

The Tar Heel Enclave: Public Library Salaries in North Carolina

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In these days of budget-cutting propositions, unsteady inflation, and uncertain economic trends, North Carolina public librarians find themselves in an unenviable position. With gloomy prospects for salary increases, and with low starting professional and staff salaries, library workers may need to take positive action if they wish to remain above the poverty level. The pride and satisfaction attained by working in a human services agency do not buy the groceries or pay the rent; unfortunately, the public library is an enclave harboring intelligent men and women willing to sacrifice their time and education for a mere pittance.

The Problem: A Bleak Picture

Troubled economic times affect everyone, but the already depressed¹ salaries of public librarians and support staff are harder hit than others. Historically speaking, librarians have always received minimal pay for the amount of education they are required to have. The principal reason for this, one often acknowledged, is the fact that librarianship is a female-dominant occupation. As early as 1877, Justin Winsor underscored the "economy" of hiring women for library work: "In American libraries we set a high value on women's work. They soften our atmosphere, they lighten our labor, they are equal to our work and for the money they cost... they are infinitely better than equivalent salaries will produce of the other sex."²

Although increasing numbers of men have been entering the library field nationally, and despite the fact that men typically hold administrative and better-paying positions than women, salaries for the profession as a whole remain low. It is in the best interests of all librarians and paraprofessionals, whether male or female, to work together for higher pay. Independent studies conducted by Valerie

Oppenheimer and Juanita Kreps indicated that "occupations which are heavily female dominated... do not seem to foster high earnings for either males or females."³ The potential library worker should be wary of this fact when contemplating a career choice.

In this so-called "softened atmosphere" librarians discuss the salary issue in hushed and frustrated tones. This has not been true of other professional groups, most notably the American Medical Association and, in North Carolina, the North Carolina Association of Educators. Only recently have library voices become the least bit strident. In 1952 one small voice anticipated the current concern with low wages. Elaine von Oesen, then with the North Carolina Library Commission, stated that "no librarian in North Carolina needs to be told that library salaries are too low."⁴ She advocated use of a recently-published *Personnel Manual* which established library salary schedules in keeping with "salaries paid for other services in the State."⁵

The librarian classification series presently utilized by North Carolina for establishing state salaries has been in effect since 1960. Although only state employees are paid according to this classification series, library employees throughout the state find their salaries influenced to some degree by what the state pays its workers. The salary grade structure for librarians and support staff has been modified only a few times; the last change was made in 1969. In the twenty-one years between 1960 and 1981, the salary grade for Librarian I, for example, was increased from 60 to only 64—roughly one grade for each five years (See Table I).

This disturbing trend asserts itself across the nation. In the five years between 1976 and 1981, public library salaries move ahead an average of only 4.8%.⁶ Statistics show that the starting salary for Librarian I in North Carolina ranks fifteenth among the fifty state governments;⁷ however, a comparison of library salaries with those of other state-paid

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TABLE I
N. C. Salary Schedule for Librarians

	1960 Grade	Salary Range	1981 Grade	Salary Range
LIBRARIAN I	60	\$4632-\$5904	64	\$12,468-\$17,820 (College Degree)
LIBRARIAN II	62	\$4860-\$6204	66	\$13,572-\$19,476 (Grad. Degree)
LIBRARIAN III	63	\$5100-\$6516	68	\$14,868-\$21,420 (Grad. Degree)
LIBRARIAN IV	67	\$6204-\$7920	71	\$17,028-\$24,684 (Grad. Degree)
LIBRARIAN V	70	\$7176-\$9168	73	\$18,612-\$27,132 (Grad. Degree)

Source: N. C. State Salary Schedule (July 1, 1981) and N. C. Department of Administration, Office of State Personnel.

professions indicates how misleading such reports can be. If library salaries are low in North Carolina the fact that North Carolina ranks fifteenth out of fifty states also shows how terrible salaries must be in thirty-five other states. Add to this the fact that the salaries compared were only those of state employees, who represent a small minority of public library workers. Some North Carolina library personnel may have better salaries than out-of-state workers, but even those salaries purchase far less than formerly.⁸

So Miss von Oesen's voice crying in the wilderness did not start a rush to bring public library salaries up to par with other professions or public services. At the time there was great demand for librarians, but lack of supply had no effect on salaries. Unfortunately, the professional organizations for librarians, the North Carolina Library Association and the American Library Association, have not helped. By failing to recommend a minimum librarian salary, these groups, although quite progressive in other areas, have shown an important lack of leadership in an area where librarians and local funding agencies need enlightenment and direction. The present high ranking of the North Carolina Librarian I salary among the fifty states, for example, obscures its dismal position within the North Carolina salary grade structure. To work as a librarian requires completion of a college or graduate degree, but to work as a feed inspector, hotel baker or ale agent (ABC store sales) — all ranked similarly to librarians — requires little training or advanced education.⁹ Jobs with titles and education comparable to librarian in the state salary schedule, such as assistant director of information and referral, education media specialist, and media center director rate several grades higher. Few public library paraprofessional positions in the entire state compare favorably even with the North Carolina state salary range.

The picture outside state government is

even more bleak. The average female library director's salary in North Carolina, with an average 17.1 years experience, is only some twelve hundred dollars more than the top range for a Librarian I.¹⁰ In keeping with the Kreps and Oppenheimer reports, the male library director's average salary, with an average of 12.9 years experience, is nearly \$4,000 more than his female counterpart's. A look at Table II and Table III reveals the deplorable condition of many public library worker salaries in North Carolina. Outside the state employee purview, the majority of staff librarians holding graduate degrees earn less than the top salary of a Librarian I, a position which requires only an undergraduate college degree.

While many librarians have not yet joined the bread line, the 13.5% inflation rate of 1980,¹¹ the 10.4% rate of 1981, and the 6.2% rate of 1982¹² have brought them much closer to that harsh reality. According to U. S. Department of Labor statistics, the "lower budget" for a four-person family in 1979 was \$12,585.¹³ While the typical staff librarian's salary (with graduate degree) surpasses this, the typical paraprofessional salary falls far below this touchstone. Compared to other occupations in terms of salary (See Table IV), the librarian is definitely losing ground.

Librarians, already an assertive group in defending quality services for the public, may need to act with speed and tenacity to combat personnel cuts and inflation. The trend of history need not continue; salaries can and should be changed, as library colleagues, in several instances, have demonstrated in other parts of the country.

The Problem: Segregation, Politics, Economics

Several of the reasons why public library salaries in North Carolina have not kept pace with the higher cost of living have already been broached. Librarianship has been, and is still, a female-dominated occupation. Librarians often

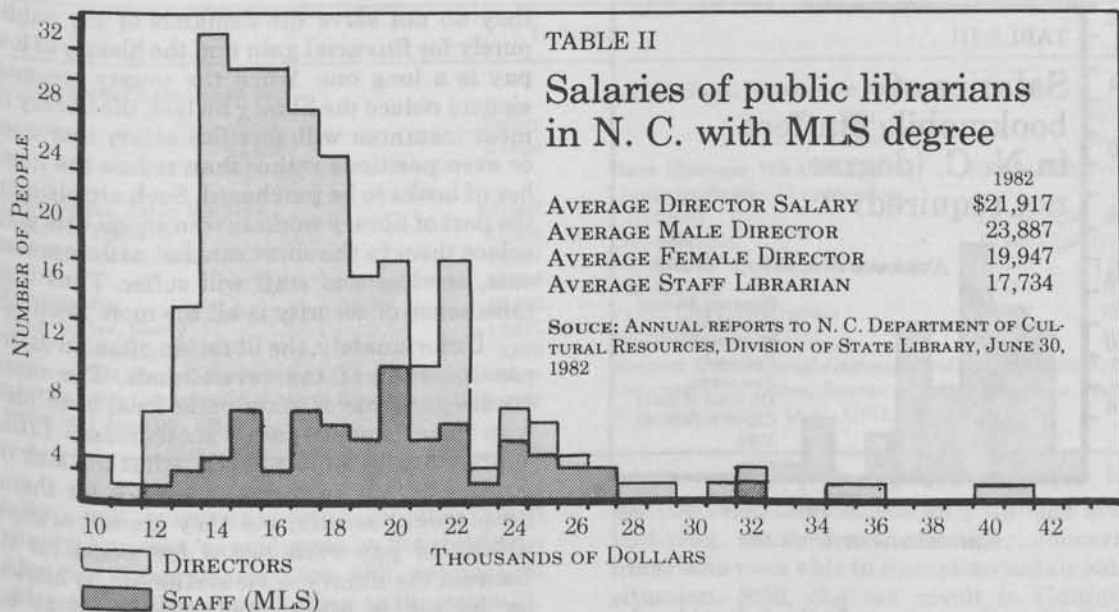


exhibit a lack of decisive mutual and political support. And the law of supply and demand fails to work in the librarian's favor. There are, to be sure, other factors which affect the librarian's salary, but these are cited most often in library literature.

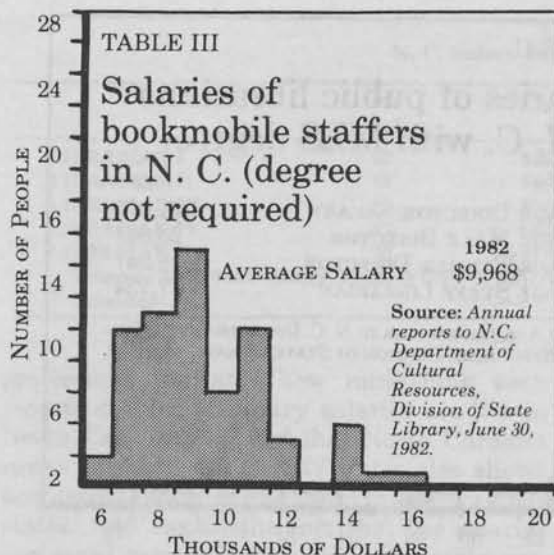
Ever since Dewey's contemporary underscored the bargain rate labor available in the female work force, most librarians have been women. Indeed, in 1980, 81.4% of all librarians in the United States were women.¹⁴ The fact that women are paid less than men for jobs of equal worth has been questioned, but the problem continues. According to a study conducted at Temple University, the "origin of the salary discrimination is derived mainly from the premise that professional librarians who for a century have predominantly been women were 'glorified clerks'. Thus, both the professional nature of librarianship which has been denigrated by the appellation 'clerical' and the worth of the 'clericals' in all fields who have traditionally been women have combined to devalue the economic worth of professional librarians."¹⁵

This image of the librarian as a female clerk survives vividly in the media today. The bunned and bespectacled, pencil-waving and shushing librarian who needs a personal banker belies the real thing. The stereotype has no family to support and lives in the house her father left her; the real thing has difficulty supporting herself, let alone a family, and cannot afford a house. Women at first worked to supple-

ment the family income, now they often are the family income. Understandably, an increasing number are finding that they cannot live on the stereotypical income.

An important factor affecting this income is the much-discussed notion of comparability. Too many salary and job classification schedules do not account for the education, skills, duties, and responsibilities involved in the various librarian positions when compared to other positions. A look at the various jobs ranked beside Librarian II, and higher positions in the North Carolina State salary schedule reveals how many jobs not requiring graduate degrees are paid more than the Librarian II or III, for example.¹⁶ As seen earlier, a similar job title entailing similar duties, such as Information and Referral Assistant, often will rank higher and pay more than a Librarian. Although the state job classification schedule purports to follow a set of objective criteria,¹⁷ the results seem skewed.

Should a librarian attempt to resolve his or her own salary situation, he will discover an alarmingly low set of salary standards. As noted previously, for instance, various county and local governments utilize the state model for lack of others. The state in turn employs the federal. Since both state and federal standards are low, the insufficient salary syndrome perpetuates itself. In North Carolina, the minimum beginning librarian salary (Librarian II, state-employed), as recommended by the Division of the State Library has been revised by



only 5.2% in three years. At the federal level, a recommendation has been made to restructure certain government librarian positions to place more emphasis on experience.¹⁸ This action would, in effect, further lower federal salary standards. Thus, when a group of county commissioners requests the Office of Personnel to evaluate county library positions, for example, it perpetuates the catch-22 of low library salaries. This bodes ill for future library salaries.

The lack of salary standards extends itself to the librarian's own peer groups. Those organizations which stand so solidly for intellectual freedom and service to the public do not lobby for higher salaries or set minimum salaries to be encouraged. The American Library Association publishes salary polls, supplying averages for various types of libraries and various locations, but only in rare instances are these purported to be too low. One series of articles published in *Library Journal* periodically inspects the relationships between sex of director and per capita support in large library systems.¹⁹ In fact, the librarian can compare her own salary to the averages given and fall into a false sense of security that she is right in there with the rest. Actually, the median 1981 director's salary in the South was two thousand dollars lower than anywhere else in the nation.²⁰

It might be said that librarians also fall into the classic female segregated occupation not only in terms of salary but also in terms of philosophy. Many are caught in what one writer terms the compassion trap.²¹ After all,

they do not serve the demands of the public purely for financial gain and the history of low pay is a long one. When the county commissioners reduce the library budget, the library in most instances will sacrifice salary increases or even positions rather than reduce the number of books to be purchased. Such altruism on the part of library workers who accept this may solace them in the short run, but with repeated cuts, services and staff will suffer. Thus that false sense of security is all the more fleeting.

Unfortunately, the librarian often faces the consequences of tax revolt alone. The more vocal opponents of taxes make local headlines with their demands for no tax increases. Little do they realize, until too late, what the lack of funding means in terms of service for them. People want service, but they are not always willing to pay even just a few cents for it. Because the library is viewed as run by clerks, its budget is often among the first to be trimmed. Small libraries and rural librarians in particular have little peer support in such emergencies: there are no library worker unions and little agreement among North Carolina Library Association members about recommended courses of action for the librarian to follow in appealing to the various funding bodies within the state. Only an informal network exists.

When the results of tax cuts hit the libraries and salaries stagnate, the librarian either leaves for another job or hopes for better times. If he leaves, the job must be filled, often at a lower salary. The mentality seems to be that anyone can perform the work in the library. In North Carolina, this development has shown itself painfully in the area of children's services. The professional children's librarian is forced to leave due to low salary;²² since the low salary cannot attract another professional, a non-professional assumes the duties. A corresponding lack of quality occurs. The demand is there for the professional, but instead of increasing budgets so the demand can be met, salaries remain the same or even decrease.

Although there are more than enough librarians to fill demand, the supply some fifteen years ago was such that they could pick and choose among jobs. But even then, short supply had little effect on salaries. As one contemporary writer said, "librarians can't even depend on the basic laws of economics to protect them."²³ Librarians were paid some \$5,000 less than the beginning salaries of other occupations with corresponding or less educational requirements. Apparently, the low salaries

TABLE IV

Occupational Salaries in N. C.

1960 Grade	Salary Range
Back Tender, Paper Machine	\$20,934
Combiner Operator	17,804
Maintenance Mechanic	14,391
Secretary	10,920
Stenographer	12,460
Truck Driver, Heavy	13,377
Truck Driver, Light	9,886

Source: 1981 Wage Rates in Selected Occupations, Employment Security Commission of North Carolina, 1981. Survey period was January, 1981.

Occupational Salaries in the U. S.

1981 Grade	Salary Range
Bank Manager, MBA (Beginning)	\$16,800-28,800 (1980)
Computer Systems Programmer, (trainee)	13,000-17,160 (1980)
Cosmetologist	13,000-18,200 (1980)
Librarian, Public (Beginning)	12,218 (1979)
Job Analyst	16,100 (1980)
Postal Clerk (Beginning)	18,282 (1980)
Real Estate Agent	14,700 (1980)

Source: Occupational Outlook Handbook, 1982-1983. U. S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Bulletin 2075. Washington, D. C., GPO, 1982.

today will eventually create another short supply; however, as evidenced by the children's librarian example, salaries will not rise to attract new librarians. Return to the catch-22.

The Problem: No Easy Solutions

Needless to say, the librarian shoulders an immense problem with regard to salaries. *He* works at a profession known as female-dominant; *she* lacks the political support of her peers; and *they* cannot rely on the economic law of supply and demand. Resolving the problem of low library salaries in North Carolina will take persistence, new tactics and strong organization, perhaps even a restructuring of the librarian's image.

Employees in female-dominant professions should acquaint themselves thoroughly with the concept of comparability so that they can work towards receiving pay for what their work is worth. Since the criteria being used for the basis of job-evaluation by the state of North Carolina result in pay inequities, they need to be studied and revamped: "the crux of comparable worth is the job evaluation system by which one determines the relative value of jobs in an office, an organization, or an industry. The proponents of comparability believe that bias-free job evaluation systems are possible."²⁴ The problem, of course, lies in achieving an evaluation system free of preconceived notions. This is not an easy task.

One such system, or at least recognition of the need for comparable pay, was implemented in San Jose, California, where city librarians obtained a thirty percent pay parity increase.²⁵ The increase did not arrive without persistent action on the part of librarians, however, who belonged to a local union and to a separate

activist organization. Working through study, lobbying, and local officials, concerned librarians were able to correct an unfair salary situation. Still, the tax revolt in California forced the library to drop several staff members.

The key to the San Jose success was political action, something which includes and entails public relations. Knowing local officials and informing them about issues which affect libraries and librarians will eventually bring in needed funds. Librarians should cultivate their local legislator. Other special interest groups do, and the librarian should be no different. It helps, too, for friends of the library, as well as professional organizations, to pressure various funding groups. People need to be told what services the library offers, what the librarian accomplishes, and how these services are essential to the community.²⁶ The library needs to be visible. If public relations extend from a base of local support to political action on all governmental levels, library workers in North Carolina stand a much better chance of fairer remuneration. As stated previously, local funding agencies tend to emulate state actions, so concern with state wide issues is imperative.²⁷

Since the public relations involved in political action necessitate educating legislators and others about the functions and purposes of the library, the librarian must remember her media stereotype. If the stereotype changes, perhaps the librarian's financial situation will change. John T. Malloy, for one, correlates image and salary: "The way librarians dress and conduct themselves gives the public the impression they are glorified clerks. As a result they are one of the most underpaid groups of people in the United States."²⁸ As long as the intrinsic worth of the librarian is equated

with that of a clerk, the salary dilemma remains. Most librarians cannot afford to dress like executives, but they should keep appearance in mind.

Part of the librarian's image arises, quite understandably, from the natural connections to libraries and librarianship. With the recent prominence of computer technology and automated data bases, the public tends to disassociate information science (computers) from libraries even though information, in one form or another (including computer), is the library's principal commodity. Another segment of the image problem lies here, for "although we professionals no longer seriously misunderstand the relationship between information work and librarianship; everyone else has absorbed the message that they are totally different and that while information work has glamour, librarianship has none."²⁹ So-called "glamour" jobs pay higher salaries, perhaps because there is a certain mystique attached to what those jobs entail. Lawyers, doctors, computer program analysts, and stockbrokers seem to merit high salaries because of their mystique and technical training. Librarians have the technical training, but they lack the mystique. If a change of terminology will help acquire a fairer wage for librarians, perhaps libraries—as some have—should become information centers and librarians information scientists. They should manage information, not look after books.

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The difficulties involved with library wages in North Carolina are not insurmountable, but there are no easy solutions. Altering the public perception of the librarian takes time. Higher salaries do not beckon from the near horizon. San Jose was one of a few isolated examples. Those librarians discouraged by the lack of financial reward in librarianship will look elsewhere for employment despite the non-monetary satisfactions accrued in librarianship. "In a nation where money is the focus of

attention and the means of influencing the many, poor librarians are likely to be unheeded and uninfluential."³⁰ Prospective library workers should be aware of the job market in general and of library salaries in particular before they entertain advanced schooling; perhaps library school enrollments should even be restricted.³¹ In the meantime, libraries and library associations should continue to sponsor investigations of alternative careers for librarians and look for ways to extend library influence.

Library administrators should examine the salary structure within their institution. There is a case for comparative reward in nonadministrative positions. In many North Carolina libraries yawning gaps exist between what the director takes home and what the other professionals earn—often as much as \$10,000 or more. Again, the director should think in terms of investments for the future. Although poor at present, the job situation may change; the director who neglects her staff today may discover that tomorrow she has none. Developing a good staff requires a great deal of time and energy. The private sector has long recognized this and prepares appealing benefit packages in order to keep good employees.

Staff librarians must not depend upon benevolent directors or professional organizations to look out for their interests. Directors work under tremendous pressure to justify every cent of the library budget on the local level. On the state level, they often feud with their counterparts about government aid. Professional organizations, being political, often compromise. As a result, sensitive items such as salary are never discussed or are couched in ineffectual terms. Library workers willingly discuss the salary problem in private, but, like the defective family member in the nineteenth century, it remains hidden from public view. Individual librarians owe it to themselves and to the future quality of library service to bring the salary issue into the open. Anyone who has ever attended a North Carolina Association of Educators meeting knows that money is a frequent topic of discussion. Nice girls (and boys) *do* discuss money.

Access to an abundance of inexpensive, skilled workers has had a positive effect on North Carolina libraries. Rural libraries benefit from the availability of librarians desperate for employment; many have been able to employ their first professional. Big-city libraries have acquired additional professional staff. The

quality of paraprofessionals employed is high; an amazing number have advanced training. Consequently, North Carolina libraries have undergone dramatic transformations. A glance at any issue of *Flash* reveals dynamic planning and programming underway in every corner of the state. North Carolina public library services have received many national library awards. It is nice to receive a congratulatory letter from the John Cotton Dana Committee. It is comforting to hear thanks from patrons for a job well done. It is even agreeable for the staff to accept remembrances at Christmas time. But are poinsettias enough?

The love of money may be the root of evil, but the search for higher library salaries falls into another category altogether. There is nothing wrong with receiving financial reward for helping others and enjoying it. The public perception of the library and the librarian must be changed, as well as the librarian's image of himself. Financial remuneration would stimulate this process. Library workers should be important to society, and their professional organizations should testify to their importance through political pressure and extensive public relations.

"Occupations which are heavily female dominated ... do not seem to foster high earnings for either males or females."

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