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## The Importance of Libraries, Relatively Speaking

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# The Importance of Libraries, Relatively Speaking

by Elma Witty &  
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Sisters Elma Witty and Phyllis McCracken at the 2013 OASL conference.

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Once upon a time, a father, mother, and three children lived on a farm in far eastern Oregon. Money was in short supply, but books and other reading materials were always available. “Family Night” entertainment often consisted of the father reading aloud to the rest of the family (many times the mother darned socks as she listened). Among the selections read were short stories from the *Country Gentleman* magazine and whole books that were serialized in the “Oregon Farmer” (*Mrs. Mike, Plow the Dew Under*). With this sort of background, it may not be surprising that two of the children became librarians and the third is a publisher.

## **Elma Witty**

I am the oldest child in that family. I majored in elementary education and taught four years in Adrian, Oregon, before getting married and staying home with my family. Eventually I made my way back to school, working at various times in special education, in the business office, in alternative education, and in a grant program seeking to help students by improving focus and balance. Finally, when the posi-



tion was available, I became the school librarian at Adrian and completed the Library Media Specialist program at George Fox University. I have been the school librarian at Adrian for 13 years now and enjoy it so much that I am having a hard time deciding when to retire, although I have at least moved to halftime work for this year.

My husband and I have three children, all of whom are library users (at least one of our kids first went to the library when he was a week old!). The city library in Nyssa, the county library in Ontario, and the school library in Adrian were all important as they were growing up. Our oldest son visited his aunt in Salem for extended periods during several summers so he could go to the city library with her each day and spend his time reading books. Over the years he has made extensive use of libraries at Stanford University, Palo Alto and Menlo Park, in California; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge and Boston (and several surrounding towns) in Massachusetts; and King County, Washington. Most of the books our kids currently check out from libraries are e-books.

My father-in-law, an elementary school teacher, said that throughout his career, students who were readers never gave him any problems. I believe school libraries play an important role in creating and supporting readers. The Adrian School library serves toddlers and preschool children in our community with a weekly story hour; students in grades K–5 have weekly library classes; when students in grades 24 finish books during their scheduled reading times, teachers send them to the library to check out new books; middle school and high school students check out books before school and during language arts and English classes. Occasionally, adults in the community check out books and audio books from the library. Ours is a library that seeks to serve patrons *across the lifespan!*

### **Phyllis McCracken**

I am the second child of that family. I remember as a youngster playing outside while my older sister was inside the house reading a book. I wasn't sure I wanted to grow up if it meant one would choose to read instead of to play. (Of course, I now enjoy reading!)

At our small grade school in Scotts Mills, the "library" consisted of several books on shelves in the principal's office. After moving to Ontario, we had access to the county/city library near the junior high, and as a high school senior I had an after-school job shelving books there. At George Fox College, I worked in the library to help pay tuition, and after a couple years changed from elementary education to major in language arts/literature.

Salem Public Library hired me in 1965 as a library assistant, and I worked there until my retirement forty-two years later. During that time, I worked in various roles in circulation, children's, and technical services and experienced many changes in technology. From the "chunka" Gaylord checkout to cameras and keypunch cards to computerization, the goal was always the same: the sharing of resources. Individual families are unable to afford the resources which are purchased by pooling our tax money, and individual homes do not have space enough to house such a collection, though some have tried!

I have witnessed a variety of patterns for cooperation between different kinds of libraries. For a time, the West Salem branch shared space and books with Walker Junior High School. Interlibrary Loan is an excellent tool for sharing. Having recently moved to a retirement community, I find that our library includes a shelf of books on revolving loan from the public library.

In addition to a firm belief in sharing, I applaud the universality of the public library. For all ages and reading levels and for a huge range of interests, the library is available. 

