Part 1: A Book, A Librarian, and an Eclipse

Pam Moran, Superintendent

Executive Director at Virginia School Consortium for Learning

Abstract

The critical importance of sustainable libraries in this century. I am somewhat dismayed to hear of libraries in rural, urban, and suburban areas cutting back hours or closing because of lack of funding. The statement about a small local community that chose to build a library during the Great Depression while still suffering the economic aftermath of the American Civil War speaks to the critical value that communities of responsibility have paid forward to subsequent generations.

Moments become inextricably linked, becoming known to us only as new events emerge. They take their places on the unfolding timeline of our lives. In the dark of last night, I stood outside and gazed skyward, waiting in silence as the lunar eclipse unfolded until an umber orb hung high above twisted branches of winter trees. The hollow's light breeze and air’s chill strung together a timeline of nights and days of generations of tribes that spent lifetimes watching lunar and solar eclipses come and go under a North American sky. We, today’s tribes, mostly watch with an appreciation and understanding of the science behind the eclipse; reveling in our new capabilities to grab instantaneous images, beam them through phones to the world, or choose, if under clouds, to watch the event streaming via NASA around the globe.

Last night, I was reminded at 2:00 a.m. of lunar eclipses I’ve watched along my own timeline. One night, perched in a cupola atop the roof of a college dorm, I rank as the coldest but clearest of my eclipse watching opportunities. Decades ago, the
second eclipse night, hanging with a few science students from my classes, reminds me why learning and teaching aren’t always a congruent Venn universe.

Wikipedia moon’s total lunar eclipse path through the earth’s shadow.

That night, I noted the difference between a student seeing a textbook image of the moon in full eclipse, hearing a teacher explain how it occurs, or simulating it with a lab group as compared to experiencing the painstakingly slow march of a lunar eclipse in a midnight sky. These memories led back to my first eclipse experience, a solar not a lunar eclipse. It also connects to my other story, that of a librarian.

Over the weekend my mother called to talk. It’s a ritual going back to my first week in college. Over time, the conversations shifted from questions about how I was doing in school to discussions about everyone’s jobs to stories about grandchildren and the ups and downs of the Atlanta Braves. In the last decade, those landline calls began to bring news of the deaths of my parents’ contemporaries- my teachers, the local judge, a minister, neighbors. Midway through the decade my father’s name was added to the list. This past weekend, my mother whispered the name of a woman who influenced generations of readers of all ages in my hometown; the longtime public librarian.

She was 97 when she died and according to her housekeeper she just slipped away. In town, she was known as an iconic matriarch of ‘all things books’ who led, shepherded, and, when necessary, pushed a community of less than two thousand out of its one-room library and into a modern day space. I still have my first library card and remember the day she filled it out by hand and assigned me the number 294. I learned how to dream myself out of my small, dirt-poor southern town because of her. She was a fierce protector of a young, precocious reader, allowing me to stay for hours and absorb as much as I could from books and her stories.

Bamberg County Library Built in 1933: A Great Depression Project
I spent every Saturday morning in that library, sometimes on the floor, sometimes on a library ladder, pulling book after book off the shelves, searching for the perfect title, a passage that intrigued, an ending that
stunned. It’s where I learned to read in whatever order I wanted to, paying less attention to the beginning, middle, end, and more attention to the feel of the book. I learned to take books apart and put them back together again – in order. Knowing that I’d flown through the juvenile collection (too soon in her opinion), she began to set aside other books for my visits; adult books I really had no business reading. She said more than once, “you can take this book now, but only if you promise you’ll read it again when you’re older.” Eventually, I moved past her censorship and took home stacks of books held tight in thin arms, often reading as I walked. Over time, I read my way through every shelf in that library and eventually found myself walking into her new library – itself now 40 years old.

The Bamberg Regional Library today (built 1970)

I also became a student of history and science as I learned to appreciate the hunt of the limited research I could accomplish in the old library. I remember the day when the librarian shared news that made her eyes smile. Our local library had joined a regional library group and she could now borrow books on behalf of her patrons.

That’s how she connected through me to last night’s eclipse. I had heard on the nightly news that the low country was going to be one of the best places to watch an upcoming solar eclipse. The anchor also warned citizens not to watch the eclipse without a viewing device at the cost of damaging one’s eyesight. I shared my goal of watching the eclipse with her and we joined forces in the hunt to figure out a solution. We finally found it because she could borrow a book that allowed me to create the simple technology needed to watch the eclipse. Who knows whether that event led me onto the pathway to become a science major in college, a science educator in the classroom, and a person who’s still willing to get up after midnight to watch eclipses? I do know I remember that event.

I had the good fortune to be born a reader- a fast reader. Eventually, I left that small town for college, other towns, and other libraries. But, it was only last night that I considered how a book, a librarian, and an eclipse linked my life’s timeline together. It’s a 3:17 a.m. eclipse moment I’ll forever hold dear.

Statistical Snapshot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building Size:</th>
<th>6,800 sq.ft.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Items Checked Out in FY2009:</td>
<td>28,941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Computers:</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data for a small town library, 2009

(I am somewhat dismayed to hear of libraries in rural, urban, and suburban areas cutting back hours or closing because of lack of funding. The statement about a small local community that chose to build a library during the Great Depression while still suffering the economic aftermath of the American Civil War speaks to the critical value that communities of responsibility have paid forward to subsequent generations.)