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# Libraries + IRW = “Big Read” Success

By Jan Coates

Libraries are a vital community partner for Island Readers & Writers (IRW), a nonprofit based on Mount Desert Island (MDI) that provides innovative multidisciplinary reading programs for children living on Maine’s coastal islands and a handful of mainland communities.

In 2010 and 2012, IRW participated in “The Big Read,” a nationwide initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and Arts Midwest designed to “restore reading to the center of American culture.” Libraries were an intrinsic part of the programs we offered and brought community together in unique ways.

IRW applied for its first Big Read grant in 2009. The target audience was residents of seven coastal islands: Deer Isle-Stonington, Isle au Haut, Mount Desert Island, Swan’s Island, Frenchboro, Islesford, and the Cranberry Isles. The library directors in the four Mount Desert Island towns collaborated with the assistant superintendent of MDI schools and the executive director of IRW to choose a book. They selected *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London from the booklist provided by the Big Read program, and together they identified some of the place-based themes and events that could bring the selected story to life and build community in the process.

IRW selected a lead library partner and all 11 libraries within the seven participating island communities were called upon to distribute books, design book-related programs and exhibits, host discussion groups, and identify lapsed, reluctant, and enthusiastic readers to share in the fun and excitement of neighbors

and families reading the same book at the same time. As active community centers with multi-aged patrons, libraries were essential to building communities of readers within each community. Books and programs were free to participants.

*The Call of the Wild* Big Read, held in January and February 2010, drew 1,236 readers for a month-long program involving seven communities, 11 libraries, 17 other nonprofits, and two school districts. Programming included everything from book discussions to musical programs and even a dog sledding demonstration outside one of the local libraries.

The success of this program led to a second application in 2011. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* Big Read held in January and February 2012 drew 1,290 readers and involved 10 libraries, 25 other nonprofit partners, and two school districts, and offered 45 scheduled programs. Programs included lectures, musical programs, art projects, book discussions, and even panel discussions on topics such as race relations in the era of the book and now.

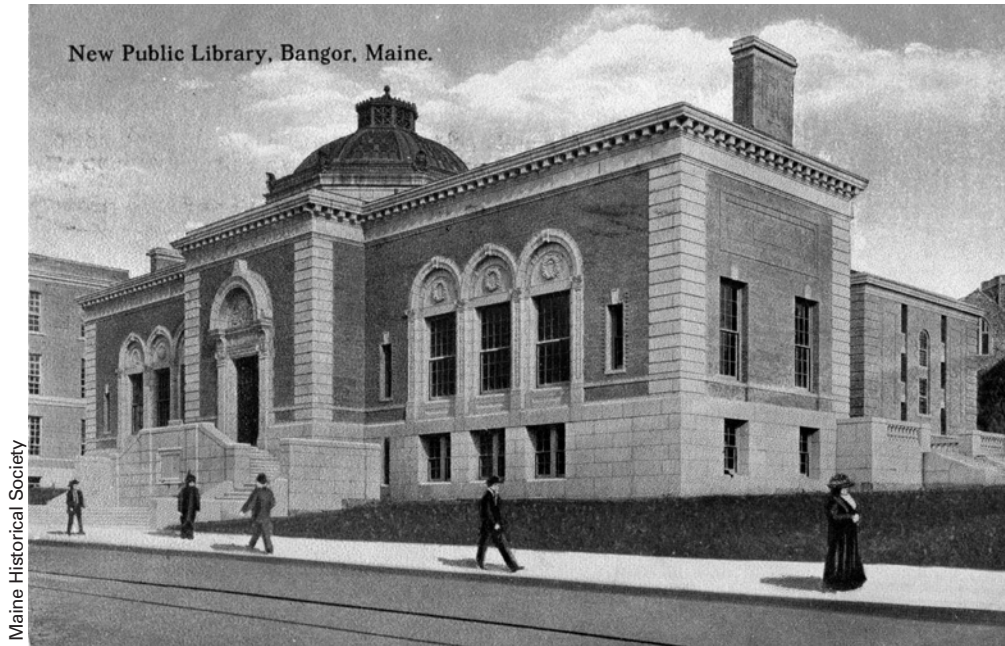
Libraries expanded on the themes and scenes in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to involve the community in innovative ways. For instance, the Bass Harbor Memorial Library solicited artwork inspired by the famed fence-painting scene in the book which resulted in “Fabulous Fences and Wise Words,” an exhibit of artwork in various media created by local artists and on display throughout the month. The exhibit was also the subject of an artists’ reception and a discussion session. At the Jesup Memorial Library in Bar Harbor there was a program on caving inspired by Tom and Becky’s cave-bound adventures in the book. The program began with the library’s executive director reading the pertinent passage from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Then, rangers from Acadia National Park provided a presentation about caving. The program was a collaborative effort among community organizations, focused on learning about the geology of caves on Mount Desert Island and how the caves of Maine differ from those of Missouri where Tom and Becky were lost.

These are terrific examples of libraries taking active steps “outside the book” to support creative learning in their communities and to provide meaningful experiences linking literature to the community and wider world in programs accessible and appealing to a wide

range of people—library users and those in the community who were not regular patrons of their libraries. The Big Read program has as a goal “the bringing together of partners across the country to encourage reading for pleasure and enlightenment.” We surely achieved this and much more, and we could not have done it without the support and involvement of our local public libraries. 🐟



**Jan Coates** is the founding executive director of Island Readers and Writers of Mt. Desert Island, Maine. She was owner of Port in a Storm bookstore in Somesville for 10 years. Prior to that, she served for over 20 years as an administrator and senior officer at Albion College (Michigan) and Hamilton College (NY).



Maine Historical Society

*Bangor Public Library, built to replace the original library destroyed in the “great Bangor fire” of 1911. Construction began in 1912 and it was opened for public use on December 20, 1913. The library remained essentially the same from 1913 until 1997, except for an addition to the back stacks in 1957.*



*Bangor Public Library today. The library was significantly renovated and expanded with the addition of a new wing in 1997, thanks to a donation from Stephen and Tabitha King. The library has the largest collection of any single public library in the state.*