

# Microcomputers Go Public

Mary Jo Godwin

The advent of microcomputers has brought to public libraries of all sizes what was once available only to large and wealthy systems — computer power. Public libraries throughout North Carolina are utilizing microcomputers to create better ways to accomplish work, manage information and express creativity. Just as microcomputers have revolutionized the business world by bringing many of the capabilities of large data processing systems to small businesses, they also offer small and medium size libraries or departments in large systems affordable means of data management.

Public librarians are not only finding the affordability and the adaptability of microcomputers to be attractive, but, more important, they are also realizing that one does not have to be a technological wizard to understand and to work with a microcomputer. What was first marketed in 1975 as a computer kit for hobbyists has become an information handling machine that stores, compares, changes and manipulates information of almost any kind to suit individual needs.

Most library personnel are familiar with the microcomputer's basic components: an ordinary audiocassette tape recorder, a television set or monitor and a unit that looks like a standard typewriter. This basic system can be expanded and enhanced by the addition of a disk drive, a printer and a modem. The capability of selecting the degree of involvement or difficulty at which to introduce microcomputers is another appealing feature to librarians. The application can be as simple as loading purchased software to make the computer a word processor or as complicated as learning how to write your own programs that meet your special needs. You are free to choose and change at your own pace.

The microcomputer is well suited for varied library applications. Beyond the standard payroll, check register and accounting programs, the microcomputer can type catalog cards, handle orders for materials, keep statistics, produce bibliographic, union and patron lists, handle information and referral services, film bookings and community calendars, and promote computer literacy.

## **Wayne County Public's Pioneer Effort**

Varied also describes the uses being made of microcomputers in North Carolina's public libraries, while mushrooming characterizes their development. Since 1979, when the Wayne County Public Library purchased a Dynabyte 32K microcomputer with two disk drives and a Qume Daisy Wheel printer, the microcomputer movement has made its way into more than six public libraries in the state, with an equal number currently considering purchases.

Robert Burgin, then Director of Wayne County, wrote the two programs that are still being used. One is a program for printing catalog cards; the other prints a mailing list. The library purchased "WP Daisy", a word processing program, but has found it difficult to use: Unlike more recently produced word processing programs, the "WP Daisy" editing and printing commands must be memorized. The Wayne County Library is presently working with the faculty at Wayne Community College to develop other programs to address particular library needs.

Other than problems with the printer, which required returning it to the manufacturer, the system has worked well. The major drawback noted by Wayne County staffer Gene Jackson is that the system is very sophisticated and requires in-depth staff training. "It is like having a 747 and knowing only enough to taxi down the runway," Jackson said.

With Wayne County as a model, other libraries began considering the purchase of microcomputers. At about the same time, the public schools, community colleges and technical institutes were incorporating microcomputer courses in their curriculums. Microcomputer hardware and software could be purchased at discount prices on North Carolina State Contract. Home computers and video games were gaining in popularity and appearing in upper middle income households. Librarians and their publics were eager to find out what microcomputers were all about.

### **Edgecombe County Computer Literacy Project**

The Edgecombe County Memorial Library decided to take advantage of this public interest in personal computers and developed a computer literacy project. Using a Library Services and Construction Act Enrichment Grant and a grant from the North Carolina Board of Science and Technology, the library purchased an Apple II Plus 48K microcomputer with two disk drives and Epson MX-100 printer. The project's primary objective is to increase the community's knowledge and awareness of the uses and capabilities of microcomputers. The opportunity for hands-on experience is made available fifty-three hours each week to all interested persons. The Apple is located in the reference area of the library where it is visible to the public and can be supervised by both the reference and circulation staff. Users sign up for thirty-minute sessions and can schedule time one day in advance. Mornings are reserved for adults and after school hours for students, while evenings are open for anyone.

Since November, when the computer went public, more than one thousand individual sessions have been logged. More than seventy-five percent of the users have had no previous computer experience. However, their lack of experience has not placed undue demands upon the staff to offer special instruction. A step-by-step guide is provided that tells users how to turn on the system and load programs. All software is kept in a binder at the computer desk.

In spite of almost continual use, there has been very little damage to software. Backup copies of all publicly used programs are made, thus avoiding

replacement costs. The game paddles, however, have not survived the constant dial jerking and button pushing. A heavy-duty pair by the Keyboard Company is now working very well. To avoid eventual replacement of the Apple's on-off switch, used constantly to reset programs, a multiple outlet strip with an on-off switch, a pilot light and a circuit breaker is used. It also protects the computer in case of power surges.

Unlike Wayne County's Dynabyte, the Apple II microcomputer is easy to operate and to program. Staff training amounted to a three-hour workshop focusing on the system's components and troubleshooting. Those desiring programming skills may take courses at Edgecombe Technical College with all fees paid by the library.

The Edgecombe project is reaching people of all ages throughout the county, not just users who come to the library. The staff has easily transported the system to elementary schools and civic clubs for demonstrations. The library plans to conduct several workshops for the public and host a computer fair with area vendors of both microcomputer hardware and software.

Some library applications are being made also. With "Apple Post," the computer can print mailing labels for the Friends of the Library. "Apple Writer" makes the computer a word processor. "Visicalc," an electronic worksheet of up to sixty-three columns and 254 rows, helps with budget planning and forecasting. The library plans to purchase software to handle bookkeeping and payroll.

### **Information and Referral At Forsyth County and Onslow County**

Forsyth County Public Library's Adult Continuing Education information service (ACE) has added two Apple II-Plus 48K microcomputers to their program of services. Funded as a Special Project by the Library Services and Construction Act, the Forsyth program combines computer literacy and information management. While a variety of software is available, "Typing Tutor", "Elementary My Dear Apple", "Visicalc" and a BASIC tutorial are used most often. Duncan Smith, of the ACE staff, reports users find some programs helpful in preparing for the GED while others are teaching themselves how to write programs. Their quarterly statistics indicate that about fifty per cent of the users have had no previous computer experience. Beyond computer literacy, the system will be used to maintain a profile of persons and their particular continuing education needs that can be matched against a data base of available continuing education opportunities.

OIL, or Onslow Information Line, an information and referral service of the Onslow County Public Library, is using LSCA funds to automate the service. They purchased a VECTOR III microcomputer with two disk drives from a local dealer who is also training the staff. The Onslow County staff produce a monthly calendar using the "What's It" software package. The data base for the I & R service is being created using another software package, "TIM-3", Total Information Management.

## Other Uses

The staff at Sheppard Memorial Library in Greenville is finding that a TRS-80 Model II with a Corvus hard disk and Daisy Wheel printer is making some routine library tasks much easier. Using "Condor III", a data base management system, Director Willie Nelms is creating a permanent file of new books, preparing lists of new titles every six months, taking care of standing orders, and maintaining a file of new borrowers. The borrowers file can also be used for direct mail. With "Scripsit", the system becomes a word processor.

Other public libraries purchasing microcomputers for word processing are Pettigrew Regional Library in Plymouth and Cumberland County Public Library in Fayetteville.

Although none of the libraries surveyed is currently lending programs to patrons, Dr. Theodore Hines of the Department of Library Science/Educational Technology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro foresees such lending to be an important library activity. "The astonishing growth of personal computers in the home, the strong effort of many school systems and state education agencies to encourage school use of microcomputers, and the growing quality and variety of available programs for entertainment and education all indicate that libraries should acquire computers for patron use and begin to lend programs just as they now lend phonographic records or filmstrips."<sup>1</sup>

## Available Data Bases

Along with more affordable computers, affordable data bases are being developed. The addition of a modem to a library's microcomputer hardware makes several reasonably priced information utilities only a phone call away. DIALOG, RLIN and ORBIT, which are familiar to the library community, are also available to microcomputer users and are not prohibitively expensive. The Source, the first and oldest of its kind (now owned by the Reader's Digest Association, Inc.), offers a variety of data bases and programs. News and current events are available from United Press International, The New York Times News Summary and The New York Times Consumer Database. Business information through the UNISTOX data base and a computer-generated Federal income tax guide enable small libraries to provide business reference resources found in larger libraries. Electronic mail is another function. A Source user can send a letter for five cents to another user; the letter arrives immediately. A wide assortment of games and educational programs is available. Users can make plane and hotel reservations as well as shop online for over 20,000 items at discount prices. EMPLOY connects employers and job hunters with a national network of executive recruitment firms and prints out resumes that match job descriptions and qualifications desired. A subscription to The Source is one hundred dollars. Usage fees are charged on an hourly basis and depend on the time of day the system is used, the current maximum being \$25.00. A new fee scale for libraries is being developed. CompuServe and System Development Corporation provide similar data bases.<sup>2</sup>

Microcomputers and all of the resources that they bring to a public library can revolutionize library service. Their rapid growth and continued development create new and refined programs for libraries. Circulation systems that utilize microcomputers are already being marketed for libraries with up to one hundred thousand circulations per year. Computerized card catalog programs that operate on microcomputers are bridging the gap between the card catalog and large, expensive mainframe systems. All of these developments can mean faster and more efficient handling of routine library tasks plus faster and improved access to information for the patron. North Carolina's public libraries are only beginning to discover the infinite variety of applications of microcomputers suitable for libraries. It is an exciting frontier only beginning to be explored.

Mary Jo Godwin is Director of the Edgecombe County Memorial Library, Tarboro.

#### References

1. Theodore C. Hines et al., "Putting Microcomputers To Work In The Library: 31 Ideas For A Start," *Classroom Computer News* (Jan./Feb. 1982): 46.
2. "Affordable Databases," *ACCESS: Microcomputers In Libraries* 1 (October, 1981): 7-8.



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