

The Future of the Past

by James V. Carmichael, Jr.

The recent specter of missile launchers looming over the deserts of Iraq and Kuwait, near the site of Susa where Alexander the Great in 324 B.C. performed a mass marriage between himself, and his soldiers and Eastern princesses in order to affect a unification of his empire, emphasizes the fragility of historical record. The architectural and historical remains of the region are indeed irreplaceable; representing a span of civilization occupying at least one-third of the average "History of the Book" course. Today most library professionals are only peripherally interested in the history of the book or their profession's history. The more pressing demands of feeding dollars into the computer technology and publishing industries while maximizing their customer service potential rightly take precedence. Still, it is startling to realize that twenty years ago school children could describe in detail achievements of social worker Jane Addams, while even library school students have been hard pressed to name one librarian who worked among the urban poor and immigrants during the same epoch. Why have we "lost" that information?

As the unofficial historian of Emory University's Division of Library and Information Management which closed in 1988, I am well aware of both the strong case that must be made in order to save valuable records and the general ignorance of the value of historical research in "marginal" social institutions. American library historians, who numbered seventy-nine at the eighth Libraries and Culture Seminar held at Indiana University last May, have become inured to labels of irrelevance in the high-tech age. While it is somewhat encouraging to note that the profession and the nation as a whole have become sensitive to the problems of physical preservation in the past several years, few librarians seem to envision the corollary principle that must apply to a crumbling professional heritage.

A lack of self-knowledge unfortunately predicates the low professional self-esteem and image problems with which service professions have been plagued. Though, to be perfectly fair, the traditional litany of names and dates and the poor or overly esoteric writing which used to pass for professional history in typical library school curricula did little to whet appetites for more historical examples in the classroom. As ever, librarians are at a crossroads. Financial crisis, the need for resource sharing, the demand for technological innovation, and the imperative of multicultural diversity are all hot topics at present, yet few professionals are aware that these modern dilemmas have been present throughout American library history. Are these then insoluble problems, a continuing part and parcel of our profes-

sional baggage, or issues which have not yet been adequately addressed? Are librarians reinventing the wheel, dressing up old concerns with glitzy names or missing the point entirely?

A knowledge of local institutional history and the careers of professional forebears not only strengthens the case for new or expanded programs and services in specific instances, but also serves to suggest fresh approaches to problems. Historical examples may inspire a fledgling generation of librarians with a limited knowledge of "best practice" or divert them from the errors of the past. Most important, professional history gives us a better understanding of what we do and why we do it. In no area of the United States does the history of librarianship bear more weight than in the South. For the South, despite its longstanding notoriety as an illiterate, bigoted, and politically backhanded region, gave birth to revolutionary ideas of library services. Prominent examples include regional ALA conferences (Tommie Dora Barker, 1921, proposal enacted, Memphis Southeastern Library Association Conference, 1934); quantitative standards for school libraries (Charles Stone and Louis Round Wilson, 1926); planned resource-sharing (Robert Downs, 1938); regional library service (Mary

Utopia Rothrock, TVA camp-site libraries, Tennessee, 1934); multitype library education (Tommie Dora Barker, 1941); and federal aid for libraries (the product of many minds all over the country but whose chief proponents were southern).

Why southern library history? Surely in the age of telecommunications, sectional differences are irrelevant—or are they? It shocks library and information

studies students today to realize that racial integration came only in the 1960s to many southern municipal public libraries; that several southern state library associations had their ALA Chapter status revoked until they agreed to integrate their state associations; that some southern library boards, city officials, and even academic administrators harbored explicit prejudice against blacks, Catholics, and Jews, not to mention librarians born north of the Mason-Dixon line; that librarians with even modestly progressive ideas abraded the conservative sensibilities of their communities.

In North Carolina where the Institute of Research in the Social Sciences at Chapel Hill was a national center of social science research in the 1920s and 1930s and where a far-sighted and integrated approach to library development earned it the title of the "bell cow" state, provincialism frequently raised its ugly head, as in 1923, when Elizabeth McCarrick, a Catholic library school student, was denied employment at the Olivia Raney Library in Raleigh because of her religion. On the other hand, North

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Carolina claimed the nation's first library association for blacks (1934) and the first southern ALA president, Louis Round Wilson (1936). Even today one does not have to wander far from the door of any southern library to find prejudice alive and well. In 1985, for example, the Durham County Public Library became a center of controversy because of an exhibit of gay and lesbian materials mounted to celebrate the Stonewall riots.

Even more basic to a southern library history agenda is the need for studies of southern female library leaders, a need which other female-intensive professions have begun to recognize in their own ranks. A recent public television special on the history of nursing, "Sentimental Women Need Not Apply," used photographs, taped interviews with longtime veterans and historians, and film footage to paint a poignant picture of the paradox inherent in "semi-professions" dominated numerically by women but actually controlled by men. Perhaps the most moving message of the film was that nurses do not work for prestige and recognition, but for the patient; the gratitude of the patient is often their only "reward." The parallels with librarianship are obvious even if they are more difficult to define in the current climate of changing professional images, technological manifests, and recession.

Deny it as one may, librarianship is still perceived as a "women's profession," as if that fact alone accounted for its marginal status. Today one hears more about technology and add-on charges and less about the service component of the work, probably because service represents the "feminine" side of the profession. Few researchers have bothered to question the obvious relationship that must exist between societal gender role expectations and the choice of librarianship as a career. Why have men chosen library and information science for a career, and why haven't more southern men chosen librarianship? In other regions male librarians provided leadership from Melvil Dewey's time forward. While in the South, home of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the ubiquitous women's club, and various social welfare associations like the Methodist Women's Home Mission Society, white and black female workers took the lead in teaching, organizing libraries, providing voluntary library service in rural areas, and formalizing libraries as cultural and educational centers in often primitive settings throughout the South. Moreover, many of them played an important role in bridging the gaps of ignorance, prejudice, and pork-barrel politics in an effort to equalize library opportunity. The names of more of these women deserve to be part of the canon known to future librarians.

Among North Carolina's female librarians, certainly the careers of Nellie Rowe Jones of the Greensboro Public Library, Annie Pierce of the Charlotte Public Library, Mollie Huston Lee of Shaw University, and Susan Grey Akers of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill provide eloquent testimony to the struggle to provide the rudiments of literacy and educational enrichment to southern communities. Jones was a fearless advocate of library services for blacks in the era of segregation. Like Annie Pierce, she headed one of North Carolina's three Rosenwald demonstration libraries which were funded from 1930 to 1935 by a grant from the Rosenwald Foundation to provide service separately but "equally" to blacks and whites. These events occurred during the Depression when, to many minds, library budgets were frivolous concerns compared to the

more basic concerns of subsistence. Even more startling was the initiative of Mollie Lee. In 1934, with the encouragement of Marjorie Beale of the State Library Commission, she founded the North Carolina Negro Library Association in order to provide a forum of discussion for black librarians who were especially isolated in their work due to the barriers that segregation imposed on their freedom of professional association. Among North Carolina library educators, Susan Grey Akers deserves special mention for the double load she carried in serving as dean of the Chapel Hill program from 1932 to 1954 and heading the struggling library education program for blacks at North Carolina Central University from 1941 to 1946.

The relevance of a southern library history research agenda can be argued in the present age more convincingly than perhaps in any other and more in the interest of disseminating the professional past than in just preserving it. Demographic alarm has swept the educational world again, and projections of the number of various racial, ethnic, and national "minorities" are mentioned in almost every speech, article, and press release concerned with the future. While the South may not have emerged totally into respectability in the post-civil rights era, it does seem to have fared better than other regions in racial relations; the Watts riots were not, after all, a southern phenomenon, although appearances are deceptive. A thorough grounding in the history of southern libraries and the use of historical case study clinics could provide better models of actual multicultural problems and perspectives than the current rhetoric affords.

More basic still are the issues raised by the present literacy crisis and the continuing debate over what should be included in the elementary, secondary, and college curricula. The South's ranking at the top of national illiteracy rates has been somewhat obscured by the recent popularity of titles such as *Cultural Literacy*, *The Closing of the American Mind*, and *Killing the Spirit* and in the seemingly endless argument over the efficacy of testing and educational output. The southern historical example as a worst case scenario provides a sobering backdrop against which the more heated of these discussions can be conducted. What has changed? Are we worse off, or better, than fifty years ago? Perhaps the most alarming feature of the Bush educational initiative was its ahistoricity; many southern librarians could have provided fuel for the literacy fire.

The characterization of the historical as a literary or "soft" methodology belies its true complexity. The scarcity of historical studies undertaken in doctoral programs may reflect the time, expense, background knowledge in various fields, and considerable writing skills required in order to create a significant, engaging, and original work as opposed to a mere commemoration of obscure people and events. Among southern library studies, the standard until recently was the 1958 work by Anders. In the past five years, however, spurred by the work of southern historians Anne Scott and George Tindall and library historian Edward G. Holley, Jr., I have made some inroads into the unexplored domain of southern female library leaders. Also, Robert S. Martin as a doctoral candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, produced a mammoth opus documenting the rise of Louis Round Wilson both as a national library leader and a university change agent. In a broader context, Plummer Alston Jones, Jr., has just completed an impor-

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tant dissertation on leaders in library service to immigrants which has much relevance to the current concern with constituencies. Of related interest is a forthcoming issue of *North Carolina Libraries* which will be concerned with state historical topics. Robert G. Anthony, Jr., will be the issue's guest editor. Although the workers are few, the soil is quite fertile.

It is only when the past is dramatically threatened, as it has been in the Persian Gulf, that the general populace becomes aware of history as more than mere artifacts and dull facts. Convincing fellow professionals of the color, vibrancy, and relevance of their own past is often more challenging than convincing the layperson. A study of past practice by no means should be limited to the exemplary. Conducted with objectivity, examination of historical documents can lead to disillusioning, shocking, and even infuriating conclusions. Historical discussions, however, removed as they are from the political atmosphere of current events, can provide a non-threatening, neutral forum for continuing dialogue on volatile and discomfiting social problems. In this sense, historical research in southern librarianship, obscure as it may first seem, provides the most cogent and pertinent first point of discussion of problems whose span is far from temporal and whose relevance is international.

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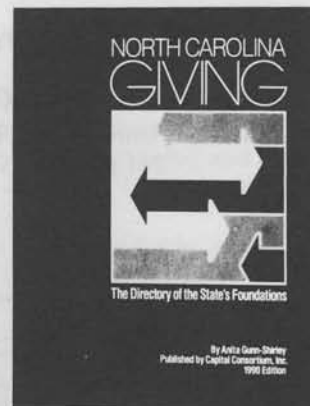
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