

How Libraries Serve Older Adults*

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In a small volume by Thomas Mann there is a delightful reference to the futility of carrying doves to Athens, an idea more familiar to us in relation to carrying coal to Newcastle. At any rate that is the position in which I find myself this morning. Yet I have had a lifelong interest in what I call "collecting libraries" and for some twenty-five years I have been actively promoting services to older adults. Hence I had the temerity to accept an invitation to speak to you from my layman's approach on "How Libraries Serve Older Adults". Probably I will say nothing you do not already know, but I hope to remind you of all the things being done or that can be done to enhance the quality of life for older adults in every community. Actually we did a rather good job in summarizing needs for library services in the

State Report prepared for the 1961 White House Conference on Aging which pointed out "the increasing emphasis on understanding the problems of aging in order to determine the libraries' appropriate role in meeting educational needs and leisure time interests."¹ With a budget request now before Congress for a White House Conference on Libraries by 1978, greatly increased emphasis can be expected.

I was pleased to note in a recent paper by Jean S. Brooks that Library services to the aging has become a *field* of study and expertise rather than a single and special isolated library service.² Library services for this age group must include the gamut of general library services plus much more. Obviously our concern is primarily with community-based libraries as contrasted with those in educational institutions or other

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specialized settings, but even the latter can be expected to emphasize increasingly their services to the growing numbers of older adults.

In fact, the literature on libraries and the aging seems to be increasing by leaps and bounds. It is really surprising that the history of this movement within the field goes back only until 1941 when the Cleveland Public Library established its Adult Education Department. This was ten years after the first federal authorization for funds for library service to the blind (the Pratt-Smoot Act of 1931). For excellent material on the historical development, which I cannot review at this session, I refer those of you who have not seen it to the issue of *LIBRARY TRENDS* for January 1973.

While we are concerned with how the library can serve the aging, we must also be concerned with how well the library serves as a center for educating the public about aging. The recent awards of nineteen grants and contracts for library research and demonstration projects by the U.S. Office of Education includes a substantial grant to the University of Denver for a project entitled "Serving Senior Patrons: Integrated Media Library Staff Training Package."³

Federal library grants for services based on senior citizen population are usually on a project basis and not on a per capita age basis. Apparently we must dream up larger projects since the North Carolina grants for fiscal 1976 worked out to twenty-two cents per senior citizen compared with sixty-nine cents in Vermont and eighty-three in Wyoming.

Potential Clientele

Every older adult in North Carolina is already making some use of libraries or belongs to your potential clientele. To indicate the numbers involved, we have only to consult the census estimates for mid-1976. They give the state 725,000 citizens sixty and over. Moreover, we know that the number of individuals in the older ages is steadily increasing from decade to decade. More than two-thirds of all individuals sixty-five and over continue to be independent, in full control of all aspects of their lives. Less than one-third need more or less help in connection with satisfactory daily living. Less than five percent are in some type of institution. These proportions are significant as one evaluates current services and plans for expanded library services. Also, they place in sharp perspective the fact that we have often failed to give adequate attention to healthy, active older adults and their interests as we focus on the frail, the ill, and the chronically disabled. The aged are a heterogeneous group, covering two or even three generations, and ranging from non-readers to the highly trained who challenge the skills of the reference librarian. We do not have to formulate all of the ideas. Many of the aging can be depended upon to express their own needs or wishes if given the opportunity to do so. Moreover, learning has no age limit.

The National Council on the Aging has recently published a study en-

titled *The Myth and Reality of Aging in America*.⁴ Questions were asked the sample of older adults surveyed about their use of libraries. For individuals sixty-five years of age and over, fifty-five percent of those with a high school education reported that a library was convenient as contrasted with ninety-one percent of the college graduates. Actually the study found that convenience is directly affected not only by education but also by economic status and mobility. For low income older adults the fact that the library is free is an advantage that should not be minimized. "With retirement comes reduced income level for most older Americans. Libraries provide one of the least expensive activities available to the individual citizen."⁵ Of the college graduates surveyed, almost two-thirds (sixty-three percent) had visited a library during the past year.⁶

Reading habits are also of interest. Of all individuals sixty-five and over in the sample, eighty-seven percent reported reading newspapers, sixty-seven percent magazines, and fifty-seven percent books. The percentages increased as income level rose and with more education. Furthermore, the next generation of older adults will have more income, be better educated, and make more demands quantitatively and qualitatively. In fact ninety-nine percent of the older college graduates read newspapers, ninety-two percent magazines, and ninety percent books, with all percentages declining slowly with advancing age. The day before the survey all older adults averaged

1.7 hours in reading with college graduates averaging a full two hours. Even for them, however, more time was spent on radio and television programs.⁷

A recent North Carolina study gave somewhat different percentages. While 61.6 percent reported that a library was convenient, 29.9 percent did not have convenient access. Some just did not know: obviously non-readers. Of the North Carolina older adults, 43.6 percent reported that they read books and 56.1 percent said they did not. For magazines and/or newspapers, 74.2 percent said they read such publications; 25.5 percent did not read them.⁸

Another recent survey of the aged for Guilford County does not include the specific data but clearly found about fifty-five percent of those persons sixty-five and over using some of their free time for reading. In fact it was fifth as a pastime behind television, church activities, having friends over, and radio.⁹

Having briefly examined the clientele, I want to turn to three A's that I often use in discussing services for the older segment of the population, namely availability, accessibility, and acceptability.

Availability

The first question under availability is whether we have recently taken stock of what we have in the library holdings to meet the interests and needs of older adults. Do we have the latest publications from the Social Security Administration on social

security payments and on medicare, or a good selection of materials relating to pre-retirement planning? What about the many pamphlets on consumerism and budgeting and the various buying guides? What about books on investments or on health? Nutrition is often a major interest and we need literally to combat food fads and diet gimmicks.

Are there special collections selected with the interests of older people, or those about to retire, in mind? We have special collections for other interest groups as a matter of course. In assembling such collections we may give special attention to good print and to convenient location. If you have a bit of arthritis in your shoulder, reaching for a special book on a high shelf is hardly tempting.

In book orders, do we keep in mind the special interests of individual older people? Perhaps Mrs. Smith or Mr. Jones has an area of expertise or a hobby that should be promoted. I am told that biography and travel books and fiction are in special demand, although we really need far more research in this area. I remember chiding my mother many years ago about having so many Zane Grey's in the then limited library collection in our small town. She replied, "If I can persuade a non-reader to try a Zane Grey, I can gradually arouse interest in reading better books." Almost fifty years ago as the founder of a library and as its volunteer librarian she already knew that there is no substitute for personal guidance.

Too often, also, our smaller

libraries seem to forget older readers in ordering their short lists of magazines and newspapers, items whose subscription price is beyond the reach of most retirement incomes. I am referring, of course, to "Modern Maturity," the "Wall Street Journal," and other of their ilk. Also, many prefer the periodicals that have survived from their younger days and that they have continued to read for much of a lifetime.

In considering special collections we also need to plan for the increasing number of persons who work with older adults in social welfare, health, recreation, and other areas. They need a wealth of information readily available. Most specialized service programs have been amply documented but the written materials are often hard to locate as many turn up in mimeographed reports, leaflets, and other hard to obtain simple publications. Here the bibliographies of special libraries, such as the one maintained by the National Council on the Aging, can be helpful. Since I am currently trying to locate material with regard to chore service, meals on wheels, home repairs and like subjects, I can assure you that the field is wide open for collections on specialized services.

The rapidly enlarging role of libraries in using media other than the printed word provides, I am sure, excitement in the profession. One of the most effective devices for stimulating participation of older people in the library is exactly the same as for children: namely, regular showing of carefully selected films. Film strips,

video tapes, a good TV, really good pictures for loan, a copying machine, records for loan or for playing in a special room are other assets generally recognized by community-centered libraries today. Most libraries provide an extensive information and referral service because even the more ignorant older adults expect to find answers to their questions by calling or visiting their nearby library. Information and referral can become a magnificent service, thereby drawing a wide range of older individuals to our libraries.

Accessibility

Gone are the days when the library was limited to a monolith with steps, near the center of the community. In no other area perhaps have services moved so drastically out of the main building into all kinds of settings. Nevertheless, we are increasingly concerned about the central building. Does it have a ramp for wheelchairs or walkers, or protective railings? Is there a drinking fountain or a public telephone at an accessible level? What about rest rooms? Are there at least a few comfortable, not too low chairs, with strong arms? If the library is of any size, is there a separate charge desk for adults? Look at your own library for ways in which to make it more comfortable and to remove accident-generating features. For those with the opportunity to plan new buildings, as in Durham, the potentials for innovative features are great indeed.

But these of course are the most obvious aspects of accessibility. More

and more we must take our wares to where people are. The branch library again is commonplace, and all the criteria for the central library apply. However, location of the branch may well be dictated by a concentration of older people in easy walking distance. Large numbers no longer drive and public transportation, if available, may be too inconvenient.

The bookmobile has long been a part of our library culture. A newspaper article¹⁰ on Mitchell County reported that Charles Wing of Boston started the mountain school and library in the small community of Ledger:

In addition to the school, Dr. Wing reportedly began the first bookmobile in North Carolina in this mountain community. He made up packages containing 75 books, and anyone who was willing to carry them on his wagon and assume responsibility for their distribution could borrow a package. At the end of the first year of operation, not a library rule was broken and no books were lost or delinquent.

Still a mainstay, the bookmobile is supplemented in most communities across the country by small collections or packets of books for churches, recreation centers, housing projects for the aged, and other institutions for the elderly, such as nursing homes. There are also book carts in hospitals, collections of books taken to meetings of Golden Age clubs, and seven day a week, twenty-four hour telephone service for ordering books, as reported by the San Antonio Public Library System, or patrons may obtain catalogues with return, postage-paid postcards for requesting books or receive books by mail in reusable containers with return postage included.

Of course there is no substitute for personalized service, as when trained volunteers, young or old, make door to door visits instead of merely delivering a packet of books to a nursing home. It may take some encouragement to start the older person reading again or discussing what he has read with other residents in the home. More and more we are stressing the socialization aspects of services for the isolated and immobilized, and the library can play a leading role. More and more we join our friends in social welfare in seeking alternative delivery systems, which is the reason for all of the special services mentioned. Help directly to the individuals involved is essential at every point where a book may meet the older reader.

While we have long focused on taking books to where the readers are, a more recent emphasis is on taking readers to the library resources. This change in direction may be compared to the stress on congregate meal centers versus meals on wheels programs for taking meals to the individual. Some libraries utilize buses to bring older people to the library for a wide variety of activities. The bus may be owned by the library or made available by some other community agency. Grand Forks, North Dakota, has a "Ride to Reading" program for which the library pays the bus fare. Many communities have volunteer drivers to take individuals who no longer drive to places where they need or want to go. The library can make use of this service.

Looking again at one of the more widespread services, we have books in large print, books in Braille, and talking books. The great majority of the blind or near blind are older citizens. In fact almost half of all newly blind in the United States each year are sixty-five and over. For them we must make special provision and the program of the Library of Congress is indeed remarkable. Moreover, our own Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped in the State Library appears to be especially well organized. But I am increasingly questioning whether we may place too much emphasis on large print. First of all the books are too heavy for frail older people and take up a lot of shelf space. Would we be smarter to have a supply of excellent, large reading glasses or other magnifying devices which could be used in the library or on a loan basis? Why do we stress talking books only for the blind rather than for any older person who would enjoy them? Such steps would immediately reduce the pressure for a major increase in large print volumes and at the same time broaden the range of reading material for many with limited vision. The importance of the daily newspaper is reason enough for making reading glasses available (the weekly large type *New York Times*, while often useful, does not carry the much wanted local news). Of course other gadgets such as book holders and page turners are available but certainly are of less priority. Whatever is needed we must try to fill the void in the lives of visually handicapped older persons.

Perhaps the library is really not accessible because the older person does not know how to use it. Individual or group instruction on how to tap its treasures, and issuance of borrowers' cards, must be part of any effort to serve all older adults. Most of them did not receive the introduction to the library which is routine for today's school children. We cannot take for granted that they somehow learned in earlier years to use the library; and they may now be hesitant to ask for help.

Acceptability

Acceptability obviously becomes an issue only when the tests of availability and accessibility have been met. We are really concerned about a personal approach, so the warmth and helpfulness with which the older person is greeted may be the touchstone which we are seeking. Are we asking too much of busy librarians? Do we need to give more thought to the use of volunteers (and what better setting than a library in which to be a volunteer)? We have used volunteers for the essential daily tasks of maintaining the library. How about a volunteer hostess to greet older visitors, to help them locate the desired materials, to chaperone them through the necessary steps? Someone has even suggested a library coffee pot!

And of course volunteers have a major role in any special program. The lucky library has a cheerful meeting room or rooms which can be used for classes; games; study or discussion groups; current events or

world affairs clubs; book reviews; authors' events; reading aloud, such as plays and poetry; the meeting place for appropriate community clubs; handicraft classes; displays and exhibits; and on and on for older adults. The groups do not have to focus on reading. Any one of these areas may be the acceptable service for encouraging use of the library by an older individual or groups of older people. I am so pleased about the organization of a Senior Citizens Club by the librarian in a small, non-urban community I know well and about the services being developed for the members. The "Aging Without Fear" program of the Richard B. Harrison Branch Library in Raleigh is another example of an imaginative use of library resources. The socialization that occurs during and following such programs is a rewarding aspect. Again volunteer leaders can be invaluable in such programs. It should be pointed out that any programs specifically developed for older persons should be scheduled during daytime rather than evening hours. Not only are older individuals less likely to drive; a high proportion do not drive at night. Many of them live alone and do not want to be out late for that particular reason. I would also caution against programs or other special events that last too long. One has less energy at seventy than at forty years of age.

The Adult Services Librarian

I am told that the Charlotte and Mecklenburg County Library System has a special librarian for adult ser-

vices, and there may be others elsewhere in the state. In smaller systems this may not be feasible, but increasingly someone must serve in that capacity, hopefully with some special training with respect to aging. In my experience on national boards ranging from a focus on in-home services for older adults to improving public television, I have been impressed by the contributions of the representatives of the American Library Association. If serving on national boards is important, membership on local agency boards and on a variety of interdisciplinary groups is equally desirable. In the first place this is one of the best channels for publicizing expanding library services. One of the reasons I take the small newspaper published in my childhood home town is to keep up with the library notes and calendar, which I find missing, by the way, in urban dailies. We seek publicity on radio and TV for so many interests. How do we use these media to promote our library services for older adults, except as we depend on "Book Beat" on public television? Surely the better TV stations will offer opportunity for related library features. David N. McKay, the new state librarian, also stresses public exposure and a better press.

A simple pamphlet detailing services for older persons and inviting participation is probably found in every library. If not yours, why not?

But there are other approaches to be promoted by the special librarian. One is the current emphasis on oral history. In any community it is possi-

ble to capitalize on the older's fondness for talking about the "good old days" or some special experience.

I have been intrigued by libraries which have developed cook books detailing old time recipes. Uniquely valuable contributions can be made through such approaches by any library.

I have also been interested in the growing use of the term, "bibliotherapy," and the special demands which it entails. One definition is as follows: "Bibliotherapy is a program of selective activity involving reading materials, planned, conducted, and controlled as treatment under guidance of the physician for emotional and other problems."¹¹ Here we open up a highly specialized area which involves not only the well qualified librarian but also the well qualified physician. It should be approached, I believe, with considerable caution but also with cautious enthusiasm. Certainly with the growing emphasis, pioneered at Wayne State University, on special training for library service to the aging, we will see increasing numbers of librarians qualified in this specialty.

Adult Education

Today's topic cannot be covered without attention to adult and continuing education and its major role with respect to older individuals. The Academy for Educational Development reports that at least eight hundred colleges are offering some type of specialized program for older adults. Most of the programs have been developed only within the last

four or five years. They serve both small and very large groups and depend heavily on use of off-campus facilities, such as libraries, museums, and churches. Thus they can serve people where they live and are more accessible for older adults than college campuses. Also, the nearby public library provides much of the material needed by these older students.¹² Many community colleges across the state as well as the four-year institutions are actively involved in this major development.

But not all older adults want to learn in group settings. Very recently some library systems have developed detailed programs for adults interested in self-directed learning projects. The public library is of invaluable help not only with respect to the plan for independent learning but also by obtaining essential books and other materials. This type of study, when well advertised in the community, will attract more and more adults¹³ and open up opportunities for continuing intellectual stimulation.

Friends of the Library

Finally, I want to emphasize my commitment to Friends of the Library. Surely any library anywhere needs such an organization. It should make possible or enhance every item we have covered this morning. What better way to share common interests!

Since we are realists we know that expanded library services are directly related to budgets. Friends of the Library can help to provide special funds as well as generate greater interest in the on-going activities of the

library and in the development of special programs, such as those for the aging.

Actually though, most of the ways for better serving older adults can be effected through using resources already at hand. It is a matter of focus, of some re-ordering of priorities, exploiting to the full interest in libraries that you have built up in your communities over the years.

Eleanor Phinney, writing recently on our topic of the morning, summarized the current directions:

Fresh approaches, a new flexibility in the choice and use of materials and a new awareness of the need for specialized training in service to the older person — all these point to the development of services which will be more firmly based in the library's total program and which eventually will be recognized as the responsibility of all types of libraries."¹⁴

Clearly, new directions are the order of the day.

Footnotes

¹North Carolina's Older Population: Opportunities and Challenges, Governor's Conference on Aging, July 27-29, 1960, p. 109.

²Jean S. Brooks, "Professionalism in Library Services to the Aging", a paper presented at the University of Indiana Conference on Library Services for Indiana's Senior Citizens, April 8-9, 1975, p. 1.

³HEW NEWS, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, August 11, 1976.

⁴Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., for The National Council on the Aging, Inc., *The Myth and Reality of Aging in America*, January 1976.

⁵National Citizens Emergency Committee to Save Our Public Libraries, *Fact Sheet on Library Users*, Washington, D.C., June 30, 1976, p. 2.

⁶Louis Harris and Associates, op. cit., pp. 175-178.

⁷Ibid., pp. 206-208.

⁸Department of Health and Administration, School of Public Health, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, *Omega, U.S.A.: Planning, Organizing and Evaluating Services for the Aged*, Social Indicators for the Aged, 1971-72, 1975.

⁹Vina R. Kivett, *The Aged in North Carolina* (The Guilford Study), North Carolina Agricultural Experiment Station, Tech. Bul. No. 237, April 1976, pp. 31-32.

¹⁰ASHEVILLE CITIZENS-TIMES, August 1, 1976, p. 19A.

¹¹Ruth M. Tews, "Introduction", *LIBRARY TRENDS*, 11 (October 1962): 99.

¹²Fact Sheet on Library Users, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

¹³Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁴Eleanor Phinney, ed., "Library Services to the Aging," *LIBRARY TRENDS* 21 (January 1973): 365.