LITERACY IN AMERICAN LIVES

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span of a lifetime, must accomplish an abrupt transition from family farm to twenty-first-century postindustrialism—a transition that took the country itself several generations and myriad forms of sponsorship to accomplish. And she must rely heavily on the institution of the school to make that leap. For her and many others, literacy learning entails more than attaining the reading and writing abilities implied by ever-rising standards. It also entails an ability—somehow, some way—to make the transformations and amalgamations that have become embedded, across time, in the history of those standards. Teachers sensitive to the projects of translation and adaptation that underlie students’ writing can listen for those moments when students express them and then recognize their value. But, even further, with the right care and insight, the “lateral possibilities” that Hunt’s writing remembers and imagines may not be eliminated. Hunt should be able to look to her school for help in articulating the suffering of her community and for realizing her solidarity with those people, urban and rural, who are “kind of affected” by the same issues as she. When we read, write, teach, and learn with historical consciousness, we save from extinction the often inchoate yearnings of voices in change.

LITERACY AND ILLITERACY IN DOCUMENTARY AMERICA

In his fascinating book, Literacy, Law, and Social Order, Edward Stevens (1988) explored the difficult relationship between literacy and justice in U.S. legal history. Literacy came to be presumed of the citizen in both political and economic dimensions. Voting, serving on a jury, and seeking entitlements all required access to information that was embodied in writing. Likewise, under the rules of contract, signers were expected to know what they were signing and were bound by it. Although in principle literacy is a foundation of American democracy, it is in practice a troublesome source of inequity and disequilibrium in the administration of justice. Knowing how to read enhances political and economic rights, whereas not knowing how to read diminishes them. In relationship to illiterates, literates enjoy more autonomy and prerogative; in a practical sense, their liberties are worth more. What happens to fairness and equality under the law under such conditions? Stevens explored the crises for individuals and public institutions in a society where justice depends so heavily on the printed word. Drawing on case law, Stevens showed how, at times, U.S. courts tried to protect illiterates from political exclusion and economic exploitation. However, the rights of illiterates gradually lost out to what Stevens called the “ideal of the contract” in American thought—a belief in the unfettered right to pursue private interests by engaging freely in mutual exchanges and obligations. The principle of contract was so powerful that illiteracy eventually came to be treated as a form of irresponsibility.

Connections between literacy and social viability tightened further with what Stevens called the rise of “advanced contractarian society” (p. 25) in the twentieth century. More and more aspects of economic,
political, and even social relationships were being conducted through documents – spurred by the development of corporations and the concentrations of power and money that they accrued. Direct market relations between individuals gave way to corporate-style activity – a growth in bureaucratic structures, interdependence, planning, restrictions on the flow of information, and other forms of control, all based largely on written and other symbol-based instruments (p. 185). The industries of insurance and banking grew in size and complexity to handle problems associated with large-scale investment. Governments grew in kind as efforts to regulate commerce and administer justice under these changing conditions required public bureaucracies equal in size and strength to private ones. These developments helped to standardize contracts, rules, and rights, and, in some ways, illiterates and literates alike benefitted from protections built directly into standard language. However, as more political and economic processes were bound up with documents, illiteracy grew more limiting and more punishing. Indeed, these developments strained the basic literacy of all citizens, as staying informed, exercising rights, and claiming a fair share of public resources all involved the negotiation of increasingly complex institutional systems and their thickets of documents. The potential power of one's civil rights rose or fell depending on one's ability to match or surpass a growing standard of sophistication in reading and writing. In an advanced contractarian society, the ability to write has grown as integral as the ability to read; in a world of print, writing is often the only viable way to have voice. At the start of the twenty-first century, the troubled and troubling connections between literacy and justice persist in new form, as society's political and economic relations move increasingly on-line. Unequal access to computer technology introduces new sources of inequality into the processes of staying informed, exercising free speech, and enjoying economic benefits and choices. In a practical way, computer technology amplifies the civil and economic rights of those that have it over those that don't.

Dorothy Smith (1974) explored other ideological dimensions of what she called “documentary reality,” a term she used to underscore that in contemporary society, much of what we count as basic features of work and life already has been highly processed through print and other symbolic media. Those who control everything from news reporting to reporting forms structure the ways that people can know the world and determine what counts as fact. Smith called the accounting categories and documentary procedures of any organization its “enforced linguistic resources” (p. 265), the manner and substance in which organizational thinking and action occur. That which is unrepresented or unreported falls away as if it were not there or had not happened. When documents then become the basis of official decision making, their power grows even more profound. Written reports in schools, mental health care facilities, credit bureaus, prisons, hospitals, divorce court, personnel departments, adoption agencies, and Social Security offices – in fact, documents in all modern organizations – control the way that decisions are made, justice is rendered, and resources are distributed. The dominion of documents in very real ways constructs who we are and to what we are and are not entitled. “Our relation to others in our society and beyond,” Smith observed, “is mediated by the social organization of its ruling” (p. 267). Again, the growth of computer-based communication will only intensify these trends as more basic social activity will play out in the symbolically arranged world of virtual reality.

Written accounting procedures were a ubiquitous presence in the literacy histories that I collected, and it was clear that learning to write in the twentieth century involved many people in learning how to negotiate and, at times, circumvent or subvert – various systems of accounting procedures. Henry Schmidt, born in 1908 and a dairy farm inspector for a large milk processing corporation, used to physically carry loan documents and government regulatory booklets into the barns and milk houses that he visited, convincing small-dairy farmers to negotiate loans from his company for modern equipment and helping them to complete government reporting forms that would protect the grade A status of their milk. Independent plumber Sidney Vopat, born in 1913, recalled how he learned to read regulations regarding construction materials and procedures, translating them mentally all the while into cheaper alternatives that still technically met code. “You had to abide by it,” he said about plumbing regulations. “But we could always find a cheaper way of doing it. You learned how to be an honest crook.” Meat salesman Bill, born in 1919, laughingly referred to the expense account he had to keep track of as his “swindle sheet.” Animal technician Phil, born in 1907, recalled increasingly formal accounting procedures at a large public institution that employed him – procedures that required bids for virtually any purchase. In reaction, he and other blue-collar technicians increasingly were called on to make or jury-rig needed equipment as a way to circumvent the lengthy and cumbersome outside contract procedure. Gladys Robinson, born in 1946, served as a home health aide to her ailing mother as a means of supporting both of them as well as an extended family of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. As she documented her mother's condition, she was well aware that the forms also would be scrutinized for judgments about continued funding of her position. Just how much the
formal accounting procedures of modern organizations can "rule" interpersonal relations was made clear by Cassandra Hackman born in 1960, who at the time of our interview had just given birth to a son with cerebral palsy. She had been asked by her child's pediatrician to keep an ongoing written record of the baby's sleep patterns, mood, and responses to food and medicine, a log that she took along on all doctor visits. And a young father I interviewed said that a journal that he kept at the request of a medical professional had become part of the official record during a custody hearing.

These brief illustrations demonstrate the impact of a burgeoning documentary society. Print proliferates in the lives of Americans, as documents form part of the general environment in which the meanings of writing and reading develop. Beyond that, however, we can see how documents become a site on which struggles for rights and resources play out. For individuals, these struggles can both stimulate learning and affect the worth of one's skills. Gladys Robinson's LPN charting skills, for instance, had to craftily keep up with a system that was growing less supportive and more demanding of accountability in medical costs. As her case and those of others show, the struggles of competing interests fought out on the grounds of documents often determine how effective individual literacy skills can be in protecting rights and pursuing well-being. But the competitions that develop in a documentary society reach even further into the history of individual and collective literacy learning, as literacy skills especially over the twentieth century were recruited into the interests of sponsoring agents. The adult writing of dairy inspector Henry Schmidt, for example, developed along with the changing fortunes of the corporation that employed him as it jockeyed for market position and responded to government regulation. With each turn in the contest came new demands on his writing and reading skills. The explosion of information workers over the course of the twentieth century and the rising norms in literacy achievement are both results of the rounds of competition waged on and through the grounds of written instruments. So, to Edward Stevens's concerns about the status of outright illiterates in the rise of documentary society must be added concerns about the role of documentary society itself in making literacy and illiteracy. As documentary activity intensified, the skills of American literates not only got caught up in the struggles but were vulnerable to the outcomes, as fights over valuable access to information or control over accounting procedures would bring inevitable consequences for the status and power of individual literate skill. In document wars (and the technology wars that have evolved from them), rendering an opponent ill-informed or, better yet, illiterate becomes an irresistible and effective strategy. The impact of this process on literacy learning and on the problems of literacy and justice are consequential.

This chapter, then, continues to explore the impact of sponsorship on literacy learning by examining how it functions as part of the growth in "contractarian society." The exploration proceeds again through two extended case studies of literacy development, this time involving two American men. One is Dwayne Lowery, born in 1938, an auto worker turned union representative. He saw the demands on his literacy skills rising precipitously in the 1970s and 1980s as labor and management turned increasingly to document-based struggle to advance their interests. The other man, Johnny Ames, born in 1950 and raised a sharecropper, could barely read or write when he was sent to prison in the late 1970s. Over a period of seven years, he became literate from inside a maximum-security prison during an especially intense period of struggle over the meanings of rehabilitation and the limits of prisoner rights.

The analysis of both cases proceeds with several aims. Most generally, the analysis continues to employ the concept of sponsorship to explore how individual literacy development takes shape in synchrony with economic and political developments. The cases also illustrate how struggles among sponsors of literacy create opportunities and barriers for individual literacy learners. Competitions for control or ascendance inject volatility into the value of people's literacy skills and are most responsible for the unrelenting rise in literacy standards. We will see how intensifying competitions for economic and political edge raise the stakes for literacy for individuals caught up in those contests. The dynamics of these contests affect not only people's economic chances but often their ability to exercise basic rights.

At the same time, the analysis will explore how histories of competition among the sponsors of literacy also provide the resources on which people depend as they cope with escalating demands and shifting definitions of literacy. Residues of past struggles around literacy leave behind critical materials, tools, practices, and values that individuals can amalgamate into new and more adaptive forms of literacy and literacy learning. This accumulating history of literacy grew in ideological density as well as sheer material excess as the twentieth century proceeded. The resultant complexity was both hindrance and help in learning to read and write.

We will see how two men, positioned quite differently by race, region, occupation, and circumstances, are both caught up in the intensifying power of contractarian relations, the thickening context of rules and
regulations that came to regulate public and private domains of contemporary society. Contractarian struggles entered labor-management relations and inmate-prison relations during the same 20-year period, bringing dramatic implications for the lives of Dwayne Lowery and Johnny Ames. These struggles both expanded and curtailed the political and economic rights of the two men and, at the same time, expanded and curtailed the power of their literacy. In treating these two case studies in depth, the chapter continues to demonstrate a method for exposing sponsorship patterns in individual literacy learning and also tries to capture the dense and complex character of literacy as it was developing across the latter half of the twentieth century.

Dwayne Lowery, Born 1938

Consider, first, then, the case of Dwayne Lowery, whose transition in the early 1970s from line worker in an automobile manufacturing plant to field representative for a major public employees union exemplified the major transition of the post–World War II economy—from a thing-making, thing-swapping society to an information-making, service-swapping society. In the process, Dwayne Lowery had to learn to read and write in ways that he had never done before. How his experiences with writing developed and how they were sponsored—and distressed—by institutional struggle will unfold in the following narrative.

A man of eastern European ancestry, Dwayne Lowery was born in 1938 and raised in a semirural area in the upper Midwest, the third of five children of a rubber worker father and a homemaker mother. Lowery recalled how, in his childhood home, his father’s feisty union publications and left-leaning newspapers and radio shows helped to create a political climate in his household. “I was sixteen years old before I knew that goddamn Republicans was two words,” he said. Despite this influence, Lowery said he shunned politics and newspaper reading as a young person, except to read the sports page. A diffident student, he graduated near the bottom of his class from a small high school in 1956 and, after a stint in the army, went to work on the assembly line of a major automobile manufacturer. In the late 1960s, bored with the repetition of spraying primer paint on the right door latch of 57 cars an hour, Lowery traded in his night shift at the auto plant for a day job reading water meters in a municipal utility department. It was at that time, Lowery recalled, that he rediscovered newspapers, reading them in the early morning in his department’s break room. He said:

At the time I guess I got a little more interested in the state of things within the state. I started to get a little political at that time and got a little more information about local people. So I would buy [a metropolitan paper] and I would read that paper in the morning. It was a pretty conservative paper, but I got some information.

At about the same time, Lowery became active in a rapidly growing public employees union, and, in the early 1970s, he applied for and received a union-sponsored grant that allowed him to take off four months of work and travel to Washington, D.C. for training in union activity. Here is his extended account of that experience:

When I got to school, there was a lot of reading. I often felt bad. If I had read more [as a high school student], it wouldn’t have been so tough. But they pumped a lot of stuff at us to read. We had extensive homework. We had reading to do and we had to make some presentation on our part of it. What they were trying to teach us, I believe, was regulations, systems, laws. In case anything in court came up along the way, we would know that. We did a lot of work on organizing, you know, learning how to negotiate contracts, contractual language, how to write it. Gross National Product, how that affected the Consumer Price Index. It was pretty much a crash course. It was pretty much crammed in. And I’m not sure we were all that well prepared when we got done, but it was interesting.

After a hands-on experience organizing sanitation workers in the West, Lowery returned home and was offered a full-time job as a field staff representative for the union, handling worker grievances and contract negotiations for a large, active local near his state capital. His initial writing and rhetorical activities corresponded with the heady days of the early 1970s when the union was growing in strength and influence, reflecting in part the exponential expansion in information workers and service providers within all branches of government. With practice, Lowery said he became “good at talking,” “good at presenting the union side,” “good at slicing chunks off the employer’s case.” Lowery observed that in those years, the elected officials with whom he was negotiating often lacked the sophistication of their Washington-trained union counterparts. “They were part-time people,” he said. “And they didn’t know how to calculate. We got things in contracts that didn’t cost them much at the time but were going to cost them a ton down the road.” In time, though, even small municipal and county governments responded to the public employees’ growing
power by hiring attorneys to represent them in grievance and contract negotiations. "Pretty soon," Lowery observed, "ninety percent of the people I was dealing with across the table were attorneys."

This move brought dramatic changes in the writing practices of union reps, and, in Lowery's estimation, a simultaneous waning of the power of workers and the power of his own literacy. "It used to be we got our way through muscle or through political connections," he said. "Now we had to get it through legalistic stuff. It was no longer just sit down and talk about it. Can we make a deal?" Instead, all activity became rendered in writing: the exhibit, the brief, the transcript, the letter, the appeal. Because briefs took longer to write, the wheels of justice took longer to turn. Delays in grievance hearings became routine, as lawyers and union reps alike asked hearing judges for extensions on their briefs. Things went, in Lowery's words, "from quick, competent justice to expensive and long-term justice."

In the meantime, Lowery began spending up to 70 hours a week at work, sweating over the writing of briefs, which are typically 15- to 30-page documents laying out precedents, arguments, and evidence for a grievant's case. These documents were being forced by the new environment in which Lowery's union was operating. He explained:

When employers were represented by an attorney, you were going to have a written brief because the attorney needs to get paid. Well, what do you think if you were a union grievant and the attorney says, "Well, I'm going to write a brief" and Dwayne Lowery says, "Well, I'm not going to"? Does the worker somehow feel that their representation is less now?

To keep up with the new demands, Lowery occasionally traveled to major cities for two- or three-day union-sponsored workshops on arbitration, new legislation, and communication skills. He also took short courses at a historic school for workers at a nearby university. His writing instruction consisted mainly of reading the briefs of other field reps, especially those done by the college graduates who increasingly were being assigned to his district from union headquarters. Lowery said he kept a file drawer filled with other people's briefs from which he would borrow formats and phrasings. At the time of our interview in 1995, Dwayne Lowery had just taken early and somewhat bitter retirement, replaced by a recent graduate from a master's degree program in industrial relations. As a retiree, he was engaged in local Democratic Party politics and was getting informal lessons in word processing at home from his wife.

Over a 20-year period, Lowery's adult writing took its character from a particular juncture in labor relations, when even small units of government began wielding (and, as a consequence, began spreading) a "legalistic" form of literacy to restore political dominance over public workers. This struggle for dominance shaped the kinds of literacy skills required of Lowery, the kinds of genres he learned and used, and the kinds of literate identity he developed. Lowery's rank-and-file experience and his talent for representing that experience around a bargaining table became increasingly peripheral to his ability to prepare documents that could compete in kind with those written by his more highly educated, professional adversaries. Face-to-face meetings became occasions mostly for a ritualistic exchange of texts, as arbitrators generally deferred decisions, reaching them in private, after solitary deliberation over complex sets of documents. What Lowery was up against as a working adult in the second half of the twentieth century was more than just living through a rising standard in literacy expectations or a generalized growth in professionalization, specialization, or documentary power — although certainly all of those things are, generically, true. Rather, these developments should be seen more specifically, as outcomes of ongoing transformations in the history of literacy as it has been wielded as part of economic and political conflict. These transformations become the arenas in which literacy experiences lies deep within the historical conditions of industrial relations in the twentieth century and, more particularly, within the changing nature of work and labor struggle over the last several decades. Formal relationships of all kinds came to rely on elaborately explicit rules and regulations. For labor, these conditions only intensified in the 1960s and 1970s when a flurry of federal and state civil rights legislation curtailed the previously unregulated hiring and firing power of management. These developments made the appeal to law as central as collective bargaining for extending employee rights. I mention this broader picture first because it relates to the forms of employer backlash that Lowery began experiencing by the early 1980s and, more important, because a history of unionism serves as a guide for a closer look at the sponsors of Lowery's literacy.
These resources begin with the influence of his father, whose membership in the United Rubber Workers during the ideologically potent 1930s and 1940s grounded Lowery in class-conscious progressivism and its favorite literate form: the newspaper. On top of that, though, was a pragmatic philosophy of worker education that developed in the United States after the Depression as an anticommunist antidote to left-wing intellectual influences in unions. Lowery's parent union, in fact, had been a central force in refocusing worker education away from an earlier emphasis on broad critical study and toward discrete techniques for organizing and bargaining. Workers began to be trained in the discrete bodies of knowledge, written formats, and idioms associated with those strategies. Characteristic of this legacy, Lowery's crash course at the Washington-based training center in the early 1970s emphasized technical information, problem solving, and union-building skills and methods. The transformation in worker education from critical, humanistic study to problem-solving skills was also lived out at the school for workers where Lowery took short courses in the 1980s. Once a place where factory workers came to write and read about economics, sociology, and labor history, the school is now part of a university extension service offering workshops – often requested by management – on such topics as work restructuring, new technology, health and safety regulations, and joint labor-management cooperation. Finally, in this inventory of Lowery's literacy sponsors, we must add the latest incarnations shaping union practices: the attorneys and college-educated coworkers who carried into Lowery's workplace forms of legal discourse and "essayist literacy."  

What should we notice about this pattern of sponsorship? First, we can see how the course of an ordinary person's literacy learning – its occasions, materials, applications, potentials – follow the transformations going on within sponsoring institutions as those institutions fight for economic and ideological position. As a result of wins, losses, or compromises, institutions undergo change, affecting the kinds of literacy they promulgate and the status that such literacy has in the larger society. So where, how, why, when, and what Lowery practiced as a writer – and what he didn't practice – took shape as part of the postindustrial jockeying going on since the 1970s among labor, government, and industry. Yet there is more to be seen in this inventory of literacy sponsors. It exposes the deeply textured history that lies within the literacy practices of institutions and within any individual's literacy experiences. Accumulated layers of sponsoring influences – in families, workplaces, schools, memory – carry forms of literacy that have been shaped out of ideological and economic struggles of the past. This history, on the one hand, is a sustaining resource in the quest for literacy. It enables an older generation to pass its literacy resources onto another. Lowery's exposure to his father's newspaper reading and supper-table political talk kindled his adult passion for news, debate, and language that rendered relief and justice. This history also helps to create infrastructures of opportunity. Lowery found crucial supports for extending his adult literacy in the education networks that unions established during the first half of the twentieth century as they were consolidating into national powers. On the other hand, however, this layered history of sponsorship is also deeply conservative and can be maladaptive because it teaches forms of literacy that oftentimes are in the process of being overtaken by new political realities and by ascendant forms of literacy. The decision to focus worker education on practical strategies of recruiting and bargaining – devised in the thick of Cold War patriotism and rapid expansion in union memberships – became ripe, by the Reagan years, for new forms of management aggression and cooptation.

It is actually this lag or gap in sponsoring forms that we call the rising standard of literacy. The pace of change and the place of literacy in economic competition have both intensified enormously in the recent past. It is as if the history of literacy is in fast-forward. Where once the same sponsoring arrangements could maintain value across a generation or more, forms of literacy and their sponsors can now rise and recede many times within a single life span. Dwayne Lowery experienced profound changes in forms of union-based literacy not only between his father's time and his but also between the time he joined the union and the time he left it, 20-odd years later. This phenomenon is what makes today's literacy feel so advanced and, at the same time, so destabilized.

Johnny Ames, Born 1950

If we can say, in a rough sense, that Dwayne Lowery's literacy was overpowered by late-century competitions between labor and management, we find in Johnny Ames a man whose experience moved him in an opposite direction – from illiteracy to literacy – in approximately the same time period, from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. Ames was an inmate for more than 16 years in maximum- and medium-security prisons in the Midwest during a period of sharp ideological fluctuations in approaches to penal administration, prisoner rights, and rehabilitation. The same civil rights rulings that informed labor-management battles in which Lowery was involved also informed inmate-institution battles during approximately the same time period. In the cross-currents of these competitions,
Ames amalgamated the resources by which he taught himself to read and write, passed a GED test, and completed an associate's degree as a para-legal technician. He wrote an appeal that overturned his conviction and eventually was released from prison. In the early 1990s at the age of 41, he began a career as a legal-aid researcher and part-time counselor of youth offenders.

The case of Johnny Ames is presented here not because it is representative of people sent to prison— for it clearly is not. Nor is this case meant to be representative of how one unusually humane, gifted, and hard-working individual can overcome all odds— although it clearly is. Rather, the aim is to continue to explore the dynamics of literacy sponsorship as they function within current institutional and cultural life— to examine in detail how barriers and opportunities for literacy learning arise out of accumulating struggles for economic and political advantage, struggles to which the powers of print increasingly become tied. Out of the dense and often contradictory conglomeration of materials, practices, and personnel converging in a penal institution in the late twentieth century, Ames was able to reroute even some of the most oppressive aspects of literacy's power into a project of justice and self-rescue.

Ames, an African American, was born in 1950 in a rural community under oppressive political and economic conditions still bearing the arrangements of nineteenth-century slavery and peonage. He grew up in an extended family led by his grandmother, who served as a tenant forewoman on a cotton farm and in later years built her own home and worked as a domestic. Except for an aunt who had migrated to New York, Ames said he knew of no adults in his family who had more than a fourth-grade education. However, Ames saw his grandmother writing and keeping figures in connection with her work overseeing day workers. He explained:

My grandmother's job was to hire people to pick cotton, fill out, do all the figures. She had to put the name of the people, how much they worked, how much they picked a day. Every time they picked, she had to weigh the cotton and tally it up at the end of the day, take it to the gin, get it weighed, get the money, pay the people off, and take the money and turn it in. She had to keep books for the person she worked for. We lived in a sharecropper's house. The person my grandmother worked for, the man on the farm, let us live in the house.

Evenings at home were spent around a wood-burning stove or on the porch where adults told stories or his grandmother read from the Bible.

"She would tell me stories about it," he recalled. "She would tell me stories based on nature. Most of her stories were based on the Bible and nature. Mostly proverbs." Other family members, some who were visiting temporarily, also told stories: "The stories were so real," he said. "You could tell that most of the stories came of life experience. Down South it would be real dark, no street lights. So when they'd tell these stories, it'd seem like you could see the things they were talking about. They made the stories humorous. But they'd seen a whole lot of stuff and they were telling us about it."

Despite intense interest in imaginative and didactic stories heard at home and at Sunday school, Ames was a reluctant student who preferred the company of his grandmother over the classroom. "School was not interesting to me," he said. "My focus was mostly on my grandmother. When she'd go clean up, I used to clean up. I'd cook. I'd do everything. Everything she used to do, I used to do." Ames said he attended school only because his grandmother told him she would be arrested if he didn't go. But reading and print were often sources of negative racial messages— messages that he knew enough to repudiate even at a young age. From the prohibitive signs on segregated water fountains and eateries to his teacher's reading aloud of the racist story Little Black Sambo, print was a source of confusion and turbulence:

That story about Little Black Sambo did something to me, I mean it really did. It just didn't make sense. And I guess during that time when you're a kid and you're trying to make sense out of something that don't make no sense, eventually you just resolve in a way that none of this makes sense. That story threw everything out of whack. And then there were the signs [i.e., No Negroes Allowed], and they had to write those signs. In my mind I can see how that association took the drive out of me. It didn't motivate me to write.

By the time he reached eighth grade in the early 1960s, virtually unable to read or write, Ames followed what was then local custom and stopped attending school: "Down South everybody dropped out of school mostly because they worked in the fields. They worked more instead of going to school. Working was our livelihood. It was connected to our supporting ourselves." But that system of tenant farming was fast evaporating, even in the isolated counties of central Missouri where Ames was coming of age. As farm mechanization appeared, so did truant officers. "They were trying to get most people down South to go to school because it was a big political thing," Ames explained.
The “big political thing” was an escalating youth unemployment rate that was of growing concern to government. In addition, at this time, in the early stages of the Vietnam War, up to one third of military recruits were being rejected for a lack of basic skills. In 1964, Lyndon Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act, creating, among other antipoverty initiatives, the Job Corps. Under this program, hundreds of residential training facilities were opened, many in remote areas of the country, to provide vocational and educational training to low-income teenagers. Among the first recruits was 14\(\frac{1}{2}\)-year-old Johnny Ames, who was taken from Missouri to Idaho. He described the experience:

It was on-the-job training in manual labor. Driving heavy equipment. I guess they had another part of the Job Corps where they had a lot of reading and writing. I guess. But at the time, the one I was in, we mostly did manual labor. Dig trenches, cut trees, landscaping. Never had too much reading or writing.

Nevertheless, Job Corps field trips sometimes included visits to college campuses. Ames particularly recalled one outing to a college in a small northwestern town:

It was the first time I saw a real African person. I said, “Hey, there’s a black person right there.” It was the first time I had seen a black person in this little town. And they said, “No, that’s an African.” So I went over and started talking to him. He didn’t even talk English that much. But that was the first time I ever saw anything besides the Tarzan program of Africa in my life at that time.

Like many Job Corps enrollees in this period, Ames quickly grew homesick and miserable. He was released after five months and returned home. “I just roamed around, went fishing and stuff like that,” he said. When he got older, he found marginal agricultural employment, then married and migrated to the automobile manufacturing areas of the upper Midwest. It was there that he was arrested and convicted of a capital offense. At age 25, he received a life sentence and entered a maximum security prison. Ames said his efforts to learn to read and write began with a staff of psychologists and social workers administered tests, classified inmates, ran group therapy sessions, and controlled and monitored prisoners classified with mental problems. Ames was buying a lot of books through prison library and began copious copying of passages that appealed to him. “I would go over the words, and the ones I didn’t understand, I would get a dictionary or I would ask, ‘What does this mean?’ I do that right today. If I run up on words I can’t pronounce, I just say, ‘Pronounce this word for me,’ cause now basically I know the meaning of a lot of words that I may not pronounce well.”

Ames’s reeducation in prison began with a chance meeting:

Prison was like total repression. We marched in twos, we had to stop talking at seven o’clock, and there was nothing about encouraging people to learn anything. But I ran up on an ex-nun named R________ E________ who was there at the prison. She was a schoolteacher and she always read books, Booker T. Washington, Up from Slavery, and things like that. At first I didn’t know what the word slavery was. I thought it was like self, the word self. So I asked a friend what the word was and he said slavery. So I went to her and I said, “Well, you must like what your people did to us.” And she said, “I’m going to show you that all white people are not alike.” So she made me sit at a desk the days after that and made me read that book. I used to stumble through the words and she used to tell me words. And she kind of encouraged me to continue to read. So I began to like it. I got really interested in books.

Using a dictionary given to him by the nun, Ames continued to work through books by Washington and Frederick Douglass as well as titles on inner growth, also given to him by the nun. He sought additional books through the prison library and began copying passages that appealed to him. “I would go over the words, and the ones I didn’t understand, I would get a dictionary or I would ask,” he explained. “I had no qualms about asking a person, ‘What does this mean?’ I do that right today. If I run up on words I can’t pronounce, I just say, ‘Pronounce this word for me,’ cause now basically I know the meaning of a lot of words that I may not pronounce well.”

Ames was assigned to work in the prison clinical services department, where a staff of psychologists and social workers administered tests, classified inmates, ran group therapy sessions, and controlled and monitored prisoners classified with mental problems. Ames was buying a lot of books by this time and occasionally exchanged them with the psychologists and social workers with whom he was associating. “Because the nature of
my offense, the staff people always liked to give me psychological tests just to see if I could do them. I'd say I was their guinea pig and they were my specimens, because I was studying them, too." Ames also became active in the Lifers' Group, which had been organized in the mid-1970s to gain more opportunities, including education privileges, for prisoners with life sentences. "The policy of the Division of Corrections then was not to educate lifers. They wanted to focus their funds on people who were going to get out," he explained. This group independently began raising money for education programs for themselves and others, helped by some members who already had education. "This was a diverse group of men," he explained. "It was men that could write and could think." They established an anticrime program for teenagers. They sold candy, canned goods, and photographs and applied for grants. The group was able to sponsor master's-level correspondence courses for one of their members to become a psychologist for the group. "Our objective was that we needed our own psychologist," he explained. "A person who had a life sentence could understand the mind of another lifer."

Many petitions and proposals were written through the 1970s and early 1980s, as the group had to win the right to meet and have access to written materials. "That's how other groups in the prison system now get to meet," Ames explained, "because we established a rule for that." Eventually Ames became coordinator of the group, serving for two years, working intensely on a number of grant proposals and petitions, written on a typewriter bought for him by his mother. Although he had enrolled in no formal course work, Ames talked his way into taking the GED and passed it. Soon after, as we will see below, he enrolled in college courses.

At about this time, in North Carolina, inmates won a crucial U.S. Supreme Court case, *Bound v. Smith*, that upheld their Fourteenth Amendment right to represent themselves in court and to have access to written materials. "That's how other groups in the prison system now get to meet," Ames explained, "because we established a rule for that." Eventually Ames became coordinator of the group, serving for two years, working intensely on a number of grant proposals and petitions, written on a typewriter bought for him by his mother. Although he had enrolled in no formal course work, Ames talked his way into taking the GED and passed it. Soon after, as we will see below, he enrolled in college courses.

For seven years I had only seen the tops of the trees. I'd make jokes about it. The trees don't have bottoms. We'd never see the bottoms. When I got to [the medium-security prison], there was grass and the bottoms of trees. I was talking about how exuberant I was and how I could smell. I wrote all that down.

He also started using writing to record incidents of racial tensions and injustices that he witnessed in the prison. "I'd write my feelings about that and throw them away," he said. "I knew there was trouble to get into for speaking, so I said, well, I'm not going to speak it. I'll just write it down."

Throughout his prison term, Ames also wrote in connection with mandatory participation in therapeutic groups, in which he was frequently chosen leader. This writing ranged from workbooklike questions and answers to a full-blown autobiography. "It was basically done for..."
yourself," he said of this writing, although the writing was reviewed by administrators and sometimes used in the preparation of psychological profiles introduced at parole hearings.

In 1992, Ames was at last paroled and became a full-time researcher in a legal clinic providing assistance to incarcerated people. He researches law and translates legal issues into lay terms, both in speaking and writing. Of the writing he does on his job, he said:

I basically explain administrative codes, what the statutes are, what the latest rulings of the courts are; I basically do factual writing. It has to be very concise. [The clients] must have no reason to be misled as to whether we are going to represent them when in fact we're not going to represent them or whether they have an issue when in fact they don't have an issue. The work I do is important because the men really need someone to explain to them their particular situation. I learned to write in order to convey that message to them so that they can understand what's going on in their life.

Ames learned how to use a computer on the job, primarily by reading a word processing book. Occasionally, he said, he asked questions of more experienced supervising attorneys or younger law students who worked with him, "little things mostly just to confirm what the book said," he explained. On nights and weekends, Ames also works for a community organization providing programs for youth offenders in presentencing or probation. Counselor and mentor, he loans books to the teenagers and takes them to area lectures. Ames also served on a citizen task force on gang activity in the county in which he lived; attending meetings with elected officials, school authorities, corrections personnel, community organizations, and area policy makers.

Ames said that he continued to go through "great pains" as a result of the gaps in his formal education. "Some things are hard for me to grasp," he said, "but once I grasp something, I got it. So some people can read something once or twice. Maybe I'll have to read it three or four or five times. But I know the value of rereading it four or five times." Reflecting on his literacy development, Ames said that reading and writing gave him a "chance to evaluate what is valuable and what is not. I wouldn't have been able to make those determinations in my life without reading and writing."

Ames's pursuit of literacy took place within a penitentiary system that had grown dense with the products - material and conceptual - of competing philosophies of prison management, rehabilitation, and law. This history, which ebbed and flowed with shifting political and social pressures from the larger society, was embedded in many of the institutional structures on which Ames relied for support. At the same time, Ames was finding ways to scaffold his emerging literacy on a number of important judicial decisions that were emerging from the courts during the very same period in which he was learning to read and write. These rulings, having to do with prisoner rights, as well as the responses of prisons to these judicial pressures, were a crucial part of the context for Ames's literacy learning. A close look at this synchrony of individual development with institutional development will be useful for understanding the deep structures of opportunities and barriers for literacy.

Historians of the American prison system point to a number of pressures that bore down on the corrections systems in the 1940s and 1950s. Autocratic for most of their history, state prisons typically had been administered independently with strong wardens and weak oversight. But by midcentury, prisons, like other burgeoning state institutions, began moving for financial and political reasons toward more bureaucratic and rational models of administration. As modern management theories were adopted, wardens became more professionalized and greater attention was given to communication, planning, public relations, fiscal management, legal awareness, central oversight, and written policies and procedures. These developments brought a flood of documents, forms, schedules, and regulations into the lives of prisoners. With more coordinated management, prisons differentiated into various types and missions, a process that induced an elaborate classification system for inmates, based not only on categories of crime but also increasingly on diagnostic evaluations, psychological and psychiatric testing, and social casework. Prison guards were joined by growing staffs of college-educated psychologists, activity specialists, testing experts, and casework managers, along with teachers and librarians who had had a more longstanding presence in the prison. The documentation that occupied so much of the time of the professional staff came to have increasing influence over the fate of prisoners in terms of treatment programs, work assignments, and, most important, parole. In his case study of one Wisconsin prison over a period of 30 years, Dickey (1991) suggested that the bureaucratizing of the post–World War II prison became a new form of repression. Expanding prison populations, increased paperwork, more government regulation, and increased public scrutiny all favored elaboration of standard procedures and documentation. According to Dickey, "all of these forces push toward rigidity, control, case processing, and no risk-taking," a process he believed reduced chances for human transformation within the prison (p. 7).
Professionals who were hired to control, classify, and monitor inmate populations by document rather than by force also carried with them new, competing philosophies of rehabilitation. These approaches could range at any time period from group therapy to behavior modification to transactional analysis to transcendental meditation (Pollock, 1997, p. 163). Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, when rehabilitation enjoyed lots of public support, inmates and groups of inmates could become engaged in analyzing life scripts or identifying communication patterns or participating in encounter groups. All of these treatments generated certain kinds of reflective discourse and reading and writing assignments for those who could manage them. At the same time, as a literate practice, participation in therapeutic programs in prison was complicated by the potential of having one's words reported and evaluated in other contexts – for instance, in surveillance for illegal or dangerous behavior or in judgments about assignments, privileges, parole, or release. Among the many thick files of his prison writings, Johnny Ames showed me worksheets associated with substance abuse therapy that were used as part of psychological evaluations and parole reports.\(^{15}\)

Another factor with implications for literacy was a round of important court decisions that gradually, over a series of discrete rulings, articulated citizenship rights of prisoners. Beginning with a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1941 that acknowledged prisoner access to due process, a spate of decisions in the 1960s and 1970s expanded prisoners’ access to legal services and information, banned censorship of correspondence between prisoners and lawyers, gave inmates access to law libraries and photocopiers, allowed prisoners to carry law books and legal papers, and allowed them to loan books and papers to others. These and other rulings also addressed other freedoms, including First Amendment rights. The Office of Economic Opportunity in the 1960s funded legal aid groups that pressured for better prison conditions, and subsequent civil rights legislation gave all citizens, including prisoners, the right to sue public officials. Prison historian James B. Jacobs (1977) described the late 1970s especially as a period when federal and state courts “scrutinized every aspect of the prison regime” and “issued injunctions and declaratory judgments affecting discipline, good time, living conditions, health care, censorship, restrictions on religion and speech, and access to the courts” (p. 9). Occasional high-profile prison riots through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s provided added pressures for expanding rights and improving material conditions. Most crucial overall was the broad social and judicial impact of the African American civil rights movement, which was affecting legal philosophy and inmate consciousness simultaneously.\(^{16}\)

Prison responses to liberalizing judicial rulings – including backlash – also affected the climate for literacy inside prisons. For instance, after U.S. Supreme Court rulings that upheld prisoner rights to access to legal services, many prisons added law libraries to their facilities as an alternative to providing direct legal aid. Cheaper and more politically palatable than assigning lawyers to take up inmates’ cases, libraries also made the pursuit of litigation more arduous for the individual, usually poorly educated inmate. Pollack (1997) also reported that throughout the 1970s, especially as racial consciousness and political activism rose, prisons officials were able to use court rulings on the First Amendment to curtail freedom of speech in a variety of areas, to suppress rights of prisoners to organize, and to put more systematic controls on prisoner writings. In some prisons, nonlegal correspondence was censored, writing and publishing for profit were forbidden, and printed material not received directly from publishers was banned.

Nowhere can the ideological vicissitudes of institutional contexts for literacy be better felt than in the history of prison libraries, whose health and mission rose and fell not only with various reform movements but also with shifting social beliefs about literacy itself. According to Coyle (1987), libraries appeared in prisons in the late eighteenth century primarily as a moral force, “as part of the internal discipline aimed at reform.”\(^{17}\) But as reading took on other purposes in the larger society, shifting from a focus on religious and didactic functions to leisure and entertainment, rationales for prison libraries became more tenuous. The twentieth century saw a revival and gradual professionalization of prison libraries but also intensifying arguments about their appropriate mission. As notions of rehabilitation bounced between education and therapy, the kinds of materials and services shifted accordingly. In the 1960s and 1970s with a focus on the prisoner’s right to read, there was a growing call for decoupling libraries from prison objectives and adopting the all-purpose service models of regular public libraries. Throughout this period, however, most libraries remained under control of correctional authorities and functioned primarily as adjuncts to education programs. By 1982, federal prison libraries saw their mandate clarified when the Federal Bureau of Prisons made literacy programs mandatory. Inmates with less than a sixth-grade education were required to enroll in adult basic education classes. By 1986, the standard had moved to eighth grade, and, by 1991, GED classes were required for anyone who had not already completed high school.\(^{18}\)

A return to Johnny Ames’s account of his literacy learning in prison demonstrates how his development partook of complex sediments of
conceptual and material resources formed of the struggles for ideological control going on in twentieth-century correctional facilities. These included bureaucratic, educational, judicial, and political initiatives whose competing agents, wittingly and not, became the sponsors of Ames’s literacy learning. Faced with the need not only to become literate but to build his own framework for doing so, Ames found, within the bureaucratic congestion of a maximum-security prison, the people and materials that he could divert to his effort at literacy learning. Like so many other modern bureaucratic institutions, the prison carried along within its practices, materials, and personnel multiple recessive and ascending literacy traditions.

In Ames’s remarkable encounter with the teacher-nun, we see the oldest ideologies of reform, based in spiritual redemption through literacy, still at work in the education apparatus of the prison. Reading books by ex-slaves with dictionary in hand, Ames was reenacting a scene by which many African Americans learned to read in the decades before and after Emancipation. At the same time, his experience in the clinical services department allowed him to reroute resources of the college-educated personnel—their books, outlooks, knowledge, and liberalism—into intellectual stimulation in what was otherwise a repressive environment. His agreement to serve as a “guinea pig” for their scientific methods of classification and analysis gained him experience with the very testing formats that regulated everything from GED certification to parole evaluations. Books on inner growth and healing, which comprised much of his reading during this period, also were present by virtue of philosophies of rehabilitation that had cycled through the prison over the previous decades and had accumulated in the library holdings. This reading was reinforced by writing that was required as part of therapeutic programming. On the bureaucratic side, Ames and his fellow Lifers carved a space for learning out of written policies and procedures that were proliferating in penal institutions in response to public demands for more accountability and to the need to both equalize treatment of prisoners and limit their organizational activism. Most critical to Ames’s development were the cultural currents of racial consciousness and political liberation that were being inspired by the contemporary African American civil rights movement. As part of that milieu, activist courts expanded prisoner rights, granting more access to legal discourse and communication and precipitating a period of intense litigation, petition, and appeal that promoted writing among inmates and inmate organizations. We see in Ames’s intersection with this history especially how the ability to write develops in relationship with the prerogative to write.

It is clear that the curriculum that Ames put together for his own literacy learning was far more complex and far-reaching than the official offerings in adult basic and technical education programs in which prisoners are typically enrolled. Ames benefitted considerably from formal course work in the legal technician program, especially from the credentials that it gave him. But his schooling was embedded in a much larger sphere of reading and writing that was linked to immediate and palpable changes, both in his mental outlook and in the political and educational conditions in which he and his fellow inmates were living. He put together a reading and writing regimen that spanned the many fields—psychology, law, sociology, racial politics—whose systematic influences bore directly on his immediate conditions. It is here that we see more tangible evidence of relationships between institutional developments and individual literacy development. Ames’s success resided not in a simple motivation to stay clean and work hard in the degree program in which he was enrolled but in a complex motivation encompassing personal history, current conditions, and future ambition. The compound interactions among his inventively self-made curriculum, his liberatory motivations, and his corollary of sponsorship forces inside the prison explain not only the complexity of his means of achievement but also the reason such an achievement remains so rare under prison conditions.

Soon after Ames reentered society as a free man in the early 1990s, prison populations in his state reached an all-time high, caused most directly by mandatory sentencing for drug offenses. By the late 1990s, as minority populations inside the prisons were rising at unprecedented rates, the state was appropriating more of its budget to corrections than to higher education. So overcrowded was the system by the late 1990s that some inmates were being rotated to private prisons out of state. In the medium-security prison where Ames served his time, inadequate space and resources put prisoners on waiting lists for access to education programs. Legal aid societies continued to retrench in the absence of public funding. And legislative remedies were being sought to reduce the number of lawsuits initiated by prison inmates.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on sponsors of literacy as they appeared in the learning accounts of Dwayne Lovey and Johnny Ames. These sponsors included family members, teachers, workplaces, newspapers, unions, libraries, religious organizations, government programs, liberation movements, correctional systems, rehabilitation practices, the judiciary, and other agents as they bore at particular times and places on the lives of
and political struggle, and sponsorship suggests a need for definitions of
Lowery and Ames.

ments had specific, tangible, and abiding implications in the lives of both
interests and the exercise and recognition of one's rights. These develop­
ments for both oppression and liberation, this expanding legal arena impli­
cated writing as increasingly necessary for the representation of one's
these men were learning to write in times and places in which civil rights
developed adult literacy. Although positioned differently within it, both of
these two men. The interests of these agents at their particular moments
of contact affected what the two men learned, how, from whom, and
and for what. Sponsors deliver the material and ideological possibilities for
literacy learning, often as a by-product of the struggles for economic or
political ascendency in which they are involved. Sponsors subsidize (or
don't) the development of people's literate resources as a way to recruit
or coerce those resources to their cause; they also can reject or discard the
literate resources of people that no longer serve their interest. Often pro­
lific in assets, sponsors may have their resources diverted to projects of
self-interest or self-development by literacy learners under their aegis.
Conservative in nature but often ruthlessly demanding of change, spon­
sors carry within their material and ideological orbits multiple aspects of
literacy's past and present, receding and emerging traditions that accumu­
late as part of a history of contact and competition. Even within single
institutions, the uses and networks of literacy crisscross through many
domains, potentially exposing people to multiple sources of sponsoring
powers - secular, religious, bureaucratic, legal, commercial, technological.
It is these characteristics of the sponsors that give contemporary literacy
its demanding qualities of complexity, multiplicity, and stratification, its
sense of surplus and its volatility. The fast pace of change in communica­
tion technologies only intensifies this process.

Dwayne Lowery and Johnny Ames learned to write during a period in
American history when standards for literacy achievement were rising
higher and faster than ever before, and when the meaning of how much
literacy was enough was changing quickly for both of these men. The
course of their literacy learning was plotted across fast-moving transforma­
tions that were bringing the need for individual writing skills ever more
widely and deeply into the conduct of competitions over liberty, money,
ideas, and control. The histories of these larger competitions - for them,
labor-management relations, correctional philosophies, law, and civil
rights - delivered the sponsoring agents through which the two men
developed adult literacy. Although positioned differently within it, both of
these men were learning to write in times and places in which civil rights
and litigation were central to political and economic activity. With capaci­
ties for both oppression and liberation, this expanding legal arena implic­
cated writing as increasingly necessary for the representation of one's
interests and the exercise and recognition of one's rights. These develop­
ments had specific, tangible, and abiding implications in the lives of both
Lowery and Ames.

This synchronization among literacy learning, histories of economic
and political struggle, and sponsorship suggests a need for definitions of
literacy that better incorporate the ways that literacy actually gets made in
the lives of people. That is, it is not enough to investigate the component
mental or scribal skills that are required to perform reading or writing at a
particular level nor even the components of contexts and their opportuni­
ties that are available to people for learning those skills. Rather, we must
look even further into the origins and makeup of these components them­selves.
Individual abilities are one with the historical conditions in which
they are made and permitted. Opportunities for literacy are not merely
the occasions on which people learn to read and write or not; from a bio­
ographical perspective, they can be the internalized structures that orga­
nize and define individual skills.

This point is most starkly illustrated by the extent to which the reported
experiences of Lowery and Ames carry in their details so much of the
general history of literacy in America. As we have seen, Lowery's work history
moves like the American economy from manufacturing to information, a
process that inflated the value of the written word not only in the produc­
tion of goods and services but in the basic pursuit of labor rights and inter­
ests. It was this double change that we saw Lowery working to accomplish
in his writing. The principle is even more profound in the life experience of
Ames. Born at midcentury into one of the most economically and racially
oppressed social systems in the country, he encountered as a child forms
of literacy still connected to remnant regimes of slavery and peonage.
These included writing embedded in the practical exchanges of local agricul­
tural labor and an oral tradition that, in the absence of real access
to schooling and in resistance to harsh racism, transmitted mother wit and
survival skills from old to young. As his social system gave way, Ames's
exploitable value as an agricultural worker gave out, and the few resources
he possessed won little articulation in the world beyond his family econ­
y. Caught in a period of acute mental depression and reckless behavior,
he was sentenced to life in prison. Then he gradually diverted the ideolog­
ically congested resources of a late-twentieth-century prison to accomplish
transformations in his literacy and work that recapitulated - within a span
of 16 years - transformations that had taken the country an entire century
or more to accomplish.

As we saw also with the case of Barbara Hunt in the previous chapter,
traveling that distance, making those transformations, in fact is the daunt­
ing challenge for many literacy learners in the nation now, especially those
who were left out of economic and political expansions of earlier periods.
Literacy learning entails more than attaining the scribal abilities implied
by an imposed standard. It also entails an ability, somehow, to make the
transformations and amalgamations that have become embedded, across
time, in the history of that standard. The farther away one is to start with, the more it takes to become and stay literate. This second kind of ability, this deeper aspect to literacy learning, is what Dwayne Lowery and Johnny Ames worked so hard to develop. It is here, in the second, deeper, sponsor-reliant level of literacy ability—the one so affected by economic and political inequities—that the pressures of the rising standard of literacy are most wrenchingly felt.

Genna May was born in 1898 on a dairy farm in south central Wisconsin, the eighth of nine children of Norwegian immigrants. She spoke no English when she enrolled at the age of 7 in a one-room schoolhouse built on land donated to the school district by her parents. Although Genna would eventually go on to complete high school by boarding in a town 10 miles from her farm, she started school at a time when Wisconsin required only that young people ages 7 to 15 attend a local grammar school for 12 weeks a year.\(^1\) As a student in “the grades,” as she called them, Genna wrote spelling lessons on slates, erasing them with a wet cloth to go on to arithmetic lessons.\(^2\) She remembered a home with few books and little paper, and she said she would have had no reason to write as a girl except to compose an occasional story assigned by her teacher. After high school graduation in 1917, she enrolled for several months in a private business college in the state capital, just long enough to learn typing and shorthand and win a certificate in penmanship before gaining employment in the office of a company manufacturing disinfectants for dairy barns. In the mid-1990s, Genna was using writing to record recipes, balance her checkbook, and send holiday and birthday greetings to family members.

Genna’s great-grandson Michael May was born in 1981 in a sprawling suburb built on former farmland east of Wisconsin’s state capital. In the early 1990s, he was attending a middle school equipped with computers. The first of four children in his family, Michael remembered that his earliest composing occurred when he was two years old and his parents...
13 In his history of rural America, Danbom (1995) wrote: “The first two decades of the 20th century represented a time of such rare prosperity for American farmers that the period is referred to as the golden age of agriculture. During this twenty-year period, gross farm income more than doubled and the value of the average farm more than tripled” (p. 161).
14 For descriptions of the massive buildup of rural schools in the late nineteenth century as well as political and social organization of the schools, see Fuller’s (1982) wonderfully readable history of the one-room school.
15 Writing about the period between 1920 and 1930, Danbom (1995) observed: “Fewer farms and a declining labor demand on those that remained combined with the economic and social attractions of cities during the roaring twenties to increase the pace of rural-to-urban migration dramatically. The countryside suffered a net outmigration of 6.25 million people in the decade. Even though the rural birthrate exceeded the rural deathrate, there was still an absolute rural population decline of 1.2 million people between 1920 and 1930. Those most likely to leave were the young, whose family and property responsibility were usually minimal” (p. 196). In speaking of herself in this period, Martha Day remarked that she wanted to be a “Horatio Alger girl,” referring to the author of popular turn-of-the-century rags-to-riches adventure novels.
16 According to Evans and Salcedo (1974), this bonanza period for commercial farm publishing coincided with a rise in farm outputs and the appearance of a number of technological innovations. The 1950s saw a slackening in advertising revenue as the number of farmers declined and competition from mass-market magazines intensified (pp. 65ff).
17 Interestingly, these strong teacher figures continue to appear well into the mid- and late nineteenth century in the lives of many African Americans that I interviewed. Traditional forms of literacy sponsorship, including apprenticeship, held together for African Americans and grew most precious as they continued to be widely excluded from education and occupational opportunities connected to the new economy. For more on this phenomenon, see Chapter 4.
18 See Walters (1996).
20 For more on the Country Life Movement as a social and educational policy, see Danbom (1995, pp. 167–175) and Tremmel (1995). Danbom traced the ambivalence of rural people to impositions of urban values on their education and consumer practices. He wrote: “The Country Life Movement was most significant for what its existence indicated about the evolving position of rural America in the nation. For most of the history of the country rural had been normal, and urban had been peculiar... Now farmers had become peculiar... Whatever its intentions and accomplishments, the Country Life Movement represented the diminished status and growing peripheralization of rural America” (p. 175).
21 For an analysis of the impact of economic downturns on farm families, see Saupe (1989).
tion contained in the contract was assumed. For the unlettered person not to avail himself of that knowledge was to be negligent. When the written word took on a life of its own, as often happened, the “worth” of liberty was considerably diminished for the unlettered person” (p. 207).

2 Stevens saw growth in corporatism in the twentieth century as a period when contract law actually became less important than in former decades, when contracts were more typically between individuals. Regulation of contractual processes, including the development of standard contract language, became more accepted and upheld by the courts as a public interest issue (Stevens, 1988, pp. 185–186).

3 In the Conclusion, I further explore implications of computer technology for issues of literacy, access, and justice.

4 For more on how many low-income families navigate the complex accounting procedures on which their livelihood depends, see Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) and Cushman (1998).

5 One of the most obvious cases of the creation of illiteracy for political ends involved the uses of literacy tests in the South to disenfranchise African American voters. Tests were used capriciously and inequitably to eliminate voters, a practice that continued in many places through 1965 (Stevens, 1988, pp. 79ff).

6 For more on this point, see Heckscher (1988). He wrote about the rise of what he called “associational unionism” (p. 8), which depends “on influence more than on the power of confrontation” for effectiveness especially by extending “employee rights by law rather than by collective bargaining. The last two decades [1970s and 1980s] have seen enormous activity in this area” (p. 9).

7 For useful accounts of this period in union history, see Heckscher (1988) and Nelson (1988).

8 Farr (1993) associated “essayist literacy” with written genres that are esteemed in the academy and noted for their explicitness, reliance on reasons and evidence, and impersonal voice.

9 Kozol’s observation in 1985 that the prison population represents the single highest concentration of adult illiterates was still holding true in the 1990s, with somewhere between 60% and 70% of prison inmates unable to read and write above a grade-school level. See Kozol, pages 13 through 14.

10 For more observations about the survival system in African American cultural and economic life and its relationship to literacy learning, see Chapter 4.

11 This legislation also initiated the first federal funding of adult basic education (see Stevens, 1988, p. 19).

12 Like other “war on poverty” programs of the 1960s, Job Corps treated poor people as culturally deprived. In their brief history of the Job Corps, Levitan and Johnston (1975) listed three assumptions of the program:

First was ... that the success of disadvantaged individuals in the labor market could be measurably improved through basic education and skill train-
Mandatory education in American prisons dates back at least to the early 1800s, when Kentucky required prisoners to take four hours of literacy instruction on Sundays. Full-time teachers were assigned to New York prisons in 1847. Generally, prison education began in the form of religious instruction and evolved into rehabilitation. In this century, education became mandatory in some prison systems in the 1950s for inmates with less than a third-grade education (see Pollock, 1997, 141ff).

Cornelius (1991) provided many descriptive accounts of settings for literacy learning among enslaved African Americans. Also see her earlier article, "We Slipped and Learned to Read" (1983).

Johnny Ames showed me the list of titles that he read during his 16 years in prison. The topics ranged from religion, politics, sexuality, psychology, African American history, and sociology to Dale Carnegie-like self-help guides: more than 100 books in all.

Dickey (1991) described the education and vocational program in a typical Wisconsin prison as consisting of math, social problems, business education, marketing, music, practical English, welding, auto mechanics, machine shop, printing, barbering, carpentry, steamfitting, cosmotology, food service, sewing, and clerical training.

Johnny Ames felt that his understanding of racism learned in the blatant conditions of Jim Crow in the South served him well in a northern prison where, he said, the racism was more latent but no less virulent. He said he was able to negotiate the racist atmosphere better than some of his northern-born peers because he was able more often to know when to keep his mouth shut.

Chapter 3. Accumulating Literacy: How Four Generations of One American Family Learned to Write

1 See Landes and Solomon (1992) for the dates on which each state passed compulsory schooling legislation.

2 For a useful overview of the development of the graded school, see Vinovskis (1995), especially pages 112ff.

3 For the role of reading in middle-class families, see, for instance, Heath (1983), Chapter 7, and Cochran-Smith (1984).

4 In the nineteenth century, schooling levels among free white children generally rose with family prosperity, both because children's labor was less needed and because more money could be spent on schooling. For an economic analysis, see Horan and Hargis (1991) and Kaestle and Vinovskis (1978).

5 See Danbom (1995), especially Chapter 8 for outmigrations from farm areas induced by World War I and other social factors. According to Cremin (1988, p. 230), high school enrollments increased tenfold between 1900 and 1940.

6 Other members of Genna May's cohort recalled their European ethnic churches converting to English during the opening decades of the twentieth century. Henry Schmidt (introduced in Chapter 2), born in 1908, began confirmation classes in German in his evangelical Lutheran church. Talking about that training, he said: "We didn't have Sunday school in those days. We had to go [to confirmation classes] every Saturday for two or three years, and then the last year, after public school was out, we had to go every day. That was in German when I first started. In our church, the minister preached in German and everything was German. But then they switched over when I was fourteen [1922] and I was confirmed in English anyway."

7 For pertinent perspectives on European American Protestant women, literacy, and education, see Kerber (1976), Main (1991), and Riley (1969).

8 Even as late as 1956, owners of the college were boasting that "we have no job placing students, particularly women," noting that there were six or seven jobs waiting for each female graduate. The number of office workers quadrupled between 1900 and 1940 (Beniger, 1986, p. 393). For useful contrasts in prospects between male nineteenth-century clerks and female twentieth-century secretaries, see Strom (1992).

9 Of the men in this cohort who drove trucks and delivered milk, those who worked independently or for small businesses reported doing more recordkeeping than those who worked for larger, corporate condensaries. In the latter cases, office workers or foremen wrote out schedules and kept records of exchanges, as drivers at the most gathered signatures of receipt.

10 Beniger (1986) suggested the information economy was an inevitable outgrowth of mass production, which separated producers from direct contact and communication with consumers. This split created a crisis of information and control that had to be restored through "control" technologies.

11 The Palmer method of handwriting was developed by Austin Norman Palmer (1859-1927), a teacher at Cedar Rapids Business College. As a student of business, Palmer sought to develop a straightforward method of penmanship in contrast to cursive and shaded calligraphy. The Palmer Method did not require students to form letters in precisely the same way but instead focused on muscular movement, posture, and paper position. By 1900, the Palmer Method was in general use in public schools. Palmer taught 50,000 teachers a year and ran summer institutes and correspondence schools. See Kernan (1984).

12 Writing in 1933, Hettinger described how, in the early days of broadcasting, programs would "offer a small souvenir or useful gift to listeners who would write in to the sponsoring company or the station over which the program was broadcast" (p. 276). By 1932, nearly one third of companies on the air were giving something to listeners. After networks ended prohibitory regulations, commercial contests came into vogue in the early 1930s. Many of them invited writing in the form of endorsement letters, limericks, and word-building contests. Hettinger reports that contest magazines flourished briefly during this period (pp. 277-279).