

Accessible Radicalism: The Subversive Printing Tradition of Girard, Kansas

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Undergraduate division

Among the percentage of the population that has visited Girard, Kansas, most would be surprised to learn of the town's radical history nestled amongst the friendly restaurant-goers and waving motorists. For starters, former hotbeds of the American socialist movement lie in the town's square's buildings, whereas today they are known for only a hair salon or dollar store. Five-time Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs regularly lectured on the town's courthouse steps to throngs of children and their parents. The famous meatpacking novel *The Jungle* was first envisioned in Girard, as well as its serialized publication through the town's radical newspaper. Even President Theodore Roosevelt monitored the printing activity stemming from Girard, believing the radical movement to be a nuisance to the overall health of the nation. After World War I, later Girard generations designed an innovative method for cheap access to information via the Little Blue Books, oftentimes itself taboo and clandestine.¹ As a sixteen-year-old in history class, I could hardly believe my ears when I learned that my small, present-day conservative town had such an exciting history. Thus, "Accessible Radicalism" is a collection of radical literature whose basic creation emerged in the attempt to bring alternative ideas to common people via cheap, accessible publishing methods.

As a product of the K-12 Girard public school system, I have an interest in American socialism that comes from the special relationship my town fostered with an eccentric who's-who of American radicalism in the pre-WWI years. Girard's historical relevance comes primarily from its housing of one of the most widely-published newspapers in the world, the socialist *Appeal to Reason*. Some historians, including Daniel Bell, have pointed to Girard as one of the primary reasons for the expansion of the "Golden Years of American Socialism," primarily from 1901-1912. Some of the more popular socialists who either resided in or visited Girard included

¹ The definitive account on Girard radicalism is Elliot Shore, *Talkin' Socialism: J.A. Wayland and the Role of the Press in American Radicalism, 1890-1912* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1988).

Appeal owner J.A. Wayland, Debs, *The Jungle's* Upton Sinclair, *White Fang* and *The Call of the Wild* author Jack London, social activist Kate Richards O'Hare, and author Marian Wharton, among hundreds of others. Almost all of them came because of the *Appeal*, located in the modern "Temple of the Revolution," as Socialists affectionately called their printing headquarters.

Such prosperity did not last, especially after 1912. That same year, facing mounting attempts of federal suppression, Wayland committed suicide. The paper began to fall on hard times and slowly descended into irrelevance amidst governmental crackdown and financial difficulties. However, the printing operations were bought by E. Haldeman-Julius and recast as the home for Little Blue Books throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Even after the *Appeal to Reason* printed its last issue in 1922, the Little Blue Books continued saturating the market with books often considered subversive, if not timely. The importance of the genre revolves mainly on the idea that Americans craved knowledge and would respond well to a cheap medium designed for that purpose. The Books were published on a variety of topics, including everything from Ancient Greek philosophy to abortion and divorce. It is on said radicalism where my transition from historical dilettante to quasi-serious Girard collector owes itself.

I first learned of the *Appeal* and Little Blue Books in 2003, during a conversation with one of my father's oldest friends. Highlighting the subversive nature of some of the print material, my older acquaintance had just concluded telling me a story of secretly meeting with his friends to pour over forbidden topics. Intrigued, I began pressing him for more details, but the conversation quickly died, and my friend began backtracking. I had just learned that for many in Girard, the *Appeal* and the later "suggestive" Blue Books were strictly an aside to a conversation,

something that could augment a local reference but not dominate an evening. It did not take me long to learn that Girard radicalism was a Thing You Should Not Talk About, looked upon by subsequent conservative 20th century generations as a laughable experiment that met its rightful end with the emergence of World War I and hyper-nationalism in America. I was confused—for a town whose only semblance to a tourist draw was a giant American Legion flag, why didn't more people highlight the successes of the radical press in the town, allowing it to reach a national audience? Why didn't more people know about the *Appeal's* special serialization of *The Jungle* in its pages before it became a national bestseller? The answers to these questions are complicated and beyond the scope of this essay, but they solidified my interest in Girard history. Indeed, this interest has translated into a senior honors thesis in the History department and an opportunity to use some of my collection in an examination of the radical press.

As mentioned, I first entered the world of southeastern Kansas radical literature because of its taboo nature. In the summer of 2006, I volunteered for a summer in Girard's public library to help catalogue its collection of Girard subversive materials, where I first learned of the scope in topics. At the time, I was a confused sixteen year-old who sympathized with the idea of rebellion more than the act, and here the forgotten titles of some of works beckoned to me like an old relative. As I sorted books, I can remember feeling excitement at the idea that my volunteer work was (so I thought) a small act of rebellion against the cookie-cutter mold of small town hegemony. Here, resting just a few feet from the sanitized, artificial monotony of innocent librarians and bad self-help books on the floor above were titles such as *Religion as a Bar to Progress*, *The Sex Factor in Man's Life*, and *Confessions of an Abortionist*. I thought of my older friends recalling their childhood stashes of Little Blue Books. Here were some of the most clean-cut and polite people in town, and they hadn't been corrupted or turned evil by books in their

childhood, I thought. Satisfied, I took a greater interest in the movement, even after finishing the volunteer job at the library.

By the end of high school, even as my rebellious phase filtered away, I was collecting objects from the *Appeal* days and the subsequent Haldemann-Julius Blue Book years. Often, I found the most success at antique stores and local garage sales. My parameters for collecting were relatively simplistic: I sought items that mentioned my hometown, Girard, on the title page, where I could show friends or family members. Later, I realized that almost all of the works followed a literary current of grandiose, visionary promises juxtaposed with appeals for intellectual self-advancement for the working class, which became more appealing as a collector. If the *Appeal* worked to foster socialist growth to the common man or downtrodden citizen, the Blue Books continued targeting this audience while introducing it to a new level of intellectual conversation.

The primary sources contain a theme that is ubiquitous to Girard's brand of radical printing: accessibility to the proletariat and common man. One of the best ways of fostering this accessibility came through the unique writing style of the Girard socialists and their successors, most evident in *Appeal* owner J.A. Wayland. Without Wayland or his influence, there would have been no Blue Book or preponderance of academic interest in the movement. His fiery writing on socialism remains engaging a century later, combining simplistic altruistic appeals to communal solidarity with pseudo-scientific "evidence" on the practicality of socialism. A typical Girard socialist paragraph follows a pattern of an approaching utopian future, vague in specificity but grandiose in promise. Wayland, for example, wrote how only "fools uphold a social system that has robbery for its basic principle," while contrasting their approach by noting

that, "they will get wiser with time and Socialist agitation."² To this day, imagining such language emerging from a contemporary sleepy square is particularly enthralling, where the only present-day reference to the movement rests on a rusted plaque by a modern dentist office. Needless to say, the opportunity to research these individuals and collect their work as I close my undergraduate career has been a rewarding experience.

After asking for the occasional Blue Book or history book on Girard for a year's worth of holidays and birthdays, I began venturing into collecting on my own. Given that almost all of the books in this collection are out-of-print, I purchased the non-Blue Book primary sources through online resources, namely AbeBooks or Ebay. However, the majority of the Little Blue Books came from Lawrence's own Vagabond Bookstore, where I remember seeing the seasoned shop owner's eyes light up upon hearing about my interest in Girard radicalism one afternoon. Before my purchase, the owner described a familiar tale of acquiring his collection through elder relatives and the ephemera of his youth. The story followed closely to the Haldeman-Julius objective: he owned many of them to simply learn more on hard-to-research topics, not unlike a curious person of the 1920s, for example. The experience in the Vagabond store was worthwhile, but if one visits any antique store in Southeastern Kansas, they would be hard-pressed not to find at least a few dusty copies of a Blue Book lying among the shelves as well.

Today, my collection of Little Blue Books and other literature from the *Appeal to Reason* is more valuable to me for its historical value than its shock value. Whether one is turned off by its political content, I believe it is still impressive that the original purpose of its publication was to foster knowledge among the people and cast an intellectual version of American self-improvement in the process, in this case replacing potential growth in capital with knowledge.

² Quoted in Shore, 77.

Indeed, even though the publishers included the occasional racy title to spark sales, the vast majority of the Little Blue Books and socialist literature contains materials for individual advancement, be it through career advice or primers on historical events.³ Ironically, one could argue that said advancement operated within the very same capitalistic system in which the socialists criticized, but this argument does not detract from the movement's success. Thanks to its accessibility—especially after the *Appeal* folded—one needn't be a socialist to enjoy the works; the Haldemann-Julius family steered the final *Appeal* issues away from its socialist content and moved into a less political direction in later years. Perhaps it stems from living in an age where knowledge rests behind the click of a button, but the Girard radical literature collection provides an interesting window into the academic interests of bygone Kansans, both from a production and consumption standpoint. As evidenced by the bibliography, these interests could touch everything from geometric theory to evolutionists.

Eventually, I hope to give a wistful nod to the radicals' vision by providing a permanent display case for the public to view. In my own vision, the centerpiece of this collection is the lengthy Debs book, for it represents the most tangible realization of the canon of self-advancement rhetoric. Luckily, it maintains a pristine condition some decades after its publication, despite the lack of an adequate space to house the collection. Even though my collection is usually dispersed throughout various safes and bookshelves between Girard and Lawrence, its personal value continues to resonate with me as I include the collection together for the first time. Collecting these materials not only allows me to learn more about the radical movement in my hometown, but also channels the remaining traces of my youthful sentiments, which somehow always returns to a dusty storage room in the Girard Public Library.

³ The bibliography expands upon these examples.

Bibliography

Little Blue Books

Barrett, Lawrence A. 1928. *Elementary Plane Geometry Self Taught*. Little Blue Book #748. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications.

Carrington, Dr. Hereward. 1925. *Astronomy for Beginners*. Little Blue Book #895. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

Condon, Edward. 1925. *Curiosities of Mathematics*. Little Blue Book #876. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

Crawford, Nelson Antrim, ed. 1924. *Great English Poems*. Little Blue Book #9. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

Cunningham, Clarice. 1927. *What Do You Know? A Book of Questions and Answers*. Little Blue Book #1251. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications.

Cunningham's work acts as a forerunner to the later popularity of trivia in American culture. The title alone, *What Do You Know?*, hearkens for the reader to advance his or her knowledge and learn more about the world around them. As with many of the Blue Books, ignorance or lack of knowledge on a particular subject is inexcusable, because one simply need find the correct Blue Book on the topic of his or her choice.

DeFord, Allen. 1926. *Latin Self Taught*. Little Blue Book #999. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

DeFord's book on Latin is a helpful portrait to the expectations of the Haldeman-Julius Company and the intellectual desires of the American people. As with any publisher, some books sold better than others, but here the authors agreed that a 1926 audience would be interested in teaching themselves Latin. Moreover, many of the Blue Books contain "Self Taught" in the title, suggesting that the timeless American tradition of self-improvement and personal advancement was not just limited to economic opportunity, but intellectual capacity.

DeFord, Miriam Allen. 1926. *Typewriting Self Taught*. Little Blue Book #1009. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

Fenton, Carroll Lane. 1924. *Ernst Haeckel: Evolutionist*. Little Blue Book #597. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

Fenton's book on Ernst Haeckel is the collection's first example of subversive, even taboo material being published. I especially like it because of the word the publishers use to describe Haeckel, in this case "evolutionist" instead of the more politically-correct "biologist" or "scientist." Additionally, it reveals that the Little Blue Book reader had a plethora of topics to whet his or her intellectual appetite, ranging from the Lawrence Barrett's geometry books to biographies on famous individuals, and everything in between.

Froude, James A. *Science of History*. Ten-Cent Pocket Series. Little Blue Book #175. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

Goldberg, Isaac. 1925. *The Enjoyment of Reading: Notes on the Appreciation of Literature*. Little Blue Book #897. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

Hibschman, Harry. 1928. *The Riddle of Human Behavior*. Little Blue Book #777. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications.

Huxley, Thomas. *A Liberal Education*. Ten-Cent Pocket Series. Little Blue Book #7. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

London, Jack. 1924. *What Life Means to Me*. Little Blue Book #30. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

Even though socialism as a political alternative fell out of favor with many Americans after World War I, the Girard publishers still did not hesitate to include subtle references to the movement's "glory days." In this case, London, an ardent socialist, intertwines American socialist talking points throughout his anecdotal personal philosophy. The 1920s reader would recognize the subliminal politicizing. It is interesting to note that the this book came in the Little Blue Book infancy, leaving one to wonder its publishing fate in the 1940s or 50s.

Markun, Leo. 1927. *A Dictionary of Geographical Names*. Little Blue Book #1259. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications.

----. 1927. *A Short History of the American Revolution*. Little Blue Book #597. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications.

Mason, John. 1923. *Evolution Made Plain*. Little Blue Book #467. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Co.

Milburn, George and Peter Quian. 1926. *Lives of the U.S. Presidents*. Little Blue Book #1065. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

Ross, Nelson E. 1928. *How to Write Telegrams Properly*. Little Blue Book #459. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications.

I especially like Ross's book on writing telegrams because it continues the Girard printing tradition of self-improvement through a professional skill as opposed to a historical event or biographical sketch. Clearly, both reader and publisher recognized the perceived social importance of learning how to write telegrams. The fact that many adults sought information on the technology leads one to believe that a) the disparity between telegraph users to non-users must have been notable, and b) that the technology's warrant of a how-to book on its usage still cast doubts on its ubiquity in commonplace American skills.

Seymour, Flora Warren. 1924. *History of the New York Indians*. Little Blue Book #754. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

- Sheehan, Murray. 1924. *A History of Sculpture*. Little Blue Book #466. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.
- Sheehan, A.M. Murray. 1923. *The Story of Architecture: Facts You Should Know About the Evolution of Buildings*. Little Blue Book #468. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications.
- Shipley, Maynard. 1926. *Physics Self-Taught*. Little Blue Book #994. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.
- Smith, Lloyd E. 1927. *A Book of General Information Quizzes*. Little Blue Book #1253. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications.

If Carroll Fenton's work on evolution could be considered an example of "subversive" Little Blue Book topics, Lloyd E. Smith's work would be the opposite. His safe, non-divisive topics form a primitive self-help genre of Little Blue Books. With information ranging from classical mythology to self-taught arithmetic, Smith's contribution is not unlike a high school curriculum, providing a broad base of general topics to form a well-rounded reader. For this reason, his work is equally as important to the Little Blue Book canon as more radical authors.

- . 1924. *A Dictionary of Classical Mythology*. Little Blue Book #499. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.
- . 1924. *Popular Shakesperian Quotations*. Little Blue Book #816. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.
- . 1925. *How to Write Letters for All Occasions*. Little Blue Book #855. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications.
- . 1925. *Arithmetic Self Taught Part I*. Little Blue Book #856. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.
- . 1925. *Arithmetic Self Taught Part II*. Little Blue Book #857. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.
- . 1925. *A Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases in Frequent Use in English Contexts*. Little Blue Book #902. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.
- . 1925. *A Dictionary of Biblical Allusions*. Little Blue Book #905. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.
- Von Keler, Theodore M. R. 1923. *The Essence of the Koran*. Little Blue Book #428. Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Company.

Other Primary Resources

- Brewer, George D. *The Fighting Editor, or Warren and The Appeal*. 2nd ed. Girard, Kansas: George D. Brewer, 1910.

This book is a reactionary piece drafted to protect *Appeal to Reason* editor Fred Warren from a series of federal indictments that threatened his continued employment for the paper. I especially find it appropriate for the collection because Brewer's work—as well as the *Debs* anthology, set the standard for what subversive material looked like in this time period. Oftentimes, this came in the forms of lectures, op-ed pieces, and demeaning cartoons. By present-day standards, these mediums are quite harmless, yet the charged material inside reads as a rousing defense of the paper's operations; it is not hard to imagine critics' disdain at its publication.

Debs: His Life Writings and Speeches. Girard, Kansas: The Appeal to Reason, 1908.

This anthology of Debsian speeches, letters and essays came several years before the Little Blue Books and their renewed emphasis on educating the proletariat, but one notices the influence *Appeal to Reason* works such as this one played in crafting such targeted rhetoric for future generations. Indeed, the copyright page reads in part, "Copyright protection is taken upon this volume for the sole purpose of protecting the work of Comrade Debs from prejudicial misuse by pirate Capitalist publishers..." This book is the highlight of the collection, borne out of the apex of Girard socialism yet still some decades before the dawn of Little Blue Books.

Secondary Sources

Shore, Elliott. *Talkin' Socialism: J.A. Wayland and the Role of the Press in American Radicalism, 1890-1912*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1988.

As a history student, I don't believe the collection to be complete without a professional's historical context. Shore's work is the definitive account of Wayland, the *Appeal*, and the socialist years of Girard printing radicalism. He briefly touches on the Little Blue Books, but spends the bulk of his writing crafting an image of Wayland that casts his numerous editorials and articles in a more accessible light. Of course, the Little Blue Books owe much of their success to the path forged by Wayland years before.

Novels

Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*. New York: New American Library, 2009. (Original work published 1887).

Bellamy's *Looking Backward* is the father of Girard radicalism. I first bought this novel because I knew J.A. Wayland had a copy of it on his bedside on the night of his death, which was suicide. After researching the influence of Bellamy, I learned that Wayland and several other prominent Girard residents appreciated the utopian, colonial aspect of Bellamy's novel, where groups of people would move to desolate areas in the country to forge communities out of nothing but Bellamyian idealism. Bellamy's novel outlays a model Boston in the year 2000 built on communal efficiency, where all citizens pull equal weight to form a model society.

Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle: The Uncensored Original Edition*. Tucson: See Sharp Press, 2003.
(Original work published 1905).

The term "Radical" (from the Latin radix meaning root), during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, identified proponents of democratic reform, in what subsequently became the parliamentary Radical Movement. During the 19th century in the United Kingdom, continental Europe and Latin America, the term "Radical" came to denote a progressive liberal ideology inspired by the French Revolution. Historically, Radicalism emerged in an early form with the French Revolution and the similar movements it