



Public Library Services to Adults

JACK B. SPEAR

FROM THE BEGINNING of recorded time knowledge has been treasured by adults for their own use. Whether the information was preserved in hand-lettered scrolls of papyrus or in volumes printed in countless copies, the record was made as an aid to memory and as a legacy to later generations. Libraries were formed to collect these records and to preserve them for use. In the beginnings, to be sure, there was no concept of use by the public; but with the change in recording from a hand process and few copies to a mechanical process and many copies came the idea of sharing. From this, and with this, come the roots of public library service.

It was Benjamin Franklin who spoke with a circle of his friends in Philadelphia about sharing some of their personal books with each other and with other interested adults in the community. From this venture grew what is commonly thought of as the first lending library, and soon this scheme for sharing books was adopted elsewhere in the country. In Franklin's library money for the necessities came from fees and subscriptions, and as the number of subscribers multiplied funds increased. Finally, the idea of a "free" library developed, but since money was necessary to pay for rent, candles, cords of wood, custodians, and even books, it could not really be free. The town fathers, seeing more and more the advantages of having a library available to everyone, began to appropriate small amounts of public monies for maintaining these collections of books which had been established to help fulfill a need felt by the adults in the community. Civic leaders in America believed then, as we know now, that formal education was important in the beginning years of life and that informal learning is equally necessary after formal schooling is completed. For did not the Constitution declare in 1787, "We, the people of the United States, in order to . . . promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this

The author is Head of Traveling Libraries, Library Extension Division, New York State Library.

Constitution for the United States of America." Four short years later the adoption of the first amendment gave freedom of the press legal status and thereby established and insured one of the most important channels of adult learning.

During the early nineteenth century public libraries grew in influence and numbers. With this growth came in 1876 the founding of the American Library Association, and almost fifty years later this association gave appropriate recognition to the library's role in adult education by the appointment of a commission to study this movement and to make recommendations for action to the A.L.A. Council. This led to the establishment of an A.L.A. Adult Education Board to "encourage, inaugurate and assist in the conduct of a series of library experiments and demonstrations in adult education."¹ Two years later came the extensive report, *Libraries and Adult Education*,² which provoked wide professional interest in the subject. The readers' advisory services established in our larger public libraries were copied elsewhere until in "1935 there were some sixty-three professional readers' advisers at work in forty-four American public libraries."³ It is noteworthy that the American Library Association at the 1934 annual conference restated its objectives to include goals in adult education.⁴

In the fall of 1937 the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago held an institute for librarians in service. Through this institute "an effort was made: (1) to indicate the increasing opportunities which libraries have of performing fundamentally educational service from which the nation can profit; (2) to formulate objectives which libraries should set as the goal of their efforts in this field; (3) to point out certain methods and experiments which seem to hold out possibilities of increasing the effectiveness of libraries; and (4) to indicate something of the significance of the library's contribution to the total adult education movement."⁵ This institute and the attendant publication added a great deal of professional know-how to the growing field of working with adults in our libraries. In addition it undoubtedly whetted professional appetites and supplied food for thought to those many farsighted librarians who were beginning to hear more and more of Alvin Johnson and his "people's university"⁶ and who perhaps in the not too distant past had digested W. S. Learned's basic theories on the diffusion of knowledge.⁷

To the omniscient seer it would have been apparent that a quickening cycle was developing. "Adult education in public libraries" became a popular topic in the periodical indexes, and the expositions increased in length and in importance. Many theories, projects, prob-

Public Library Services to Adults

lems, and solutions were proposed in the years before World War II. These are readily available, and they are fascinating reading. C. W. Stone,⁸ in *Library Trends* in April 1953, analyzed and identified past "trends in public library thinking which have determined the library's place in adult education." Not available to Stone in 1953, but mentioned by him as in progress, is the Survey of Adult Education Activities in Public Libraries financed by a grant to the American Library Association from the Fund for Adult Education, an independent agency established by the Ford Foundation. The survey was directed by Helen Lyman Smith, and her report was available in manuscript to the writer.⁹ This report is the most comprehensive study of the services currently available to adults in our public libraries, and without the information contained therein no prediction of future trends in this area could be made.

The purpose of the survey, as stated on the cover of the questionnaire, was "to learn what public libraries and state library extension agencies in the United States are doing to help adults and young adults in continuing education," and it was to be "concerned primarily with three areas: (1) the services your library provides to other adult education agencies, (2) the services your library provides to community groups, and (3) your library's own programs and activities."¹⁰ The questionnaire was designed to find out what was actually being done in this field at a particular time—and after the facts were found, they were to be interpreted through a series of interviews with a representative sampling of the librarians involved so that the information could be properly related in a statistical analysis. The questionnaire, after careful pretesting, was mailed to some 4,096 public libraries in the United States. This number included every type of community as well as every political subdivision of government that is used for support of a public library. It is interesting to note that over half of the libraries were in what we unashamedly call "small communities," those with 2,500 to 9,999 people.

The final chapter of the survey has special significance in a consideration of the trends in the adult education activities of public libraries:

Since this is the first survey of its kind there is no yardstick against which we can measure the findings. However, the recommendations of the ALA Commission on the Library and Adult Education indicate that some of these services represented in the survey in quantity were only beginning, or were practically unheard of, thirty years ago. Among the definite needs which this Commission felt should have

serious consideration if libraries were to meet their responsibilities was "organized and more adequate library service to other organizations engaged in Adult Education," and establishment of "an information service regarding local opportunities for Adult Education." The professional literature reveals that the use of audio-visual materials and discussion groups in adult education began to be talked about in the middle thirties. The services of this kind which libraries now provide, coupled with those which they would like to provide surely proves that more and more libraries consider group services an important and natural function of library.¹¹

Before considering the findings of the survey, it should be pointed out that the questionnaire itself served as a detailed list of suggestions on the services a library might offer the adults in a community. Careful study of the seventeen pages introduced many librarians to undreamed of opportunities for local service, and this in itself will greatly accelerate the extension of library services to adults.

And now, what are some of these much flaunted facts? First and foremost, the fundamental assumption of the survey, "that the public library is a major educational institution with responsibilities for helping adults to learn,"¹² was confirmed.

The findings are conclusive evidence that the public libraries of the United States are providing adult education services to other agencies and groups and in the libraries' own programs by a variety of services and activities and with various materials, means, and personnel. The extent to which adult education services to groups are provided has been ascertained for the first time. It was found that, while slightly less than 10% of the libraries were doing a great deal in helping adults and young adults continue education in group activities, the majority of libraries were equally divided between those doing a medium amount and those doing a little.¹¹

In our expanding market of service to adults, two basic premises should be considered. First, existing collections of books and materials should be used more thoroughly and effectively by more of our people, and second, future recognizance by these same people of the role of the library in their lives should increase. A study of library income, book budgets, services to the community, and trained personnel during the last decade indicates that both of these premises are and will continue to be true. And this applies in particular to communities where the library is active and alive, for here, through careful and skillful interpretations of the needs of the community, the library has come to occupy an increasingly greater place in the minds of all its

Public Library Services to Adults

public. Public librarians have felt for a long time that the individual is the main recipient of our service. Where else in our communities today can a man go to read what he wants as rapidly or as slowly as he pleases—where, but to the public library? The individual and his problems, all as different as only people can be, are and will continue to be of primary concern to librarians. In the last decade, however, has come a new way of working with that individual—in groups with his neighbors, or with other people who have similar interest.

The survey found from the 1,692 tabulated replies to the questionnaire that 1,037 libraries (over 61 per cent) served women's study and reading clubs, 995 served parents' organizations, 834 served informal local clubs, and 832 gave their services to missionary societies and church groups. At the other end of the scale, there are only 129 libraries currently working with labor unions and 137 serving industrial groups.¹³ Labor unions and the attendant problems of labor and management should receive greater attention from public librarians within the next few years.

Some public libraries became acquainted with group work through the A.L.A. American Heritage Project, under the auspices of which 292 public libraries sponsored regular meetings in 1952-53.¹⁴ The 4,573 people who participated in the second year of the project came to the groups to talk:

And talk they did—not as they had been accustomed to in their civic organizations, clubs, PTA's—but in a new way. For now under the American Heritage Project they talked together about an idea, a document, or an issue that they had individually explored for the specific purpose of discussion with others. Coming together, they found that this preparation led to productive discussion rather than the airing of preconceived ideas. And they were pleased—yes, extremely pleased—that as individuals equipped with information, they had contributed to each other's thinking through group discussion and had come away with a well-rounded view.¹⁵

The leaders of the Project believe that this type of adult education work will continue to thrive:

The first two years of the Project certainly indicate that future expansion in the major grant areas will be from strength gained from experience. But, one might ask, "What about the new areas where they must start from scratch?" The answer is: Now we have a working combination of substantial aids—administrative skills, plus a body of knowledge gained in leadership training, programming, selection of materials, preparation of guides, lists and publicity materials; and

JACK B. SPEAR

work with a variety of community circumstances. We feel confident that, just as the experience of the first year gave impetus to the growth in this second year, so will 1952-53 contribute to a successful future.¹⁶

The next decade will see more and more public library sponsored discussion programs. These may be titled "American Heritage" or "Great Books," but they probably will bear a new name and will deal with the specific problems or interests of particular communities. The increased knowledge that a relatively few librarians have gained in the skills of leading discussions and working with groups will spread within our profession. The survey reported that 178 libraries were using films,¹⁷ and this number will increase as more public libraries employ film as the bases for group discussions. According to the survey, eighteen public libraries in the United States are now providing television programs,¹⁸ and others will find ways to work with it. What the Milwaukee Public Library has done with its "Today in History" series, and what the Mohawk-Hudson Council on Educational Television in Schenectady, New York, has done to help public libraries to present programs on a cooperative area basis are only two examples of things to come.

Among our people are many who have lost their sight. Little more than a decade ago the blind had to depend on Braille or other embossed type for their reading. Then came the recording of books on 33½ rpm long-playing records. The acceptance of "Talking Books" has been rapid among the blind, yet only 10 per cent of those who are eligible to receive these records free of charge actually do. This roughly parallels the percentage of our population that actively uses our public libraries. Challenging opportunities await librarians in working with the blind and persons handicapped in other ways.

There are many services to adults which public librarians will consider as they plot the courses of their institutions. Some will find that the maintenance of a calendar of community events and a speakers bureau will be enough to add to their present work load; others will offer training for mothers in the art of storytelling, courses in group leadership, instruction in remedial reading, or institutes and workshops for program chairmen. Whatever is attempted, if it is well done, will add to the stature of the public library as a community agency for adult education.

References

1. Stevenson, Grace T.: Adult Education Plans. *Library Journal*, 79:161-166, Feb. 1, 1954.

Public Library Services to Adults

2. American Library Association. Commission on the Library and Adult Education: *Libraries and Adult Education*. Chicago, The Association, 1926.
3. Bryson, Lyman: *Adult Education*. New York, American Book Co., 1936, p. 178.
4. Wilson, L. R., ed.: *The Role of the Library in Adult Education*. (University of Chicago Studies in Library Science) Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1937, p. v.
5. *Ibid.*, p. vii.
6. Johnson, A. S.: *The Public Library—a People's University*. (Studies in the Social Significance of Adult Education in the United States No. 9) New York, American Association for Adult Education, 1938.
7. Learned, W. S.: *The American Public Library and the Diffusion of Knowledge*. New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1924.
8. Stone, C. W.: Adult Education and the Public Library. *Library Trends*, 1: 437-453, April 1953.
9. Smith, Helen L.: *Adult Education Activities in the Public Libraries*. Chicago, American Library Association, 1954.
10. American Library Association: *Survey of Adult Education in Public Libraries and State Library Extension Agencies of the United States—1952-1953*. (Questionnaire).
11. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
12. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 37, Table 22.
14. American Library Association: *American Heritage Project Annual Report, 1952-53*. Chicago, The Association, 1953, p. 2.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
17. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 7, Table 7.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 17, Table 15.