

NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIES

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A GLANCE AT THE 1944 LIBRARY SURVEY

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It is the beginning of wisdom for individual or institution when self-inventory and soul-searching begin. Then is the time that profit or loss shows up, sound practices which perhaps bear amplification are revealed, weak policies which need reinforcing stand out in the red, and very likely, bad spots which merit excision look very dark indeed. It is also a time for self-questioning and reorientation. What goal are we headed for? Why was our present policy adopted? Are our methods as effectual as might be? Have we clung to routines and deepened ruts when we should have been striking out for new fields?

These are some of the reasons why the North Carolina Library Survey is good business. The timing is strategic: long enough since the revitalizing of the public libraries in the state and the expansion of the school libraries for critical evaluation of trends and achievements; early enough in advance of the peace period with its inevitable changes and readjustments to lay careful plans. The findings of the Survey were significant: evidence of a sturdy beginning, of roots strongly planted, of healthy growth, of wise direction—and of almost as far still to go until national standards have been reached.

Take, for example, the matter of availability. In four years' time, the percentage of residents in the state without library service was cut from 48 to 11. That is remarkable and gratifying. It must have been a dramatic change, since Mrs. Lee tells us that in the 1942-43 biennium some 600,000 Negroes or about 17% of the total population of the state, were still without books and libraries.

More interesting, however, than the fact of increased areas of service is the pattern being evolved. Instead of isolated city and village

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libraries, very few of which could hope to attain the \$25,000 annual minimum income which A.L.A. postwar standards set as basic, the North Carolina trend toward county and regional institutions ensures not only wider service, larger book collections and more properly qualified personnel, but does this without undue duplication of effort among the smaller units and thus without subsequent waste of taxpayers' funds. There are now 82 county libraries with a per capita income two and one-third times as large as that of the 27 county libraries existing four years ago. Small wonder, then, that in spite of heavy discarding, the book stock should have increased by a third of its per capita volume, and that the number of trained librarians should have enlarged at a satisfactory rate.

A third matter for state congratulation is the manner in which many libraries in the state are cutting across old-time professional concepts and mental barriers which would have seemed insurmountable a generation ago. Outstanding here is the cooperation between libraries of various regions, types and clientele. Schools are receiving books from public library collections via bookmobile and in classroom lots. They are consulting public librarians about their school library problems. In one instance, at least, the public librarian is part-time supervisor of the local school library. In return, school libraries are housing branch libraries for adults, are sharing trained librarians with public libraries, are lending books for summer reading, and sometimes are giving school credit for summer public library reading. Similar understanding of the source and purpose of public funds is shown by the use of the same county bookmobiles by whites and Negroes. This is very promising.

It may be queried, however, why with the increase in book stocks and the improvement in professional training the per capita circulation for public libraries should have risen only 1/100 of a volume in these four years. The 1944 figure for North Carolina (1.68 volumes per capita) is well below the present A.L.A. goal of 5-10 volumes. The answer must lie in the character of the period, in the war strains and prolonged work week which have caused a general decline in the nation's reading. When the time span is pushed back, as in the decennium noted for Negro libraries, both school and public libraries are observed to have nearly doubled their per capita circulation.

Much more serious for the future is the condition of library quarters. With 85 of the 92 reporting libraries facing overcrowded buildings and exhausted shelf space in the next five years, the prospect is not pleasant. Nor can present working conditions be ideal when only half of these have telephones and the majority need new lighting and heating plants. Staff efficiency and readers' pleasure alike suffer when surroundings and equipment are not conducive to optimum results. Yet there is little likelihood that a remodeling or repair fund can be accumulated during these years of materials shortages and priority lacks. Library income in North Carolina has risen to 21c per capita. As Miss Beal points out, that is exactly one-half as good as the nation at large enjoys. It is one-fifth of the dollar per capita which is present library standard. And it is one-tenth of the sum postulated for superior service in the postwar period. Certainly 21c will not permit the accumulation of a reserve fund for building purposes.

Has library service in North Carolina reached its maximum development, then? There is no indication in the data

that it has. Unfortunately, only a minor part of the evidence deals with the effectiveness of the service rendered. An intangible, qualitative matter, this would have been difficult to assess completely. Nevertheless, the reports on contacts made with civic groups, on talks to Rotarians, Lions, women's clubs and church organizations, on instruction to school children in library usage, would show that libraries have not waited passively for readers to become conscious of their existence, but that they have deliberately sought out potential friends and readers. In these reader contacts and in the satisfaction which the reader derives from his own grass-roots library, on the one hand, and in able leadership, backed by the support of key figures in local government, on the other hand, seems to lie the hope for increased appropriation—as North Carolina's own experience would prove.

All the statistics in the Census reports are valueless unless after their compilation something is done about them. So with the 1944 Library Survey. Trends, achievements and lacks show plainly. Remains now the obligation of taking action on these. After all, self-investigation is only the *beginning* of wisdom; its end lies in the successful achievement of the goal thus revealed.