ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF A SMALL LIBRARY 1794-1956

To President Dwight of Yale College we own a description of the little town of Stepney, now Rocky Hill, as it appeared in 1796.

"Stepney," he says, "is a parish of Wethersfield lying on a collection of hills, which are a continuation of the Middletown range……one of these eminences, Rocky Hill, has given it's name to the parish so generally, that few persons in the State have ever heard of the name Stepney……. This parish is a rich agricultural country, and carries on a considerable commerce……The people are prosperous; the houses generally good, the church, a new building, is handsome and everything which meets the eye wears the appearance of industry and prosperity."

In 1794, two years before President Dwight's tribute, Calvin Chapin came as pastor to the twenty-seven members of the Rocky Hill Congregational Ecclesiastical Society. For the fifty-seven years of his ministry, he was, undoubtedly, the town's most eminent citizen. A man of wide interests and fine intellect, his interests extended far beyond the boundaries of his town and even of his nation. Among his more notable achievements was his interest in organizing of the American Board of Commissions for Foreign Missions, which has since grown to world wide fame.

On December 11, 1794, only six months after his call to Rocky Hill he acted as moderator of a meeting at which the Social Library of Stepney Society was organized. The records of this first library are, for the next fifty-three years in the handwriting of Calvin Chapin. He was also it's first librarian and evidently the moving spirit and inspiration of the group. A constitution was

drawn up and sixty-eight subscribers including four women were listed. Each subscriber paid nine shillings ($1.50) as a fee. This was later reduced to three shillings a year and finally to eighteen pence.

The forst books, eighty-seven in all, were purchased from Isaac Beers Jr. of New Haven in January 1795 at a cost of twenty-six pounds, 13 shillings and four pence. The collection included history, travel, poetry, fiction and theological works. The record shows additions to this nucleus to an aggregate of two hundred thirty-five volumes.

In January 1795, only a month after this first group of interested citizens had organized, another group of whom twelve were women formed the Free Library (though a fee of seventy-five cents was charged). Again there was no permanent fund or home and the location changed many times.

Why two libraries in a village so small? Since there was, until many years later, only one church it is assumed that it might more likely have been political animosity. Feeling between the Federal Party (progenitor of the present Republican Party) and the Republican Party, now the Democratic Party was beginning to boil in preparation for the election of 1796. Neither organization makes any allusion to the other.

In 1820, a new generation having taken over the affairs of the town, the Free Library proposed a conference with the Social Library. The report of this meeting says that the two library associations came together, “on the noble principal of generosity”. This new combination took the name of the original group and framed a new constitution listing seventy-eight proprietors. Very few of the original groups were part of this compromise.

In 1829. the books (about two hundred) were catalogued and some volumes thought to be superfluous were sold. From this time on for many years the books were kept in Mr. Wait

Williams' store near the ferry landing. He was librarian until 1838. The last records of the Social Library of Stepney Society are dated 1847 and claim five hundred eight volumes. This was also the year of the retirement of Dr. Chapin.

Reverend Mr. Rockwood, next pastor of the, by then, Rocky Hill Congregational Church organized, in 1855, a society "for mutual improvement, especially in connection with a library". This was called the Social Library Association of Rocky Hill. To this group the old library gave its books, now reduced to two hundred twenty, as a nucleus for the new society. Although organized with lofty ideals, there were evidently no meetings but the library continued to loan books and presumably "mutual improvement" continued.

In 1860 a few citizens met for the purpose "of considering the propriety of forming an association for the literary culture of the people generally". It had a concert committee, a library committee and one to organize a debating club. Several interesting lectures were given by distinguished Connecticut scholars.

The sixty volumes which this group had accumulated were in 1877 turned over to the newly formed Rocky Hill Library Association which became heir to all earlier organizations of a literary and cultural nature. A constitution, adopted in 1879, stated that it was organized "for mental, social and esthetic improvement, from recitative, dramatic, didactic and other literary exercises". They further provided that "fifty dollars annually shall be expended for books"… members in arrears for dues (50 cents annually) shall pay an admission fee of ten cents per night to the regular fortnightly entertainments." As a final and important vote it was decided that the librarian "shall receive twenty-five cents per evening for attendance at the regular times of taking out and returning books". This "regular time" was for many years one evening every two weeks.

This association met, at various times, in Academy Hall (now Legion Hall), “Mrs. James Bulkley’s ellport”, and the former barroom of the Velley Hotel until in 1899, having bought land, they appointed a committee of five men to submit plans for a building at a cost not to exceed $2000. To insure the carrying out of these plans they also appointed a committee of five women to raise the funds. Both groups must have worked efficiently and before the end of the year the building which is today the adult room was dedicated.

Senior citizens of Rocky Hill still speak with fond remembrance of the good times they had in Library Hall where meetings continued to be held every two weeks. Skits, musicals, games, recitations were enjoyed by young and old and Mrs. Adelaide Wright, was until her death in 1917, in charge of “taking out and returning books”. In her memory a trust fund was started for buying books in the non-fiction class. This is the first of several small bequests.

Mrs. Nellie Warner became librarian in 1918 and, at her suggestion, books for children were added. This brought a new group of borrowers and the juvenile collection has been considered unusually good for so small a library.

Another change of title came in 1926 when the library became town property and for the first time public funds were used. The Town Report of 1927 records $518.58 as the town’s expense. This included $150. as the librarian’s “salary”, $84. for the janitor and $88.64 spent for books. The weekly circulation is given as one hundred sixty which seems unusually good when one considers that the number of books is only listed as “about 2600 volumes”.

In 1929 there appears the first mention of cataloguing, which was done by the six elected board members and volunteers. Mrs. Belle Holcomb Johnson of the Public Library Department of the State Board of Education supervised this work. The town appropriation continued but

never exceeded $500 until 1941. The Town Report for that year shows expenses of $766.88 and five hundred thirteen books were added.

It would seem that the first encyclopedia was purchased in 1932. This was The World Book and the price was $48.87. Although this was the worst year of the depression, or perhaps because of it the library was first opened twice a week. Interested citizens, under the very able leadership of Mrs. Cora. J. Belden worked faithfully for the interests of all. Until her death in 1948 Mrs. Belden was a ready helper to the children in their assignments. Mrs. Belden was not only chairman of the library board but did all the book selection, buying, and preparing for circulation for several years. It was indeed a labor of love for which she was honored by having the library renamed the Cora J. Belden Library. A few months before her death Mrs. Belden felt she should resign and as this coincided with a town election a new group became directors.

Under the direction of the Bureau of Libraries a heavy program of discarding was undertaken. The new regional library is the recipient of many volumes more suitable to their use than ours. For the first time the library was open for three afternoons and evenings a week. A successful Saturday morning program has been conducted several winters and the American Heritage Program was conducted. Our librarian celebrated thirty-five years of work in 1953 and was honored with a tea,

Through the erection of a new town building the library was, in 1954, given full use of the building, which since 1926 had included the town offices. At last the dream of interested citizens for a children's room became possible. We were fortunate to secure a trained librarian to take over the technical phases of selection, discarding, cataloguing and arranging the facilities for children. The room was attractively painted, shelving built and, even as the work progressed, a story hour conducted to draw the boys and girls. Funds were still scarce and the question of

personnel could be answered only by volunteer workers. For one whole school year the library was open morning, afternoon and evening three days each week (to accommodate classes on double session) staffed by women of the town. It was a highly successful example of community cooperation.

The library today, still very inadequate for a rapidly growing suburban town of six thousand has no trained staff but lists an enthusiastic nine hundred seventy-five borrowers. The budget is still less than the minimum one dollar per capita recommended by most authorities. The present collection of 13,040 volumes of reference material, plays, poetry and a large amount of good fiction will someday be a basis of worth for the library which Rocky Hill needs.

It takes much had work, great persistence and a deep devotion to all that a library can mean to succeed. However there are always those who believe that good books are a powerful source for good and a great source of comfort, of joy and of understanding.

"Books are keys to wisdom's treasure;
Books are paths that upward lead;
Books are gates to lands of pleasure,
Books are friends
Come let us read."