

PIONEER IN OUTREACH SERVICES: THE YMCA LIBRARY 1850-1920

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During the years immediately following the Civil War, most areas of the United States experienced a period of unprecedented prosperity. Profits reached record levels, population rose and American manufacturing and industrialization flourished.¹ Public libraries, however, did not participate in this general expansion to the extent to which many other service-oriented agencies did. Little farsightedness in the area of outreach services to the public is seen until the twentieth century; libraries seemed content to offer what services they did within the con-

finances of the library building or room, during respectable daylight hours.

Libraries in Young Men's Christian Association organizations, however, provide a noteworthy exception to this general rule. From the founding of the Y until the 1920's, these organizations across the country were most anxious to serve the public so that by reading, young men might avoid a temptation to ruin their lives, a concept modern-day bibliotherapists might not find totally alien. YMCA services to young men and later to adult railroad workers included clean, ground-floor, well-lighted libraries open

evenings as well as during the day, staffed by librarians imbued with a sense of almost missionary zeal toward their responsibilities.

With the joining of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads at Promontory, Utah in 1869, followed by three other transcontinental routes in the 1880's,² YMCAs embarked upon their second outreach venture, that of taking books to workers in railroad halls and, later, of forming libraries, the first of which was opened in Cleveland in 1872.³

If we consider railroad book collections to be early attempts to establish what later came to be known as branch libraries, it becomes apparent that this remarkable organization was indeed a pioneer in the philosophy of "books to the people."

The purpose of this article is to trace briefly the development of the YMCA library, delineating its organization, physical features, philosophy, services, requirements for staff members and opportunities for patron growth.

Strange as it may seem, the 1851 Worlds Fair in London was the impetus for the development of the YMCA in America, as it provided visiting Americans the opportunity of seeing at first hand British Y's, then seven years old. George Van Derlip was such a visitor. A New York University student on vacation, he is generally credited with being the motivating force behind the Boston movement toward the establishment of a YMCA in late 1851.⁴ When the Boston headquarters, the first of its kind in this country, opened in March of 1852, it included a library of several hundred books and forty New England newspapers.⁵ Intending to be a friendly home away from home for young men working in the city, it met with much success and by 1854, one sees nearly fifty such Y groups, similar to the Boston group, across North America.⁶

In the development and growth of YMCA's, the concept of a library was

always of primary importance, as public libraries at the time were not well-established and not open to all.⁷ The first compilation of associations in North America, done in 1856, reprinted in C. Howard Hopkins' *History of the YMCA in North America*, shows the number of volumes in each association library, with Boston's totaling 2016.⁸ Indicative of the high priority put on libraries is the fact that in the same year the first YMCA activity for Navy men in Portsmouth, Virginia was the collection of books for the establishment of a library.⁹ Indeed, Hopkins notes that the first "secular" program to be universally adopted by local Y's was a reading room with "standard works of scientific, moral and religious character" available to patrons.¹⁰

Although the idea of Y libraries was never challenged, the type of reading material in them occasionally was. A notable example of this is the New York Y's attempt to exclude abolitionist literature, in the form of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1853, resulting in heated discussion and controversy. Novels were not generally approved; history, biography, arts and sciences circulated well in most Y libraries.¹¹

What were these early libraries like? They were not separate buildings, as almost all associations in early years occupied rented rooms. They made, however, a great attempt at accessibility, believing, as reported in YMCA Quarterly Reporter for April, 1858, that "many a young man has neglected to read a book . . . because it was not at his hand." To remedy this, it was recommended that reading rooms (libraries) be on the ground floor, carpeted if possible, with bright lights, and open during evening hours. Librarians were to be hired to maintain order, suggest books to patrons and write monthly reports.¹² In actual fact, librarians had several other duties, such as counseling and nursing, as they were expected to

take a deep personal interest in the spiritual well-being of their patrons.¹³ Salaries were low; the Boston Y spent \$570 in 1852 in salaries for all employees. Robert Ross McBurney, Y librarian in New York, received \$5.00 per week for his services as librarian and janitor!¹⁴

By the early 1870's, with the rise of railroads across the land, another opportunity arose for YMCAs to serve the people. To Henry Stager, more than any other person, belongs the credit for the establishment of Y "branch libraries" in railway stations for the employees and their families. An interesting story lies behind Stager's idea. In 1872, he was witness to a serious accident involving an employee of the railroad serving Cleveland. He overheard a conversation between two other witnesses in which one said, "It's only a railroad man." The sentence stuck in Stager's mind and upon observing the low esteem in which the public held railway workers, he conceived the idea of Y libraries for these men, to enable them to grow in knowledge and self esteem. That same year the Cleveland Railroad YMCA was founded and the idea spread rapidly to other railroad cities.¹⁵

A picture in John F. Moore's *The Story of the Railroad Y* of the reading room serving Detroit workers shows a large and comfortable room with wooden floors and tall ceiling. Paintings are hung on the walls, rocking and captains' chairs circle long oval wooden tables covered with newspapers, and glass-fronted bookcases ring the room. A spittoon is prominent in the foreground.¹⁶

The Chicago Tribune speaks highly of the reading room of the Lake Shore and Rock Island line, mentioning its seventeen windows, poster covered walls and blooming plants.¹⁷

Cornelius Vanderbilt and John Wanamaker, through their personal generosity, advanced the cause of Y railroad libraries in these early years. The

establishment of a railroad branch YMCA in New York City was due in part to Vanderbilt's visit to the one in Cleveland. He personally contributed \$215,000 for a building to be built for railroad men. A reading room, of course, was prominent in the plans. Wanamaker, also, donated the time and money to the concept of books for railroad workers.¹⁸

Any library, once established, is expected to increase its holdings, and Y libraries in railroad stations were no exception. To this end, book receptions were common in the early years — social events where the price of admission was a book or two. Moore speaks of the conglomeration of weird and worthless books which arose from this practice, resulting in later associations deciding to purchase books more carefully.¹⁹ Eventually Y railroad associations were able to pride themselves on their well-catalogued and efficiently handled collections. Such pride is shown in the monthly report of George Q. Cobb, superintendent of the reading room of the railroad branch Y in Cleveland. Cobb notes that during the month of July, 1872, 1402 people visited the reading room and the collection was nearly 1000 volumes.²⁰

Of interest, briefly, is the fact that the YMCA libraries also served soldiers in the American Civil War, distributing books and food to many camps, military posts and naval stations. During World War I, too, the Y was active, sending large wooden crates of reading materials to prisoners of war. It is estimated that from April, 1917 to April 1919, more than \$1,100,000 was spent in this endeavor and more than 4,000,000 men aided.²¹

It is no coincidence that after the founding of the American Library Association in 1875, Y libraries and book-related activities began to decline to the point where, in 1894, only twenty-six Y libraries had holdings of more than 3000 volumes, Hopkins notes. Part of the decline was due

to the rise in the number of public libraries, with which the smaller Y libraries couldn't and did not attempt to compete. Part is due, too, to the increased demand of young men for more physical activities during the time they spent at the Y. Recognizing, therefore, changing times and preferences, Y libraries declined.²² Most Y collections were donated to public libraries.

It is well for today's librarian, actively supporting the concepts of accessibility, branch libraries, outreach programs and bibliotherapy, to recall this little-known phenomenon, the YMCA library and its resulting offshoots. They are indeed part of our library history and should not be ignored.

FOOTNOTES

¹Harry J. Carman, Harold C. Syrett, and Bernard W. Wishy, *A History of the American People* 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1961), p. 3.

²Marvin Meyers, Alexander Kern, and John Cawelti, *Sources of the American Republic: A Documentary History of Politics, Society and Thought* (Chicago: Scott Foresman, 1961), p. 43.

³John F. Moore, *The Story of the Railroad Y* (New York: Association Press, 1930), p. 16.

⁴C. Howard Hopkins, *History of the YMCA in North America* (New York: Association Press, 1951), p. 16.

⁵Hopkins, p. 17.

⁶Hopkins, p. 22.

⁷Doris M. Fletcher, "Read a Book and Sin No More: The Early YMCA Libraries," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, 31 (March 1957):521.

⁸Hopkins, p. 24.

⁹Hopkins, p. 26.

¹⁰Hopkins, p. 30.

¹¹Hopkins, p. 195.

¹²Fletcher, p. 521.

¹³Fletcher, p. 522.

¹⁴Hopkins, p. 43.

¹⁵Moore, p. 20.

¹⁶Moore, p. 38.

¹⁷Moore, p. 41.

¹⁸Moore, p. 73.

¹⁹Moore, p. 150.

²⁰Moore, p. 302.

²¹Hopkins, p. 496.

²²Fletcher, p. 522.



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