

## The Making Of A Regional Library

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Editor's note: Once again, a public library in our state has been named a winner in the annual Book-of-the-Month Club Library Awards program. Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Regional Library was awarded \$1,000 on April 25th, the opening day of the 1965 National Library Week. We are pleased to publish here the evolution of this regional library.

What goes into the making of a regional library? Probably no two libraries are alike in their history or in their development. A few seem almost to have been created, but most have had to grow from their roots in the culture and the economic structure of the area. Where the economy is expanding, rapid growth is possible. Where population is shrinking and the economy is in a process of transition, the uncertainties and the discouragements of an area affect its institutions.

Libraries—public libraries—are comparatively new institutions in our area, and they have grown slowly. The complicated process of growth is not always visible. The watering by state and federal aid is plain, but the nourishment from the soil for the roots is just as important, and not so easily seen.

In North Carolina's western counties, the geography of high mountains and deep, winding valleys results in difficult access to and communication among scattered small communities and isolated homes. Avery, Mitchell, and Yancey counties include three of the highest and the most beautiful mountains in the state, as well as the ridges that have, in the past, cut off neighbors, communities, and counties from easy acquaintance and cooperation with each other.

The population is classified as rural, and yet there is only a limited amount of agricultural land, since steep and often heavily wooded slopes do not lend themselves easily to cultivation or even forestry. The small number of industries in the area has been a factor in the low average income and the consequent painfully inadequate support of most public services. The per capita income in two of the three counties is among the lowest in the state. The fifty years after the Civil War was almost a "Dark Ages" for mountain people as they struggled to hold their own against economic disadvantages and their isolation from the mainstream of American life.

Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Regional Library was formed from three existing libraries: Avery County Library with headquarters in Newland, Mitchell County Library with headquarters in Bakersville, and Yancey County Library with headquarters in Burnsville. Each had grown out of the vision and the efforts of the people of the county.

The beginnings of library service were typical of many such beginnings in the state. In one county service had its origin in a small collection of gift books, sponsored by the local woman's club and presided over by a devoted and unpaid club member and home mission worker. In another county a series of subscriptions, donations and meetings by a handful of citizens was combined with a WPA depression library project. In WPA days, also, a borrowed bookmobile gave a brief sampling of library service. In a third county individuals solicited gifts from civic clubs.

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In the 1940's state aid to public libraries under the administration of the North Carolina Library Commission gave impetus to the formation of county libraries with legal boards and appropriations from the County Commissioners. Avery authorized its county library in 1942, Yancey in 1945, and Mitchell in 1948. Fortunately or unfortunately—probably the latter—state rules permitted a county library to qualify at that time for state aid with only a token appropriation from the county; and library boards and commissioners labored under the delusion for the next ten years that a few hundred dollars per year was all that it took to have a library.



*Avery County Library of the Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Regional Library.*

The library boards managed for the next five or six years to plan and administer library service, beg for local budget help, and stave off periodic proposals to eliminate library service completely as an expensive and irrelevant frill. Even today, after twenty years of public library service, an occasional candidate for a county office campaigns on the promise to save the county money by getting rid of the library and bookmobile service.

The state requirement of the employment of a professional librarian to administer state funds was frequently waived since there were almost no professional librarians to be had. The heroic but sporadic and part-time services of any occasional professional did little to convince people that there was any need to spend good money to hire an "outsider" to do what could be done by a local, unemployed, and sensible housewife.

The coincidental move of a trained librarian into the area made it possible to have continuity in professional service. The Library Commission of the state "shoe-horned" or "strong-armed" the librarian into one county library after another with a combination of tact and firm reminders of the state aid regulations. The librarian was hired almost as a necessary evil to meet the requirements for receiving state funds, but with some thought that this might be only a temporary expedient. Other librarians had worked for a while, and then found distances and difficulties too great. Two days a

week was the most that each library could hope to employ a trained librarian with the funds available.

In the 1940's, part of the mountain area was a world of unconsolidated schools, unimproved roads, precious little cash income, and generally low educational levels. There were some good schools and well-educated people, but not enough of either. It was a world where unemployment and lack of either public or private transportation kept people home, where radios were few and television non-existent, and so books were at a premium. Fortunately, it was a world where you could buy a bookmobile for \$1800. Out of its state aid allotment, each county bought books and began saving for eventual ownership of a bookmobile.

As soon as funds accumulated, bookmobiles were bought. Each county bought one, even though it could not hope to put it on the road more than one or two days each week. The possibility of sharing a vehicle with another county library was not even mentioned. The pattern of cooperation or joint ownership seemed very remote.

For almost ten years bookmobiles provided more than half—in some places three-fourths—of the library service in each county. It was meager service in many ways. With the total library staff (including the librarian) amounting to less than the equivalent of one full-time person in each of two counties, it took two months or more to make the round of stops before the bookmobile could come back to the same community. With an average of 14,000 people in each county (not even one thousand of them grouped together in Avery County), scattered among the mountains, valleys, and coves, it took time, energy, and determination, not to mention physical stamina to reach people. But it accomplished many of the purposes of public relations, community survey, readers' advisory service, all rolled into one. In addition it circulated books!

Library boards were thrilled by the enthusiastic response to bookmobile service, but quickly discovered that circulation figures meant nothing to county budget officials. What did it matter whether people borrowed one thousand books or ten thousand books? They ought to be working instead of reading, anyway. Commissioners reflected the experience of earlier days when most of what you really needed to know could be passed on by word-of-mouth, and reading interfered with the main business of making a living. Not so many went as far as the man who said, "When I see someone reading a book, I want to hit him in the head with the back of an axe." But many thought of books only as foolish novels for women or stories for children. The wide range of ideas and information in books was not generally known, and perhaps it was just as well because in the early days the book collection had very few books to meet requests. As requests came in and as knowledge of the community grew, the book collection could be selected to meet real needs. Today it has the depth and breadth of mountain interests, and is a source of amazement to the stranger from outside the area.

Books and bookmobile service were in large part provided by the state. It was not enough to demonstrate real library service, but it gave people a taste, an appetite for books. There was a long period of discouraging and often discouraged work by library board members to secure larger county appropriations. Knowledgeable about the scanty non-tax revenues of rural counties, boards were fearful of asking for increases. In a county where the annual appropriation was \$400 to provide library service to 14,000 people, a board member was appalled that the library board had voted in his absence

to ask for \$1,000. "The Commissioners will think we're crazy!" He was right. The problem of library support was little different from that of nearly all public service agencies in the area. A school principal told of having an allotment of \$60 to buy all his supplies for a 300-pupil school for a whole school year. "We didn't educate; we just raised money all year."

Library boards and staffs became used to the many necessary but awkward expedients for stretching the budget: the use of discarded furniture, second-hand stoves, gift-shelving, old auto license plates folded to make bookends, and begging from civic clubs for money to pay for rent, heat, and light. It was five years before a typewriter (not new, of course) could be bought to replace the librarian's own little portable machine that was carried from county to county.

Much of library operation was "cheese-paring" business, but it was not without its humor. One could always contrast the affluence of a library that had pipes to freeze and make a miniature skating-rink on the floor as compared to the low estate of library quarters that had no pipes at all and where the staff had to travel across the street or down town for water. A location over the courthouse coal-pile might not seem to have much status, but it represented a real advance beyond the courthouse lawyers' room on the second floor with access by way of way of the pie-shaped iron treads of a spiraling staircase.

All three of the county libraries made several moves, each time to better quarters. Local effort went into providing more nearly adequate space for library service, and often into vain attempts to scrape together enough money for maintenance. More of



*Record Collection in use by teen-agers in the Yancey County Library in the Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Regional Library.*



everything seemed to be needed as requests for service increased, but it was rarely possible to take more than one step at a time. Board members were gratified by each step, but frustrated by the long delays in securing budget recognition of increasing service. Public interest and understanding were providing moral support, but moral support alone would not pay for additional staff time. Library boards and staff were not willing to "cut their coats according to their cloth," but were concerned about ways to find cloth to cover their expanding services.

Friends of the library, board members, and concerned individuals everywhere helped to find some of the answers. Spruce Pine, the largest town in the area (population 2500) provided, through its civic clubs space and a part-time staff member to serve the town and the surrounding area. With the cooperation of all the county libraries, books were lent to stock it.

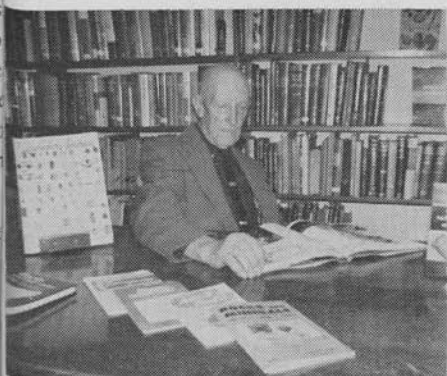
In the 10-year plan set up by each county library in 1952, there was no program mentioned for cooperation among the counties. Each library board was so involved in the problem of keeping its library alive that it did not look beyond the boundaries of its own county. However, by virtue of having the same librarian employed by each of the three counties, book purchases had been coordinated to some degree, a wider selection of titles was available to each library, and increasingly free interchange of books benefited all borrowers. Each library had only a shelf-list record of its books, but the librarian's memory served as catalog and union list.

Following closely on the 10-year plan came the first cooperative project officially planned by representatives of the separate libraries of the four counties and one town. With permission from the State Library Board, a mineral book collection was begun as part of the Interlibrary Loan subject collection program among the larger libraries of the state. Representatives of each library met to work on policy and selection for the collection. Community leaders and board members from all three counties became acquainted. The experience of working together showed some of the benefits of a regional approach to problems—and to sources of financial help.

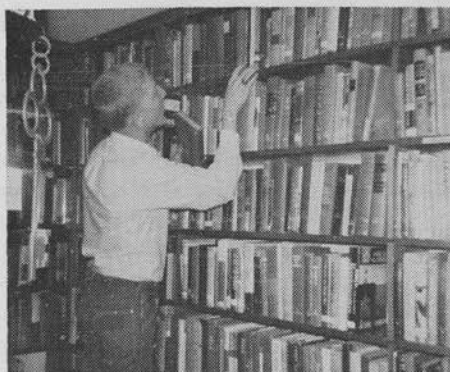
Federal aid, beginning in 1957, helped to bring about the first major increases in county support. Not immediately, to be sure; nothing changed over night, but after two years of increased hours of opening and more frequent bookmobile trips—and with the incentive of a dangled grant—one county voted enough money to double the staff. Doubling the staff meant that the one half-time assistant could work full-time with pay!

Even more important was the fact that planning for future cooperative programs brought library boards together occasionally for joint planning and discussion. First meetings were rather stiff, with cautious questions and many thoughts unspoken. Cooperation for mutual benefit was one thing, but involvement with another county was a different matter. Reasonably enough, board members felt that they might lose what had been built up so carefully over a long period and might be pulled down to the level of service in the poorer counties.

The first bookmobile serving all three counties was a "walk-in" that was enjoyed by both public and staff. Both had become used to standing out in blustery winds, slushy puddles, and poison ivy, but had never learned to enjoy these hardships. Staff members crossed county lines and became familiar with the problems and resources of the area. Each county book-collection was cataloged and a union author-file made the



*Borrower in the Mitchell County Library using the Mineral Book Collection of the Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Regional Library.*



*Borrower seeking research materials in the Mitchell County Library of the Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Regional Library.*

first comprehensive listing of the four book collections to supplement the librarian's memory file.

For a few years federal aid, in one form or another, provided a demonstration of minimum service, but the counties were by no means able at the end of the project period to continue the whole program on the basis of local support. Public approval of library service had grown, but the precarious financial situation of mountain counties losing 10 to 20% of their population every ten years did not make for optimism in public expenditures, especially with tax-rates already among the highest in the state.

Public libraries never operate independently of the surrounding cultures. Life was changing in the mountains and all over the state: more and better roads, fewer and better schools, more cars and trucks, and more persons who knew how to drive, television and eventually telephones, more persons who commuted to mills or factories or businesses, more people who needed facts and information and ideas instead of just "a good book to read."

In 1961, after prolonged consideration by all three county library boards, it was voted to approve the formation of a legal regional library for a two-year trial period. The three Boards of County Commissioners contracted with each other, and the Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Regional library was created. The prospect of an initial regional grant helped make the merger look desirable, but the experience in cooperation was the most important factor in the decision.

The legal union made little immediate change in services. The combined budget was mostly the result of adding together the three separate county budgets, skimpy as they were.

There were—and still are—problems of finance, varying levels of county support, the fear of domination or advantage of one library over another, and the push and pull of local politics — all aggravated by the low level of support from all counties.

One of the most helpful developments was a spontaneous surge of community leadership and support in Avery County that resulted in the purchase and remodeling of a dwelling to serve as "home" for the Avery County Library. The very fact that a single

county — probably the least able financially — could raise funds and acquire a building without its being lost in the Regional Library was a demonstration of freedom to progress on one's own while cooperating with others. It dissipated some of the fear of losing a library's historic identity.

No one — whether librarian, staff member, board member, or friend — has any illusion that the formation of the Regional Library has solved all problems. Poverty is still our all-encompassing problem, but cooperation has proved to be one way of multiplying resources without money. Instead of having 3,000 or 10,000 books to draw on, it is better to have 33,000. It is better to have one professional librarian whose skills have to be spread thinly over three counties, than to try to find three professionals, each willing to work for one-third of a salary.

No one — least of all the librarian — would call the story of library service in Avery, Mitchell, and Yancey counties a "success story" yet. It's a miracle, perhaps, and surely a testimony to the almost endless hard work and resolution of literally hundreds of citizens. It represents the vision and dedication of many people.

The advantages and the need of cooperative services are widely recognized, perhaps more by some board members than others, and even more generally by the public that benefits from the services. The actual operation limps along, hampered by shoe-string staff and budget. There is no one central library — an office here, a work-room there — as the decentralized service is divided among the space available at four different locations. The union catalog is housed in one place, the union shelf-list in another. The bulk of the collection of mineral books reposes in a third location, the periodicals are stored in a fourth. All facilities are separated by mountain miles (ranging from 16 miles apart to a maximum of 35 miles) with no public transportation between and toll calls to pay. Local fear of neighboring library ambitions is still a force to be reckoned with. After 16 years two counties have still only one staff member each, and one county has only a half-time employee. Each of these must serve as jack-of-all-trades in the library quarters for half the week and bookmobile librarian for the other half. Without even a clerk-typist, the librarian finds clerical chores piling up while professional work is being done, and must choose between "blowing the whistle or turning the paddle wheel."

In spite of financial starvation — or at least financial undernourishment — the library is an educational force in the whole region. Volunteers add extra hours of library service, and friends of the library help to supplement the budget. Film programs (both in the library and in a wide range of community groups outside the library), recordings, discussion groups, speakers, exhibits, participation by staff members in community activities, all are felt to be as much a part of the library's service as books. The library program makes up in quality and vitality some of what it lacks in quantity and adequacy of financial support. Every opportunity to improve the services has been seized upon: participation in the film program of the state, the processing center, the inter-library loan subject collections, cooperative use of federal aid. There is little question that the Regional Library and its Board members have earned "A" for effort, even though our zeal sometimes exceeds the time and energy of the staff.

The Regional Library is not traditional in its services nor standardized in its book collection. It has not been afraid to experiment, and its staff members have been skilled

in human relations long before they learned library techniques. The Library has had staff and board members and friends who have given unstintingly of their time. It has not been content to sit and wait to be appreciated and supported, but has taken its services as best it could to all citizens, regardless of their age, educational advantages, social status, or community standing. The area has had the leadership of a trained librarian, but the area in turn has trained the librarian. The Library does not have sufficient financial support yet, but it has the efforts of many people to achieve it, and it has the strength and vitality of the many people who stand firmly ready to back it up.

What went into the making of the Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Regional Library? Sometimes I think the chief explanation is simply endurance. All three original library boards have passed up some very appropriate moments to give up and die in discouragement. Next in importance might be the changing times that have made cooperation both easier and more urgent. A third factor is the steady stimulation, leadership, and help of the State Library, and a fourth factor has been the creative inter-action of boards, staff, and the users of books. Last of all, but absolutely vital, have been state and federal aid. No library stands alone.

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## Catalog Card Reproduction Manual Published

Chicago, March 19, 1965—Processes for reproducing catalog cards in libraries are described and analyzed in a report just published by the Library Technology Project of the American Library Association. The manual, which discusses equipment, materials, techniques, and procedures for duplicating catalog cards in a variety of library situations, is based on a study by George Fry & Associates, a management consulting firm in Chicago, under a grant from the Council on Library Resources, Inc., Washington, D. C.

The book is divided into three parts. The first reviews the general problem of obtaining catalog cards with recommendations on the most efficient and economical systems for card requirements applicable to two categories of libraries—those with low-volume requirements and those with high-volume needs.

The second part includes descriptions and discussion of the equipment and procedures necessary for thirteen processes for obtaining catalog cards which were observed in various libraries during the study. The processes range from purchasing printed cards from outside sources, through stencil and offset duplication, to more complex duplicating processes such as electrostatic and diffusion-transfer photo-copying.

The third part of the manual consists of tables showing the comparative costs of the various processes for reproducing cards. Tables for each process give purchase prices of equipment, service charges, costs of materials and supplies, and the number of staff hours needed to carry out all relevant operations. In this section, a method is given by which librarians can make systematic cost comparisons between the process currently being used in their libraries and other processes which might be suitable.

*Catalog Card Reproduction* is the ninth in a series of research reports and manuals published by the Library Technology Project since its inception in 1959.