

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE SPECIAL LIBRARY

The character of libraries, their scope and the methods of managing them depend ultimately on the character and quality of things intended to be read. When things to be read were written upon stone, whether in hieroglyphics or in sculptures or in ornaments of buildings, libraries were unknown. When things to be read were impressed upon bits of clay which were dried and baked, and preserved as records, collections of those records were made and kept, and libraries began. When things to be read were written upon paper or any of the many kinds of material which were used before paper was invented, it was clearly wise to collect them, store them safely and arrange them conveniently for use. Things to be read thus gathered and housed formed the first libraries properly so called.

### The Ancient, and Surviving, Reverence for Books

After the invention of printing, things intended to be read became more common; but, as they were still quite rare and expensive, the old methods of collecting and preserving them were kept up and the habit of giving them a certain reverence was continued.

The reverence was due in part to the fact that few could either write or read, in part to the rarity of books, in part to the mystery attached by the ignorant to the art of reading; but chiefly to the fact that writing and reading and the practice of preserving books were largely confined to exponents of accepted religious cults.

As time went on and books increased in number and reading became more common, this reverence for the book decreased, but it decreased very slowly.

Books were for the promotion of culture. Culture was something which the upper classes only had a right to set. Science was pursued by the few, and those few were scarcely admitted to the aristocracy of book-users. It is only within very recent years that in England, for example, the study of medicine and its allied subjects, even if carried on to most helpful results, gave him who followed it a good position in the social hierarchy.

### What Our Fathers Called "Real Books"

The real books in the opinion of the educated among the upper classes, and, indeed, among all of the members of the upper classes who were competent to form opinions, were held to be, first, the literary masterpieces, the books which time had spared because they were thought to tell things so skillfully as to make them of interest and value to all men for all time. Among these were included all the older Greek and Latin writings, which were looked upon in a certain awe, largely because they were in Greek and Latin. Second, books on these classic books, studies, expositions, criticisms. Third, books on religious subjects and especially on theology in all its phases, and including philosophy. These books continued to form the greater part of libraries until within a few years.

### Library Proprieties in 1876

When the public library movement took form and celerity in our country, about forty years ago, the accepted field of library book collection had widened to cover all kinds of

---

Reprinted from *Special Libraries* 5 (1914): 70-76.

incline to infidelity; and discussions of sex and society and government were feared as tending to promote immorality and insurrection. On the whole, however, almost anything that had the form of a book could find a place in the public library of forty years ago, even though it might not be thought proper to admit it to the presence of a mere reader.

As a collection of all printed books the library had arrived; as a something established to gather all knowledge and all thought that the same might be freely used by all classes of the community, it had not.

The failure of the public library of forty years ago to address itself to all the community without distinction of wealth, social standing or education, and its failure, so far as it did address itself, to find its advances welcomed and its advantages made use of, were due to two factors chiefly: The tendency of the librarian to think of his collections as rather for the learned than for the learner, and the tendency of the community at large to think of a collection of books as rather exclusively designed for those who had been reared to use them.

### **How the Library Idea Was Broadened**

This long-continued, self-imposed opinion as to the proper limitations of the library-using group was broadened in due course for several reasons.

The output of print increased with great rapidity; and the newspapers, to speak of one form only of printed things, caused a rapid growth in the reading habit and led millions to gain a superficial knowledge of many aspects of life and thought.

Public and private schools and colleges taught more subjects and taught them better, until finally the sciences were, a few years ago, admitted as proper fields of knowledge and tools of discipline even to the most conservative of English universities. From acquaintance with a wide range of required school reading it was but a step to demand that a still wider range be furnished by the public library.

The habit of reading increased very rapidly among women. More of them became teachers, more of them entered industrial life, more of them joined study clubs, and these changes in their forms of activity all led to an increase of reading, to a wider range of reading and to a notable and insistent demand upon libraries that they furnish the books and journals on whatsoever subjects woman's broadening interests included.

Indeed, a certain almost apostolic devotion to the reading done by children and an enthusiastic welcoming of women as readers and students have been two of the most marked features in the development of the library work in the last twenty years.

### **The Radical Change in Library Work Now Under Way**

Another change in library activities is now taking place, and is being mainly brought about by the increase in things printed, already alluded to. And here it may be well to refer to the opening statement, that the character of library management is dependent on the character and quantity of things to be read; and to call attention to the fact that the immediate causes of changes in the contents and administration of libraries—newspapers, children's wider reading, women's greater interest in world-knowledge—are themselves largely the results of the growth of print and the resulting increase in things to be read.

### **The Amazing Growth of Print**

Modern invention, making printing much cheaper than formerly, has led inevitably to a tremendous growth in output. And by way of explanation of, though not as an excuse for,

the failure of librarians as a class to realize the great changes in scope and method of library management which the growth of printing and the use of things printed soon will bring, it may be said that printing and print-using gained their present astounding rate of increase only within the past ten or fifteen years. Few yet realize that printing is only now, after 450 years of practice of the art, at the very earliest stages of its development and is but beginning to work on mankind its tremendous and incalculable effects.

The increase of print is marked in new book production; is far more marked in periodical literature; perhaps still more in the publications of public institutions and private associations; still more again in the field of advertising by poster, circular, picture and pamphlet; and perhaps most of all in the mere commercial wrapper.

#### **Print Grows By Being Consumed!**

Every added piece of print helps to add new or more facile and more eager readers to the grand total of print consumers. As commerce and industry have grown, print has increased also, and naturally and inevitably more rapidly than either.

Considered merely as an industry and measured by money invested and value of output, print seems to be growing now faster than any other of the great industries, among which it is one of the first; and in view of the fact that a like expenditure each year produces, thanks to invention and discovery, a greater output of things to be read, it must be admitted that in its products, properly measured, print today stands in the front rank of all our manufactures.

#### **The Need of Mastering Mere Knowledge and the Difficulty Thereof**

As modern production, commerce, transportation and finance have grown and become more complicated, they have found in print a tool which can be well used in the effort to master the mass of facts which daily threatens to overwhelm even the most skillful in their efforts at safe and profitable industrial management. In spite of all that is reported in print of things done, projects planned, tests made, results reached, in the ten thousand wide-ranging lines of the world's work—from a new gold reef of unexampled richness in the vastness of New Guinea's mountains, to the new use of a by-product of a city's garbage, much escapes, or being printed, is unknown to him who can use it to his advantage. And so our wordly information goes on piling up; not all of it in print, but so much of it in print as to make that which is printed almost impossible to control.

#### **Other-Worldly Literature**

The problem of efficient handling of worldly information is difficult enough in itself, but to this is added what we may call in contrast other-worldly information. Social questions which were seemingly quite few in number only a generation ago, have multiplied marvelously as modern industrialism and universal education have produced their inevitable result of complicating our social structure.

These social questions demand solution; societies to resolve them straightway arise, and proceed to inquire, to study, to investigate, to experiment, and to publish the results. These published results inevitably throw light on the daily routine of the industrialist, a routine already complex enough; also, they tend to modify public opinion or even almost to create a new and hitherto unheard of public opinion, and this new-born opinion again affects, and often most seriously, the industrialist's routine.

Meanwhile this new social service spirit takes hold upon questions of government, complicates them, gives unexpected answers to them, reverses the old ones, and, so doing, affects in a startling way the attempts of the industrialist to establish and maintain his routine.

Of all this social-service and government activity the printed output is amazingly multitudinous.

In any city of moderate size the social service institutions, including departments of the city, county, state and national government, and the private and quasi-public organizations which are attempting to modify opinions, customs, ordinances and laws directly or indirectly, through study, experiment, investigation, exhortation and demand, are so numerous, so active, so persistent and in the main so effective, and publish annually so many thousand pieces of things to be read, as to make it almost impossible for any organization to have in hand full knowledge of them all. Yet upon every enterprise in that city many of these countless institutions have already produced an effect, or will tomorrow, next week or next year. The wise industrialist, would take them into account in planning his campaigns, and finds it extremely difficult to do so.

### **The Literature of Science and the Arts**

Add to this other-worldly literature the tremendous stream of worldly literature already alluded to, and include in the latter the vast flood of trade, technical and scientific journals, proceedings of societies and books and brochures from individuals; and then consider the difficulties which confront, on the one hand, the industrialist who would know of the social, economic, industrial, technical and scientific changes, advances and movements which may affect his enterprise; and confront, on the other hand, the organization, be it public or private, which is trying to keep him duly informed! Moreover, beyond all this is the vast field of research within which countless widely scattered workers, who for lack of swift interchange of knowledge of their respective successes and failures are wasting their time on misdirected and needless effort.

### **The Changes Demanded in Library Method**

The change which this swift growth of things-intended-to-be read is today imposing on libraries can now be roughly outlined.

They may properly continue to serve the student, in the old sense of that word, the child and the inquiring woman; they must also serve the industrialist, the investigator or scientist and the social service worker.

It is too soon to say in just what manner this new form of service will be rendered. The difference in the amount of material to be mastered makes a wise method of administration most difficult of discovery; and added to this great difference in amount is a difference in what one may call the proper length of life.

The technique of the management of printed material gathered by libraries has, in its development in the past forty years, been devoted almost solely to the accurate description, complete indexing and careful preservation of the material. So elaborate was the ritual in this field which was established and quite generally adopted some twenty years ago that today it costs a library of moderate size from twenty to fifty cents merely to prepare and put on the shelf each one of its collected items, be the same a pamphlet of four pages costing nothing or a scientific treatise of a thousand pages costing ten dollars. And this takes no account of binding.

It would be useless to attempt here to describe or enumerate the countless sources from which comes this mass of material which confronts us, and demands of the librarian a reasonable control. It comes from governmental bodies, public and quasi-public institutions and businesses; from private bodies, scientific, artistic, philosophic, educational, philanthropic, social; and from private individuals. It even includes print which is designed to advertise but informs as well; and in this line thousands of makers of things are putting out printed notes on optics, chemistry, travel, food, machines, machine products and a thousand other subjects, which often contain later and fuller and more accurate information than can be gained elsewhere.

### **The Problem of the Print Which Is Useful and Yet Ephemeral**

Nearly all this vast flood of print, to the control of which libraries must now in some degree address themselves, is in pamphlet form, and, what seems to be of the utmost importance in considering the problem of how to handle it, nearly all of it is, as already noted, ephemeral. Herein, also, as already said, is a characteristic which distinguishes it from nearly all the printed material with which librarians have heretofore busied themselves.

Everything intended to be read which comes into a library's possession must be preserved—such is the doctrine based on the old feeling of the sanctity of print which once was almost universally accepted. Even to this day those are to be found who urge the library of a small town to gather and preserve all they can lay hands on of all that is printed in or about that town. When President [Charles W.] Eliot of Harvard a few years ago, seeing clearly, as can any whose eyes are open to the progress of printing, that print may overwhelm us if we do not master it, urged that the great libraries be purged of dead things, the voice of the spirit of print worship of a hundred years ago was heard proclaiming that nothing that is printed, once gathered and indexed, can be spared. Whereas, did any large library attempt to gather, and set in order for use under the technique now followed, as large a proportion of all that is now printed, as did of what was printed in 1800, it would bankrupt the community.

The amazing growth of the printing industry is overturning the old standards of value of things printed and the old methods of use, has indeed already done it, though few as yet realize that this is so.

To establish this fact is one of the primary purposes of the whole argument. To emphasize its truth, two more things may be mentioned, the moving picture film and the phonographic record. Historically these are as important as are any printed records of our time. Yet what library dare take upon itself the task of gathering and preserving and indexing them?

Here we have two kinds of records of contemporary life, both closely allied in character to printed things, which the all-inclusive library does not even attempt to gather, list and index. Difficult as it would be for any one library, or even any group of large libraries, to collect and preserve all these records of the human voice and of the visible activities of men, still more difficult would it be to gather and save all that is printed today.

### **The Proper View of What to Do with Print**

*The proper view of printed things is, that the stream thereof need not be anywhere completely stored behind the dykes and dams formed by the shelves of any library or of any group of libraries: but that from that stream as it rushes by expert observers should select what is pertinent each to his own constituency, to his own organization, to his own community, hold*

*group of libraries: but that from that stream as it rushes by expert observers should select what is pertinent each to his own constituency, to his own organization, to his own community, hold it as long as it continues to have value to those from whom he selects it, make it easily accessible by some simple process, and then let it go.*

Both the expert and the student may rest assured that the cheapness of the printing process of our day and the natural zeal and self-interest of inquirers, students, compilers, indexers and publishers, will see to it that nothing that is of permanent value, once put in print, is ever lost. Not only are there made in these days compilations and abstracts innumerable by private individuals for their own pleasure and profit; but also a very large and rapidly increasing number of societies are devoting large sums of money, high skill and tireless industry to gathering, abstracting and indexing records of human thought, research and industry in all their forms.

### **The New Library Creed**

*Select the best books, list them elaborately, save them forever—was the sum of the librarians' creed of yesterday. Tomorrow it must be, select a few of the best books and keep them, as before, but also, select from the vast flood of print the things your constituency will find helpful, make them available with a minimum of expense, and discard them as soon as their usefulness is past.*

This latter creed has been as yet adopted by very few practicing librarians. It is gaining followers, however, in the fields of research and industry whose leaders are rapidly and inevitably learning that only by having accessible all the records of experiment, exploration and discovery pertaining to their own enterprise, wherever made, can they hope to avoid mistakes, escape needless expenditures and make profitable advances in any department of science or in any kind of industrial social work.

### **Special Libraries and Their Association**

In recent years has arisen an organization called the Special Libraries Association. It came into being in this way:

A few large enterprises, private, public and quasi-public, discovered that it paid to employ a skilled person and ask him to devote all his time to gathering and arranging printed material out of which he could supply the leaders of the enterprise, on demand or at stated intervals, with the latest information on their work.

This librarian purchased periodicals, journals, proceedings of societies, leaflets, pamphlets, and books on the special field in which his employers were interested, studied them, indexed them, or tore up or clipped from them pertinent material and filed it under proper headings, and then either held himself in readiness to guide managers, foremen and others, directly to the latest information on any topics they might present, or compiled each week or each month a list of pertinent, classified references to the last words from all parts of the world on the fields covered by his organization's activities, and laid a copy of this list on the desk of every employe who could make good use of it.

Roughly described, this is the method of controlling the special information the world was offering them which perhaps not more than a score of progressive institutions had found it wise to adopt up to five or six years ago.

### **Newark's Special Library**

At that time the public library of Newark was developing what it called a library for men of affairs, a business branch. This was in a rented store close to the business and transportation center of the city. The library's management believed that men and women

who were engaged in manufacturing, commerce, transportation, finance, insurance, and allied activities could profitably make greater use than they had heretofore of information to be found in print. They were sure that this useful industrial information existed, for they knew that the most progressive among men of affairs in this country, and still more in Germany, found and made good use of it. Indeed, they knew that they already had in the main library's collections much material which almost any industrial organization and almost any industrial worker could consult with profit. Such material was already used to a slight extent in the central building; but they believed that if what might be called "the printed material fundamental to a great manufacturing and commercial city" were so placed and so arranged that it could be easily consulted by men of business, the habit of using it would spread very rapidly.

### **An Uncharted Sea of Print**

From the first it was evident that the library was entering a field not yet greatly cultivated. There were no guides to selection of material; there were no precedents to serve as rules for handling it when found. Professional library literature did not help, because this particular form of library work had never been undertaken. It was not difficult to learn that the old rule, gather everything possible, index and save forever, must be here in the main, discarded, and the new rule, select, examine, use and discard, be adopted.

But to put the new rule into practice was very difficult.

### **An Association of Inquirers**

This question naturally arose, are others attempting work at all similar to this of ours? Inquiry soon brought to light a few librarians of private corporations, public service institutions and city and state governments which, as already noted, were also working on the new line. Correspondence and conference followed; an organization for mutual aid promised to be helpful and the Special Libraries Association was formed.

Merely as a matter of history, and chiefly because the active and skillful workers who now have the movement in hand, promise to make of this association an institution of very great importance, it may be well to state here that the suggestion of an organization of those engaged in what may be called the sheer utilitarian management of print, was made by the Newark library, and that from that library and from the library of the Merchants' Association of New York, were sent out invitations to a preliminary conference at Bretton Woods, in July, 1909.

Representatives of about a dozen special libraries were present, and the librarians of several public and university libraries as well.

### **When Is a Library Special?**

The name Special Libraries was chosen with some hesitation, and rather in default of a better; but it has seemed to fit the movement admirably. It may be said, of course, that every library is in a measure special, in its own field, and that state libraries, libraries of colleges and universities, of medicine, law, history, art and other subjects may be called special. But a special library, and the special departments of more general libraries—like the business branch at Newark—are the first and as yet almost the only print-administering institutions which professedly recognize the change in library method that the vast and swiftly mounting bulk of print is demanding; realize how ephemeral, and at the same time how exceedingly useful for the day and hour is much of the present output

of things-intended-to-be-read, and frankly adopt the new library creed as to print management, of careful selection, immediate use and ready rejection when usefulness is past.

### The Growth of the New Idea

The story of the growth and work of this association of special libraries not only demonstrates the truth of the statement that the modern printing press is giving us a new view of its own importance and helpfulness, it also shows how rapidly the new view is being taken by the world of affairs; and, furthermore, it suggests some of the methods to which adoption of the new library creed is giving rise.

The association began with about 30 members, of whom more than half represented special libraries that could be properly so called. In one year the number of special library representatives increased to more than 70, and in the next two years to 125. In January, 1910, the association began the publication of a monthly journal. The distribution of this journal, which has been very wisely and economically edited and published by Mr. John A. Lapp, legislative reference librarian of Indianapolis; the distribution of circular letters, reports and articles in the public press; the meetings of the association itself and of sub-divisions of it and outgrowths from it, all have served as an excellent and effective propaganda of the idea of the systematic use of print in the world of affairs.

A list of special libraries in this country, published in *Special Libraries* for April, 1910, not including libraries of law, medicine, history and theology and including very few public, scientific and reference libraries, gave 118 names.

Most of the libraries that have joined the association since its first year, 1909-10, have come into existence since that year. They now increase in number so rapidly that it is impossible to keep the record of them complete. One can only say that managers of scientific, engineering, manufacturing, managerial, commercial, financial, insurance, advertising, social and other organizations, including states, cities, government commissions and the like, are, as the records of the Special Libraries Association show, coming every day in increasing numbers to the obvious conclusion, that it pays to employ an expert who shall be able, when equipped with proper apparatus, to give them from day to day news of the latest movements in their respective fields.

### The Journal, "Special Libraries"

The Journal, "*Special Libraries*," has published a total of 35 numbers, over 400 pages, and has printed scores of helpful articles on such subjects as "The earning power of special libraries," "The value of the special library for the business man, the salesman or the shop expert," "Industrial libraries," "A reference library in a manufacturing plant," and many carefully prepared lists of books, magazine articles, new legislative enactments and the like, with titles like the following: Accounting, Motion pictures, Open shop, Short ballot, Efficiency, Public Utility rates.

This association and this journal are described here thus fully because they seem to point so clearly to the coming change in general library method with which this whole argument concerns itself. In this journal we find recorded, as maintaining libraries for the special purpose of gathering by world-wide search all that can throw light on their work, their processes of manufacture, their methods of sale and distribution, such establishments as these:

The Amer. Banker's Assn., N. Y.; the Amer. Brass Co., Waterbury, Conn.; The Amer. Tel. & Tel. Co., N. Y.; The Boston Consol. Gas Co.; The National Carbon Co., Cleveland; Stone and Webster, Boston; United Gas Improvement Co., Philadelphia.

By no means all the industrial organizations which have what one may call proprietary bureaus of research have become members of the Association, directly or through their librarians. In fact, as already stated, there must be many of these special bureaus of which the Association has as yet no knowledge. It is worth noting, however, that representatives of many firms, so far as they have expressed themselves, are enthusiastic over the success of their new department.

### **The Limitation of the Older Type of Libraries**

The fact that we now have an active movement for the establishment within large industrial enterprises of special departments for the proper control of all pertinent printed information, is of itself good evidence that the needs that these departments supply are needs which public and college libraries of the conventional type are not supplying. Other evidence could be set forth from State libraries, municipal libraries and libraries of legislative research.

It is not suggested that libraries of the type of ten or even five years ago, public, proprietary, State, historical, could ever do the work which the enlightened industrialist of today asks of the special print-handling department he sets up in and for his own organization. But this seems evident enough from all that has been said, that the old type of library must modify itself in accordance with the new needs which the evolution of knowledge and the growth of print have created. Speaking of the free public library only—tho' what is true of this is true in a measure also of the college, university or historical library—it should try to master so much of the flood of print as is of importance to its community as a whole, and to those aspects of industrial life which are common to all men and women of affairs in its community.

This paper has failed of its main purpose if it has not shown that the public library should equip itself to handle a vast amount of ephemerally useful material, and should, by its methods in this work, suggest to the large business institutions how helpful they would find the adoption of similar work within their respective fields.

### **Definite Suggestions: Co-operation**

One may ask here if any definite suggestions can be made as to the selection of useful print from the useless, the making it temporarily accessible, and discarding it with ease when its usefulness has past. As already stated, these are questions now confronting librarians.

As to solution, one plan already under way may be mentioned. Mr. John A. Lapp, director of the Bureau of Legislative Information, Indianapolis, has established a co-operative enterprise for the collection and distribution of certain social and law-making information. From 25 to 100 libraries and individuals each contribute \$25 per year for maintenance.

The bureau, called "Public Affairs Information Service," collects announcements regarding information in the field of public affairs, digests the same and distributes the copies of the digests to subscribers. The information concerns such subjects as these:

Agricultural Credit  
Civil Service Commissions

Convict Labor  
Dance Hall Legislation  
Drinking Cup Question  
Elimination of Party Politics  
Occupational Welfare  
Markets, Reorganization in New York City  
Noise Prevention  
Municipal Lodging Houses  
Rural Life, Bibliography  
Prison Laws, Digest of

Under heads like these a few lines give information sufficient to guide one to the source of printed material alluded to, with a note outlining its scope.

These notes, manifolded on sheets convenient for clipping and filing, are sent out to all the libraries, firms and individuals co-operating, at the rate, at present, of about two each week, each containing an average of 20 notes. The notes vary greatly in length. A recent one gave the results of inquiries into the progress, in every state in the Union, of drinking cup legislation.

It is impossible to set any limit to the growth of bureaus of information of this kind. Every one must make for economy of time and labor in the never-ending search, going on in every library, in every law-office, in every large industrial and commercial enterprise, for the latest news on thousands of subjects of the day.

In Boston a bureau of information has been organized by several libraries, which has a central office in the public library of the city, and tries to discover for any inquirer, on any topic whatsoever, the person, book, library, document, report, or what-not that can give the precise information he needs in the shortest possible time.

The League of American Municipalities has long had in view a plan for establishing a central municipal bureau which should gather notes on the countless activities of all our large cities and hold them in readiness for any demand. Such a bureau would not only save to every city department in every city the cost of making its own inquiries as to new legislation, administration, experiments, tests of paving, lighting, etc., it would also save to the country at large much of the present vast expenditure on new legislation and new methods of many kinds which have somewhere already proven failures.