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## "A Quiet, Non-Leader Type"



by Kathleen Ditewig-Morris

*How one woman found her voice and helped save the Lincoln Branch Library...*

The Peoria Public Library's Lincoln Branch, an exquisite Carnegie library built in 1911, is now on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1970, however, it was nearly closed and demolished due to declining circulation and concerns over the deteriorating neighborhood it served.

One local woman rose up and said "no." She spearheaded a grassroots protest to save the Lincoln Branch, mustering the collective energies of neighborhood patrons, business owners, schools, churches, social service agencies, families and schoolchildren.

Kathleen Powers Ditewig had no political connections, no money and no power—but she had a fierce will, a passion for books and learning, and a deep desire to preserve the library as the center of a community. She passed away on December 21, 2014 at the age of 90, having left sparse, handwritten notes of her quest nearly 45 years earlier. "Besides my children," she penned, "this was the best experience of my life."

This is the story of her crusade to preserve what was (and is) far more than a historic landmark for an old neighborhood in the heart of the city. The Lincoln Branch Library is an irreplaceable center of knowledge—and a way of life for its residents.

### **An Extension of Home**

Kathleen Powers Ditewig lived the first 65 years of her life in a five-block area on Peoria's south side. Upon graduating from Manual Training High School, she worked as an operator at Illinois Bell Telephone Company. She and my father, William F. Ditewig, were married in 1948 and lived in a house on Shelley Street until he passed away in 1986. Three years later, she sold the house to Common Place, a social service agency directly across the street. The organization still uses the house today for a number of its literacy and other programs that serve the neighborhood.

Mom liked to say she lived a quiet life, raising her three kids and tending to the home fires—but it was never quiet in our small house. Mom laughed and danced and tried in vain to make good pancakes. She could light up a room by simply walking into it. She read voraciously and argued politics vigorously with my father. But then came the day she caused a real stir, and Peoria was never the same because of it.

*October 17, 1970.* I was the baby of the family, a gawky nine-year-old kid. I woke up on that sunny Saturday and wandered into the kitchen in search of breakfast. Instead, I found my mother pacing the floor, enraged. She and my father were talking about an article in the *Peoria Journal Star*. On the table lay the paper with its ominous headline: "Oldest Peoria Branch Library May Move to New Quarters" by reporter Theo Jean Kenyon.

As the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, the Peoria Public Library had embarked on a long-range plan to build a new branch in the north part of town and execute a policy of fewer and larger branches, then demolishing the building and converting the land it occupied to recreational use.

Lincoln Branch Library was an extension of our home, as it was for so many others in the neighborhood. We were there constantly—checking out books, hauling them home, devouring them and returning for more. We did our homework there, used the card catalog for reports, and knew the kind librarians by name. The idea of that magical place being gone made us sad.

And it made my mother *mad*. She paced and fretted and began wearing a path in the linoleum until my father said in his calm, matter-of-fact way: "Well, Kath, go do something about it." And that's when the "quiet" Kathleen Powers Ditewig sprang into action.

### **Spreading the Word**

She hunkered down at my father's desk with a phone book and started making lists of people to talk to. She marched across the street to Common Place and solicited the assistance of its founder and executive director, Dick Tunks. She joined forces with Ellwood Paine, owner of a welding supply store across the street from the Lincoln Branch, who gave her constant encouragement.

The primary rationale for closing the Lincoln Branch was declining circulation. One of the main causes for the decline, according to then-Library Director William Bryan, was increasing crime in the neighborhood. "Despite new lighting, a parking lot adjoining the building, and employment of an off-duty policeman two nights a week... use continues to decline," he said.



My mother and her growing band of partners attacked these arguments in letter-writing campaigns to the library board, the City Council and the *Peoria Journal Star*. "Our children have a right to the wealth of knowledge behind those walls and we can think of no lovelier or quieter place to retreat than Lincoln Branch Library," she wrote. For the next year or so, my mother and Dick Tunks—frequently accompanied by other concerned citizens—began attending library board meetings.

She also focused on generating awareness among local residents and increasing circulation at the Lincoln Branch. She circulated petitions among south side residents. She mustered the support of the Boy Scouts, who went door-to-door to gather signatures. She and her supporters picketed the library, too, as a means to raise awareness and collect signatures.

Word spread quickly. *Peoria Journal Star* reporter Norm Bain interviewed her for an article published on November 3, 1970. "A quiet, non-leader type," he called her. "Mrs. Ditewig's campaign has included petitions, letters to library board members, to local newspapers and calls on her alderman. She has no organization, but has received assistance from Boy Scouts, neighborhood churches and the City Council. At least a partial result of

her actions is that the subject of the Lincoln Branch will be on the agenda of the next library board meeting." The newspaper also voiced editorial support for the campaign, urging the library to "consider very closely and deeply before taking such a drastic step."

My mother and other supporters presented their case and the 1,500 petition signatures to the library board, challenging claims about circulation and crime. "Mrs. Ditewig said she had checked the figures and determined that the largest decrease was in circulation of juvenile books, with an actual increase for young people and adults," according to the next day's newspaper and library board minutes.

She also addressed the supposed reason for a decline in circulation. "Mrs. Ditewig... told the board that charges residents are 'afraid' to go the library are not true," the account said. "Mrs. Ditewig said she had asked the police department for its records on the Lincoln Park Square... and 'all they came up with were two sex offenses, one purse-snatching, three bicycles stolen and some rock incidents. That's all they came up with in the past seven years.'"

At the meeting's conclusion, the board stated it would investigate the situation more extensively before making a final decision. Mom came home, exhausted and exhilarated, and admittedly a bit proud of herself.

### **SOS – Save Our Library**

Because declining circulation centered on children's books, she targeted children's circulation to get the numbers up. She paid visits to the principals of south-side elementary schools and persuaded them to cooperate. "Over time, overall school circulation was very successful due to the fact Manual High School, St. Boniface, St. John's, St. Patrick's, Roosevelt, Trewyn and Lee schools and all the others used the facility for homework," she wrote. "Teachers insisted students use the library for reports and assignments."

Continuing her awareness campaign, she was interviewed by the local TV news as picketers paced the Lincoln Branch grounds behind her. She persuaded Caterpillar to print windshield flyers and bookmarks reading "SOS – Save our Library" to spread the word.

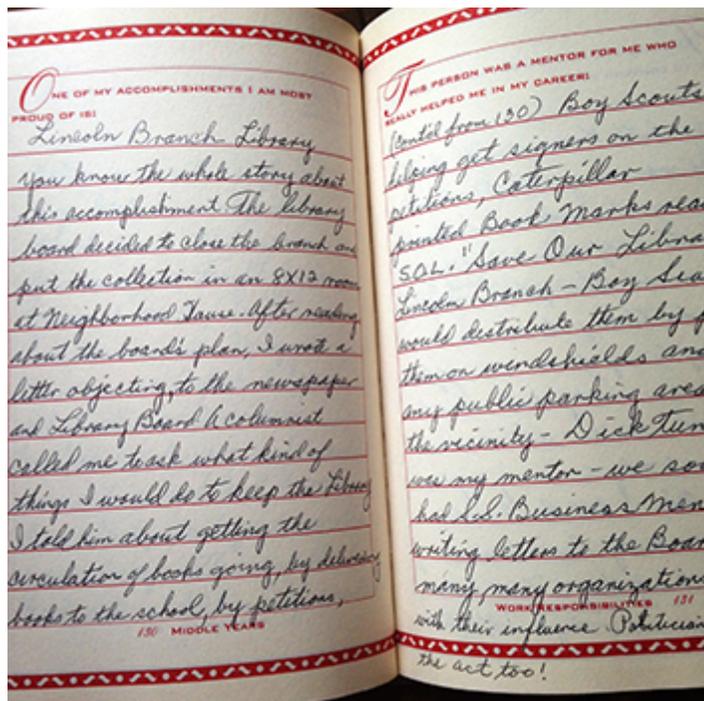
By the time the next library board meeting came around, the contingent of support had grown beyond the immediate neighborhood. Board President Hazel Wolf entertained comments from a new voice, Susan Klatte, representing the Bradley University Women's Club Political and Social Action Group, who encouraged the board to slow down. The group objected to the closing of the library "for humanitarian, cultural, educational, aesthetic and historical reasons."

At the January 15, 1971 board meeting, the Lincoln Branch Library was granted a temporary stay of execution. Wolf stated that since the problems of all the branches in the system were related to the budget, the Lincoln Branch should remain part of the overall study. Even William Bryan, the biggest proponent of the closure, backed off, saying, "At this point, I would suggest we don't try to separate the Lincoln Branch from the rest of the system but struggle through with the whole thing."

By now, my "quiet" mother had found her voice and refused to be satisfied. She feistily said she had "been under the impression that improving circulation of books and trying to attract more children to use the library might be the determining factor in the decision. That doesn't mean anything?" Board member Joe Billy McDade assured her that "we're not going to sidetrack it by eliminating it through the budget. There is no way we're going to let closing of the Lincoln Branch slip through."

The next day, the *Peoria Journal Star* ran an article with the headline, "Lincoln Branch Library Will Stay In Operation"—but only until its fate could be permanently decided. Still, my mother and the other opponents wouldn't let up. Letters continued to stream in to the board and the newspaper. She continued working to increase circulation.

At the February 19, 1971 library board meeting, the tone continued to change. After reading many more letters opposing the closure, Hazel Wolf said it looked as if the area was changing, and "perhaps this might be the time for someone to start a fund for the care of the Lincoln Branch Library building in the future," since the board was not permitted to spend money for landmarks.



Finally, my mother's efforts to boost children's book circulation began to pay off. At the April 16th board meeting, "Mr. Bryan stated that he is pleased that circulation is continuing to increase at Lincoln Branch. It has jumped about 500 books from March 1, 1970 to March 1, 1971." My mother had written in her journal, "Circulation increased so much the library board made the decision to keep it in tip-top condition, which kept the library open." Lincoln Branch was subsequently included in the larger library budget, and so it remained despite the closure of other small branches and the opening of the Lakeview Branch in 1974.

### Notes of Passion

I can't remember when my mother put away her sword and the protest faded into silence. Life simply went on in our house, at Common Place and at Lincoln Branch. By then, Mom had a fan club. She was approached to run for the Peoria County Board, but she declined. She

wanted to return to her "quiet" life, and so she did.

Last year, when the Lincoln Branch was named to the National Register of Historic Places, my mother was in an assisted living facility, and her health was failing. At the time, I didn't think she understood the significance of what transpired when we showed her the news report, but perhaps she did. Somehow, in the last few weeks of her life, she managed to scribble out notes about her Lincoln Branch campaign—notes she carefully rolled up and tucked into a cosmetic pouch in her nightstand, hoping someone would find them. We did, the day after she died.

In other journals, she always included this adventure among her life's proudest memories. Her handwriting wavered, but the passion in her words never did. It was, after all, "the best experience of her life." **iBi**

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