

Library Boards — An Endangered Species?

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I was saddened recently to learn that some of my favorite species — the orangutan, the blue whale, the mountain gorilla, and the slender horned gazelle — are on the endangered species list of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. As human domination of the other animals grows absolute, we grow nostalgic, depressed, or even fearful about the endangerment of one after another of our fellow species whose survival until recently seemed so secure. Today our sympathies, for many sound reasons, are easily aroused for the fate of endangered species.

Even in this current climate of opinion which generally looks with favor on the fate of all species, basic feelings about a particular species enter into an assessment of its merits. If mosquitoes, tarantulas, or water moccasins are ever endangered, it would be a pure act of mercy on my part to protest their diminishing numbers or their ultimate extinction. The only way

to arouse my ambivalence toward a dying mosquito would be a convincing demonstration that human fate was inextricably bound to the pest.

But we are here to consider the fate of the public library trustee, a species which we all find singularly likeable. I wonder, therefore, that so prevalent and admirable an American animal should find itself classified as an "endangered species."

Let me hasten to remark that a recent census of the species shows neither clear nor present danger. Mildred Batchelder wrote in 1969 that there were 61,000 American public library trustees extant.¹ This number, incidentally, is much larger than the number of public librarians distributed over the same land mass at this time. The picture of seeming good health of public library trustees also merged in a standard text on public library administration. In 1962, Joseph Wheeler and Herbert Goldhor stated that "more than nine-tenths of these [public] libraries, i.e., approximately seven thousand, are governed by boards of lay trustees."² Another

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writer placed the figure at an even higher 95% based on a large survey of cities by the International City Managers Association.³

History

Not only are library trustees prevalent throughout the continent today, but they also have been with us longer than the public library as we know it. An antecedent of the public library, the social library of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, often had subscribers who elected a governing board to oversee the library. Ann Prentice writes that:

The shareholders or association members elected some of their members to supervise the activities of the library for the group. These elected members responsible for the care and operation of the social library were forerunners of today's library trustees.⁴

Another nineteenth century experiment in providing library service to the general public came in the form of school district libraries which had trustees who reported to boards of education.⁵ Finally, in the middle of the last century the municipal public library emerged and fairly quickly established a board form which remained relatively independent of city politics although it was appointed by the mayor and city council.

Furthermore, during the latter half of the nineteenth century the board-of-trustee form of governance became popular in many other municipal services including police and fire prevention services. General use of boards for municipal services has been abandoned in the twentieth century. Thus, the board has been in decline as a "species" in that fewer city departments are commonly governed or guided by boards than formerly. Some authors speculate that services which must deal with crisis situations — extinguishing fires in burning buildings or halting robberies — cannot afford to deal with citizens' boards; instead, their directors must be free to go directly to the local chief executive.

Studies Of Public Library Trustees

Serious analysis and research publications concerning the desirability of governing libraries by trustee boards are themselves a rather well established, if underpopulated, species. Nearly forty years ago there was an important investigation of the government of the public library which found that library boards, like nearly everything else in this life, had strong as well as weak points. Carlton Joeckel noted that boards had had success in protecting struggling new libraries from excessive political corruption, hastened library growth, and often provided enlightened leadership when the librarian could not or would not.⁶ But he detected a misplaced provincialism on the part of trustees when larger and larger library systems were proposed in order to develop collections and expertise which could not be developed locally. Joeckel also scored library boards on the count of undemocratic representation in that the young and the poor, for example, did not serve on them. The observation that boards do not truly represent community composition is a theme that runs through the literature ever since Joeckel's work.

In a 1941 study entitled *Public Administration and the Library*, Miles and Martin set forth conditions under which, theoretically at least, cautious abandonment of strong library boards would be advisable.⁷ The essential point which they made was that the manager-council form of government renders the use of public library boards less viable than they were under earlier governmental forms. Miles and Martin reasoned that if local government grows less corrupt and more skillful, all the while attempting to conduct affairs in accordance with a code of ethics, then the library board might no longer serve a useful purpose. Its role as a buffer, a buffer between the library and the dirty politics in town, would become obsolete. Professional managers would understand better than their predecessors the need for good public library service as a consequence of their professional education.

Similarly, as librarians grow more competent by virtue of improved education, library associations, certification programs, salaries and library science literature, public library executives, needing far less guidance and support in policy-making and administration than before, would emerge in increasing numbers. These public library executives would have the technical knowledge which would increasingly enable them to make better decisions on resource allocation and library system design.

The notion, incidentally, that the library board should act as a buffer between the library director and the harsh realities of city or county politics may have been less a result of a conscious analysis of how best to govern a library than an unconscious result of sex roles in a situation where the trustees were so very often men and the librarians so very often women. The use of boards for libraries and schools, but not for fire and police departments, does not undermine this hypothesis; certainly the buffer metaphor calls to mind the honorable gentleman stepping in to protect the frail lady from harsh circumstance.

After World War II as a part of a massive assessment of the public library in the United States, Oliver Garceau took a look at governance and reinforced Joeckel's work.⁸ On balance, Garceau concluded that the library board was a reasonably strong governmental form which did, however, need to represent its community's social, economic and other groupings more closely and to recognize that very often good library service required resources far greater than could be assembled locally. More recent research by Morton Kroll, Raymond Carpenter and Ann Prentice, however, questions more and more insistently whether the public library board is still necessary.

Since 1960 this research progressively has brought into question whether the board as a maker of policy, a source of library control and a holder of power is not like the human appendix, very

much present but generally useless and sometimes a cause of pain. I have stated this last point in excessively strong terms to invite your attention to the fact that the threat to the library board species is a real threat. Some experts believe that the board more frequently obstructs rather than encourages good library service where both the librarian and the city or county manager are competent professionals. Morton Kroll urges a shift in the policy-making function from trustees to the legislative body of local political units, fully understanding that such a move would effectively leave most decisions in the hands of the librarian and the manager.⁹ He further proposes that states make such a shift easily possible for local governmental units by altering state laws in this connection. This sort of reasoning conforms exactly with recent changes in North Carolina's public library legislation, as we will see.

But first let us reflect a bit more on the results of research into the role of the public library trustee. Donald Koepp recently studied how certain classes of major decisions are made concerning local public library service.¹⁰ Seven California libraries which were in areas with the council-manager form of government and which served populations within the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas ranging from 50,000 to 100,000 people were included in his study. Six of these libraries had boards. One had none.

There is enormous variety in the manner of making decisions and the allocation of responsibility of making them. Some of the variety was a consequence of differences in regulations governing how decisions were expected to be made, but some seem to have just grown up. Koepp could not, as a result of his research, offer us a prescription on how best to govern public libraries. But he does thoughtfully dwell on the absence of real criteria on which to base such a decision. It is not known whether libraries should or should not have boards. If libraries do have boards, the question of the degree of autonomy which they should have is also

out with the jury. It may be a hung jury. If not, the case may go to a higher court.

Perhaps the answers to such questions can never be known. But it seems clear that systematic study could shed more light than we have now. On the other hand, a California councilman's observation about the irrationality inherent in resource allocation within communities may be generalizable to the question of who can best decide how to allocate resources within the community. This councilman said:

There is not any rational way of deciding whether it is better to plant more trees in the downtown area or to buy more books for the library. And there isn't any rational way of deciding whether what Joe Blow does in the recreation department contributes more of benefit to citizens of this community than what Mary Smith does in the library.¹¹

I don't know about you, but I am of two minds about such sentiments. While there is some truth in them, they also invite an inattention not conducive to honest government. Rational decision-making at some level may indeed be impossible, but the attempt at rational decision-making still is worth the price.

Recent Change In North Carolina Law

The case has already been made that as manager-council systems and librarianship come into increasing maturity, boards of trustees may do well to modify their functions and reduce their autonomy, or cease altogether. Attention to these general trends seems especially relevant to North Carolina trustees today in view of the previously alluded to changes in recent North Carolina public library legislation.¹² Fundamentally, this change now merely permits, where once it insisted upon, appointment of a board. Then if a board is appointed, the law states that the library board will be delegated all further powers by the city or county with the exception of the requirement to prepare two annual reports, one to the governing board for the local government and the other for the

state library. This means that such other library board functions as were once customary and required in law such as appointment of the librarian, establishment of library policies and programs, supervision and care of library property, and budget preparation, for instance, belong to the board only if the local city or county governing body delegates these powers to their board.¹³

Thus the new legislation solidly places power over the government of the library in the hands of the governing body, if it chooses to exercise that power. The general national trends we have briefly surveyed most certainly could have influenced the current formulation of legislation concerning library trustees. It is not fully ascertained whether it did to any degree. From comments of a person close to state affairs, it appears that a major concern was to bring the general law into conformance with current practice. Special acts locally had already established less powerful boards than those established under the old law.

This new legislation can, over several years, invite great variation within North Carolina. There will be localities both with and without public library boards. Governments which do appoint or retain a board have increased flexibility not only in what functions they assign its members but also in the size the board will be (it can now be as many as twelve members whereas earlier it had to be exactly six).¹⁴ Under these conditions a particular board may continue much as it did before this law was enacted; it may reexamine its own role and suggest change in its size or the purposes, or it may be assigned a new role by the local government.

From the point of view of an observer, public library trustees in North Carolina seem less likely to be threatened by extinction as a species than to be undergoing a profound mutation with the likely appearance, in the short term at least, of even more subspecies and varieties than before. It may be that one or more of

these new forms will be stronger than the others and that further down the road the situation will become more standard once again. Many boards will have less responsibility for the library's workings, but the case for the professional librarian together with a city or county manager handling these workings better than a lay board seems entirely credible, assuming, of course, checks and balances are included to prevent the obvious potential for abuse in this structure from being realized.

I would be less than candid if I did not remark that under the new law the library board may, like the old soldier, not die but slowly fade away. That is possible. But aside from the observation that probably many boards will indefinitely go on as before under the new legislation, there needs to be made visible here the outlines of a new subspecies of library boards I would like to see flower. It would be advisory and unconcerned with details of operation. Instead, it would concentrate its energies (in addition to the writing of the two annual reports required in the new law) to a two-lane road of advocacy.

The board would advocate: (1) creative use of the library by its public, and (2) a creative response to its public by the library. In the first role of advocacy it would provide spokesmen who would argue for the power of accurate information, clear thought, ancient wisdom and works of art to enhance the quality of life and community affairs. Moving in the other direction, important, but unrecognized, community needs for collections and programs would be identified; then the board would inform library management about these needs and would advocate that methods be adopted to answer them.

In the latter role, note that there is often a chance for lay people to point out a missed opportunity for public libraries to form special collections to attract new businesses or permit citizens to learn new skills, for example. I often wonder that those who know of child care centers do not explore with children's librarians

ways to change these centers from merely necessary babysitting services into enriching educational services with social benefits to all concerned. Boards could also be helpful in the effort to make the library into a source not only of information related to the people's studies but also a source of direct practical information on where in the government and private bureaucracies help is to be found in coping with everyday problems.¹⁵ This trustee role which we merely hint at above would involve an active, talented group of lay people working to insure that, insofar as possible, the public would get the best return on their library taxes. They would prevent the institution from growing apart from its only justifiable purpose.

More and more often neither the librarian nor the city or county manager are natives of the area they serve. At the same time the populations of political units, at least in most of the piedmont and western regions of the state, grow larger each year. Professionalism alone cannot remove the danger, and often increases the danger that public services will grow away from public needs. Or, almost as bad, will be perceived by the public as having done so. Centralization of government can invite a situation in which only the relatively sophisticated and esoteric work gets consistent attention. Responsible boards should be able to help prevent such developments.

But to be responsive as well as responsible, these boards would have to reach into many sectors of the community. A recent study of the public library trustee and his relationship of library budgeting stated:

The library trustee of 1970 had much in common with the trustee of 1935. Today's trustee . . . is white, male, with an average age of 53 years. . . . He holds a graduate degree and is employed in a professional occupation.¹⁶

Ann Prentice, who performed this research, also characterized those who are not on library boards:

Almost totally unrepresented among the trustees are Blacks, those with a high

school diploma or less, students at any academic level, craft and trade unions, and the unskilled or semi-skilled workers. In effect, the trustees represent a highly educated minority and do not reflect either the community or a large percentage of the library's patrons.¹⁷

I hope some of the experimentation in the near future in reforming North Carolina library boards will include more diverse community representation.

Conclusion

Consistent with the main thrusts of informed opinion on how to govern public libraries, the North Carolina legislature has permitted a considerable shift of power from local boards to other interested parties. It has also permitted latitude in electing to change from the former mandatory form.

This situation will invite many new hybrids. Some of them, as I have tried to hint, may be of even greater public service than their useful predecessors.

NOTES

¹Mildred L. Batchelder, *Public Library Trustees in the Nineteen-Sixties*, ALTA Publication Number 4 (Chicago: American Library Trustee Association, 1969), p. 81.

²Joseph Wheeler and Herbert Goldhor, *Practical Administration of Public Libraries* (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 54.

³Mildred L. Batchelder, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁴Ann Prentice, *The Public Library Trustee: Image and Performance on Funding* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1973), p. 2.

⁵*Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁶Carleton B. Joeckel, *Government of the American Public Library* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935).

⁷Arnold Miles and Lowell Martin, *Public Administration and the Library* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941). Chapter VII, pp. 217-245, is entitled "The Board Form of Library Organization."

⁸Oliver Garceau, *The Public Library in the Political Process: A Report of the Public Library Inquiry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949).

⁹Morton Kroll, ed., *Public Libraries of the Pacific Northwest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960).

¹⁰Donald W. Koepp, *Public Library Government; Seven Case Studies*, University of California Publications: Librarianship, 6 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

¹¹*Ibid.*, 179.

¹²The reader should see the *North Carolina General Statutes* (G.S. 153A, Article 14, 1973).

¹³The section of the law dealing with the board's powers and duties is quoted here:

If a board of trustees is appointed, it shall elect a chairman and may elect other officers. The governing body may delegate to the board of trustees any of the following powers:

- (1) To formulate and adopt programs, policies, and regulations for the government of the library;
- (2) To make recommendations to the governing body concerning the construction and improvement of buildings and other structures for the library system;
- (3) To supervise and care for the facilities of the library system;
- (4) To appoint a chief librarian or director of library services and, with his advice, to appoint other employees of the library system. If some other body or official is to appoint the chief librarian or director of library services, to advise that body or official concerning that appointment;
- (5) To establish, a schedule of fines and charges for late return of, failure to return, damage to, and loss of library materials, and to take other measures to protect and regulate the use of such materials;
- (6) To participate in preparing the annual budget of the library system;
- (7) To extend the privileges and use of the library system to nonresidents of the county or city establishing or supporting the system, on any terms or conditions the board may prescribe;
- (8) To otherwise advise the board of commissioners on library matters.

The board of trustees shall make an annual report on the operations of the library to the governing body of the county or city and shall make an annual report to the North Carolina State Library as required by G.S. 125-5. If no board of trustees is established, the governing body shall make the annual report to the State Library. G.S. 153A-266.

¹⁴The new laws reads:

The governing body of a county or city may appoint a library board of trustees. The governing body shall determine the number of members of the board of trustees (which may not be more than 12), the length of their terms, the manner of filling vacancies, and the amount, if any, of their compensation and allowances. The governing body may remove a trustee at any time for incapacity, unfitness, misconduct, or neglect of duty.

¹⁵The reader interested in exploring this rich new concept of public library service is urged to start by reading Alfred Kahn, *et al.*, *Neighborhood Information Centers; A Study and Some Proposals* (New York: Columbia University School of Social Work, 1966).

¹⁶Ann Prentice, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

¹⁷*Ibid.*