a need for a children's librarian. Mrs. Mary Ellen Cohon, who served on the library board some years after that, was a patron and stopped and discussed with me the possibility of her mother, who was a retired teacher and was moving from her farm home to Morton Grove—whether it was possible that I would have any job for her. After interviewing her and talking to her, I knew we had found the perfect person. She was a delightful lady and never showed her age, and the children loved her.

Q: What was her name?

MA: Her name was Hazel Brown. She came in as part time, because as I previously have mentioned, we didn't open the library until one o'clock. She came at one and I believe she worked until five and I think she worked those two nights a week, too. And we went along in that, with that arrangement for several years.

Needless to say, though, the board kept changing. Each time a new member of the board recognized the need only after the older members on the board would spell out the problems we were facing. I think many times we'd feel that they weren't quite ready nor did they feel they had the experience to be able to go ahead, to pass a bond issue. It frightened them.

But I do remember one night going home after a board meeting. After I got home, the phone rang. A woman by the name of Mrs. Florence Moore served on

the board, and she called me. She said, “Myra, I really feel we must do something. I have had you too many times saying, ‘I get a new board every other year and we do nothing.’” She said, “I have decided I’m going to do something.” She was criticized, I think, at times by the other board members for moving a bit too fast.

But she knew what she was doing, and she did something that was just unheard of. She said, “We’re going to hire a public relations woman.” We paid her five hundred dollars and that was a lot of money. But this woman took care of press releases, helped us organize our campaign. We shortened it because the press, Carol Daniels, who was the public relations gal, had suggested not to have too long a campaign. So whatever her recommendations were, we tried to follow.

At that time, there were a lot of—as I mentioned—a lot of new little developments, so there were a lot of homeowners associations. I don’t believe Carol did any of the speaking. The board members and I attended all the service organization meetings and promoted the library. We knew we were going to have an uphill battle because the schools were springing up and every year there was a school bond issue and people were feeling the pinch in their tax bills. And not everyone used the library, so they do not recognize the needs.

Q: Were the new homeowners more supportive of the need for a library?

MA: Yes. New homeowners certainly were, and just before I left Colorado, I was looking through a scrapbook that I had. I had forgotten about this. I don’t now if the lady still lives here; she probably doesn’t. But her address was on Ozark and I believe that’s west of Waukegan Road. She wrote a letter that was very complimentary to the village. She had just moved here and said that she was delighted the village was such a progressive area and that they had just opened this lovely pool. Now she hoped that they would consider and think about the needs of the library. And I often wonder if that did not trigger Florence Moore.

She said, “Did you realize”—this woman said—“did you realize that if every person in Morton Grove would go to the library and borrow a book there wouldn’t be enough to go around.” We had a very small collection. However, we also didn’t have space for a bigger collection.

We then hired an architect to give us a rendering, and we spelled out what we thought were our needs. And there were many board meetings that it was really chewed over, because naturally people thought we were much too aggressive in our thinking. Four-and-a-half times larger than that small library—what in the world were we going to do with that space. And I remember one board member even saying, “We don’t need a basement.” The architect said, “That’s the cheapest construction you can get. You may need it some day.” So it was voted that there would be a basement under the entire building.

The bond issue was passed, and we were ecstatic. There was a feeling of euphoria at every board meeting. It sounded like a great deal of money--\$277,000, but today, with today’s prices and particularly the quality of work that was put into that building, I feel they got a bargain.

I believe I forgot to say we had the same builder and the same architect who had built the original little library in 1952. Mr. Laurence Schwall was the architect, and B. J. Stromberg was the builder. They had both worked together on the small building and so they were most interested in the expansion.

There were problems, of course, during the time of building because we did not close the library. There was tarp hanging in areas, and even patrons had to crawl through doors that really weren’t doors. Nevertheless, we did not close the library. I had thought that we never closed it, but just before I left, again I must remind you that I reviewed some of my clippings, and found that we closed it for three weeks just dedication day. We needed to close to clean it and get all the books in place so that we would have a beautiful house for dedication. Not only that, there was still much activity going on because the landscaping was being done and we wanted everything to be in apple-pie order. And it was.

It was a beautiful, sunny June day, I believe, when the building was dedicated. People arrived and were amazed at what they saw. You could hear

people making comments about expensive chandeliers and you knew that there was criticism. On the other hand, people who like the library loved what they saw. Probably the most disturbing thing we continued to hear—not just on that day but for many weeks following—were empty shelves. “My word, you have all these empty shelves.” And it was hard to explain to them that’s why we built the building that large. We knew we needed empty shelves so that we could expand the collection. However, people expected to see the shelves full of books. This past Saturday when I attended the anniversary, I saw the shelves are full of books, and I’m just wondering how much longer they’ll be able to go with that.

In my early days at the library, I really never had any time to attend library meetings and actually there weren’t too many organized library associations in the community. However, as I added to the staff, I could attend library meetings and always was grateful for Mary Radmacher of the Skokie Public Library who invited me to attend a meeting of, I believe, about 90 librarians. It was called LACONI—Library Administrative Conference of Northern Illinois, I believe, spells out the meaning of the acronym. Also Pete Bury¹ always urged me to attend and so I was a regular communicant of those meetings to the point where at one time I even was elected president. It was a marvelous way to share ideas and discuss problems.

I had felt very deep appreciation for the help that Mary Radmacher and Pete Bury had continued to give me, because I was not a trained librarian, so I really had to learn by trial and error and I must admit there were errors. Sometimes I think about those mornings that the library was not open when I managed to correct my errors. (laughs)

As time went on—oh, I’ve got to get back to the dedication. After the dedication of the expanded building, I was alerted that—and I had been too busy to notice it—but somebody reminded me that maybe I’d want to submit a scrapbook to H.W. Wilson for the John Cotton Dana Award, which was a national award. I spoke to Carol Daniels who still was working in public relations. And she said, “Why not? Let’s go for it.” We had very little time, to the point where she

¹ Head Librarian, Glenview Public Library

would come to my house at three and four in the morning. We were still on the floor pasting and cutting and gluing. There was a deadline, but we managed to get the book off in time.

Being so excited about the new building and being able to show people around, I almost forgot that I had submitted it. Until one morning I went to work early, which was not too unusual, and my husband called me from home, and he said, "I just had a phone call from Les Stoeffel² in Oak Park, and he want you to know that you have won the John Cotton Dana Publicity Award³ and that a telegram is on its way." Well, that meant I could go to Miami to accept the award. And the book now is in the historical society room or what do you call it?

Q: The Local History Room.

MA: The Local History Room. It is there for observation. It's a bit worn, because it for years it was moved around to the different cities in the United States along with many other of the kind that were on exhibit during ALA meetings.

After this dedication, the American Library Association held their meeting I believe in late June, early July. We were notified that because it was in the Chicago that year, if we would accept and promote it, they would like to arrange for tours to come to Morton Grove, to see the Morton Grove Public Library. Naturally, this seemed like a feather in our cap, so we encouraged it and bus tours came and everybody was excited while we, the staff, ushered people from all over the United States through the building to see the lovely new facility.

I mentioned LACONI and I mentioned Peter Bury and Mary Radmacher, and it leads me to remember that we often discussed the duplication of services and texts that we were experiencing in the suburban areas and felt that there was a need for more cooperation. We had many meetings and many times came away from those meetings feeling nothing had been resolved. We were well

² Head of Suburban Library System

³ This award was sponsored by the American Library Association and H. W. Wilson Co. The award read, "For a well-organized library referendum campaign, projected through basic publicity tools."

aware that Evanston had a fine library with its collection, and we knew, too, that Skokie was building fast and had a bigger budget than we did. So we small libraries kind of wanted to push our way, but also knew that we had to tread carefully and encourage and initiate some thinking towards cooperation.

It finally came to be with the help of the State. The State had designated or divided, rather, the State of Illinois into sections. And we at that time were, and still are, I believe, in the North Suburban Library section. Also, I believe federal money had been passed on to the State to promote this kind of library service. Everyone in Illinois was working in that direction, and I felt very excited about it because I knew that eventually it was something that needed to be done.

Mary Radmacher reminded me yesterday it was 1966 that the first board of the NSLS met. And it was shortly after that that they hired Mr. Robert McClarren, who still is the administrator. They did not have a building at that time, naturally, but they rented a space on Dempster Street where they operated out of. And Mr. McClarren was a frequent caller at the Morton Grove Library.

At one time at one of his visits, he noted all the empty basement space and told me what their plans were of having Central Serial Services. At the time, of course, I had no idea what it was, so with some explanation found out that it was going to be a service that would be geared for all of the libraries in the North Suburban Library System who needed material or articles from magazines, newspapers that dated back or even recent, that libraries did not subscribe to. This would fulfill their needs. It was a little slow in getting started because it was new to everyone.

I was told to hire someone to handle the requests. At the time, a lady walked in and told me that her husband was attending the police academy at Northwestern University and she was from Torrance, California. Said that she would be in the area for a year and a half and did I have something, some kind of a job that she might fill? It sounded to me like the proper place to put her because she was new, we were new to it, we would all learn at the same time.

I needn't tell you how much that particular service grew. It expanded so fast that on my next visit back to Morton Grove after I had left here, I was

shocked to see what was being offered. Today, I'm sure that it has lots of use and no doubt a large staff. I meant to visit the area this past Sunday, but they were just locking the doors so I didn't get in. They have used that space in the Morton Grove Library for, I suppose, ten years if not more. So I often think they have helped to pay for that basement.

Q: They have! (laughter)

MA: Now, then, the basement didn't stay a basement too long. It was in 1969 that the board and I again saw that we were going to need to expand to the lower level. Thank goodness we had the area. Again, we agonized over figures and costs and called in Mr. Schwall again and knew that we couldn't possibly ask for another bond issue, so we had to find some other way to pay for this.

I was very friendly and familiar with people from the state library and also some of the people who served on the committee of grants. I managed to see to it that I got next to them at any meeting that I possibly could, because I wanted them to vote favorably on a grant that we were going to apply for. And if we got the grant, we knew that we could get some money, borrow some money to do the job that we wanted to do.

And as I look back, as I saw before I left, I was amazed to see that it cost \$240,000. In other words, building materials had gone up that much. All it was finishing the interior of the lower level, doing some carpeting, building—well, there were some washrooms added—and, of course, the necessary furniture and equipment that was put down there. So, again, I think the \$277,000 was a bargain.

I was thinking about changing locations about that time. However, I stayed at the library until I had completed all the necessary paperwork. And, believe me, when you are given a grant, there is paperwork. I often wonder whether all that paper is ever looked at because there were other, all kinds of other libraries getting grants. And supposedly, this was supposed to have gone to Washington, D. C. Maybe they had a shredder there then, too, because it just didn't seem to

me that it was possible that somebody would really pay that much attention to it. Such things as having to take pictures and fill out forms at ten percent of the finished job, at 25 percent of the job—a lot of needless work, as I felt it was. Nevertheless, we again finished that job—I believe about 1979, maybe in fall of '79.

Q: Oh, it couldn't have been—could it have been '79?

MA: Oh, I'm sorry—'69. I am sorry. That is right, '69. I was in Colorado in '79. In '69, we finished that and it was maybe in '70—I believe it would have been '70, because it was in late '70 that I resigned my position at Morton Grove Library to move to Colorado.

Before I left, my husband preceded me, but I stayed here so that I could complete all the detail work that I had to do for the grant we had received and tie up all the loose ends for that expansion.

Q: May I interrupt to ask—this expansion, you took existing basement space. Did you enlarge it or enhance it in any way?

MA: Other than paneling it?

Q: And is this going to become the children's room?

MA: That then became the children's room.

Q: And was that outside patio...

MA: That outside sunken garden, yes

Q: That was there or was that added?

MA: No, that was added. The architect felt we needed something to make it look—to add to its aesthetics because it was just all concrete walls.

Q: Yes, and it has a rather low ceiling.

MA: Right.

Q: So that would have given this...

MA: Feeling of outdoor. I'm not sure it gets used the way it should. At first, I think my janitor used to think it was just a good place to collect weeds, but I noticed Sunday that it looked nice. We had some plantings and vines put in to...

Q: Did you happen to notice that there is a mother duck down there?

MA: No, I didn't. I gave the library before I left a fountain.

Q: The fountain is there, but there's a live mother duck for her third spring. She has come for three years now and laid eggs and half of the eggs—about half of the eggs—four ducklings hatch out every year, and at an appropriate time she flies away. And then the janitor...

MA: Well, how interesting. That's much more interesting than what I've been telling.

Q: (Laughs)

MA: And then the library has a big duck dinner.

Q: The library takes the ducks to a bird sanctuary near Baha'i Temple, but the first year, the children's librarian was reading a story. She knew the ducklings

were there, so she was reading “Make Way for Ducklings” and had the children grouped around that big door, that big window. And at the appropriate moment, a duckling waddled across that patio, and the children were very blasé about it, but their mothers who had been chit-chatting at the back as they do during the children’s hour got so excited and all streamed over to see the duck that was provided just to give local color to the story.

MA: Oh, marvelous.

Q: So, anyway, that’s one little thing that they do.

MA: I’m so glad you told me about that, because I’ll remember that for sure. I’m glad something is happening in that sunken garden.

Q: To think that a live animal finds it attractive, so attractive. But let’s go on. You finished that and so you moved the children’s room—we haven’t really discussed that.

MA: In the original expansion in 1962, the children’s room was located in the west wing where the reference room is at this present time. Then we, in 1970, moved the children’s collection to the lower level where it is still today.⁴ Now, the additional expansion has been done since I left.

Q: Which added the Baxter Room upstairs. A little bit, a new...

MA: Board room and new office, I believe.

Q: This is upstairs, right, and on the main floor just a little bit has been added where the circ desk is now.

⁴ The children’s room is named the Myra Aggen Room.

MA: Everything sounded so serious while I was talking, but I do know that we had some humorous things happen at the library, and I really and truly have many times told this story, but I do think it should be on tape.

When I went to the library in 1954, there was a cannon and a statue with the doughboy. The cannon has since been moved. When we expanded, of course, we needed more ground, and the cannon has been moved over, I believe, on the Legion lawn. Nevertheless, the doughboy was always a sentinel standing out there on the front lawn.

And I remember one morning way back in the early '50s or in the mid-'50s, I was walking up the front walk, and, of course, it was a longer walk than it is today, because you're about 40 feet out in front, farther in front. And it was a pretty fall morning. In fact, it was the day after Halloween. I looked up—just happened to look up—and noticed a cigarette was in the doughboy's mouth and a babushka tied on his head. And. Of course, I was amused and thought, well, this certainly was far from vandalism.

I went into the library and dismissed it from my thoughts because I had to wait for my janitor who only came once a week. And it probably had just been there the day before. It took until he came the following week. I asked if he thought he could get the cigarette out of the mouth. Not too many people noticed it because they didn't look up. Unless I attracted their attention to it, it wasn't talked about. So he tried to get it down. He said he just couldn't. He thought I should enlist our daughter who was eleven. He knew she loved to climb trees, and he thought she'd be able to. Well, we cheered her on and she just didn't make it.

So again, I dismissed it from my thoughts and went about my business, and it wasn't until the morning of November 11, which was probably four or five days later, that I was bicycling to work when I heard the band practicing over on Dempster Street at the Legion. And it occurred to me it was Veteran's Day. At that time I think it was called Armistice Day. I thought, "My word! We still have the cigarette in his mouth and the babushka on his head, and they're going to march down Georgiana and come to the library and the veterans will hold up their guns

and see this sight and probably drop their rifles.” So I immediately ran in the library and called the fire department and said, “Please help.” They came over with a hook and ladder and managed to take down the odd objects just before the parade arrived.

I also have another little story that I thought was kind of humorous. I’m sure there are a lot of other things that happened, but this one still stays in my memory. After we had moved to the basement with the children’s collection, I was walking through the room one day and I noticed this little boy standing next to the water fountain. And he looked like he was kind of daydreaming, and yet he had his hand up and I wondered what’s wrong. I said, “What is wrong?” And he said, “I have my finger stuck.”

This fountain was stainless steel and on the cover of it, either the manufacturer failed to put the plug in or maybe the plumber who installed it was remiss, but this little hole was there and it was just intriguing enough for this little boy to put his finger in and couldn’t get it out. Well, I said, “Are you sure?” And I realized that he had wiggled it so much that it was so swollen, and I tried to look around. By that time the janitor had gone home and I tried to see what I could do, and I could see there was a possibility of unscrewing the cover. However, I thought, “My word, I can’t send him home holding the cover.” So I said, “Just, just stand there.”

And again, I called the fire department. And they came over. Two men came and had their truck with the cherry going, you know, and everybody got exciting thinking we had a fire. Well, I told them over the phone what it was. But they came, and they managed to take off the cover and with some ice we managed to get the boy’s finger out. He was really brave—never cried, except he was so embarrassed because his father was a fireman. But they took him home in the squad car and he felt quite important.

Then another time—I thought about that when I was talking about the big lawn, and I mentioned the fact that we only had the janitor one day a week. He clipped the lawn besides clean, so you can imagine how much cleaning I got done, because at the time the lawn was huge. But one year it was late May,

approaching Memorial Day, and I was frustrated because the lawn looked so terrible and at that time they used to have the services on the yard in front of the library. I talked about it to our good friends, Lois and Lyle Archer. My husband listened and the four of us went over the morning of Memorial Day and raked and took our children with us and they clipped...

(Interview Ends)

Tape One

Side A Ends