

PRESERVING AND DEVELOPING OUR AMERICAN HERITAGE THROUGH OUR CHILDREN

(Talk given at the School Librarians' Section Meeting at NCEA in Asheville, March 28, 1952.)

What is our American heritage? Too often we are prone to use catchwords and phrases in our daily conversation without giving much thought to their implications. Sometimes these catchwords or phrases are used to discredit the practices of someone with whom we disagree—such words as “subversive,” “red,” “Commie,” “liberal,” “conservative.” Other times we get on the housetops and shout “The Four Freedoms,” “democracy,” “the American Way of Life,” “freedom of speech,” “freedom of the press,” “American heritage.” But how does one explain clearly what is meant by “democracy” or “American heritage”? One must try to achieve understanding. First, one must practice these principles in his daily life. To do so intelligently one must have knowledge of what has gone before, what is happening now, and what may happen in the future. Before we, as librarians, can preserve or develop this American heritage through our children, we must have a clear cut belief in all it implies.

What does America mean to you? Joyce Anne Lewis, high school student from Philadelphia, answered this question well in her prize winning essay in a contest sponsored by SCHOLASTIC MAGAZINE in 1945. In essence she said America is a pattern of life—a repetition of feelings: seeing the same familiar faces, shapes and buildings in any city or town or country cross roads; feeling the thrill of getting acquainted; feeling that I am part of the pattern, one thread that is woven about a center motif of independence, initiative and the fight for freedom. A portrait of people—looking up to the sky; recog-

nizing that in America there will always be a limitless opportunity to go as far—to rise as high—as courage, strength and ability can take me.

Not only must we believe, we must all work at preserving our heritage. It is our responsibility to know about politics. One of the sources of our American strength is our government. Freedom, although God-given, depends upon us too. It is a fragile gift entrusted to us, which we must preserve and fortify. Freedom is not for the lazy. During the days of the Revolution Thomas Paine expressed it this way: "These are the times that try men's souls . . . What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; it is dearness only that gives everything its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange, indeed, if so celestial an article as freedom should not be highly rated." Freedom demands character, will and dedication. It requires decisions, self-respect and self-reliance. Someone has said that America has two important assets against the threat of Communism—religion and some measure of material possessions. We must help preserve our religious freedom and our sense of security. This too is not for the lazy. It is our responsibility to see that all boys and girls understand the way of life that has been handed down to them, to see that these same boys and girls have an opportunity to practice in their day by day living at school, in the home and on the playground democratic living and that they gain understanding of present day issues so that they will be ready to make the decisions of tomorrow. As librarians we can furnish a laboratory of democratic living and a storehouse of information that has come down from the ages. Books read carefully and reflectively can help provide the necessary knowledge.

Last year the American Library Association had for its 75th Anniversary theme "Our American Heritage in Times of Crisis." Henry Steele Commager, Gerald W. Johnson and Genevieve Foster were commissioned to write a book each to re-state and reaffirm our beliefs. Henry Steele Commager gathered together from many different sources material on the ideas which have shaped and are shaping our nation's history. This, Harper published under the title *LIVING IDEAS IN AMERICA*. Each one of us can get a better understanding of how our traditions and our country's experiences in the past are reflected in our present problems with possible solutions. Although this book was designed to be used in the adult study groups of the American Heritage Project, senior high school students would find it useful in social studies. Gerald W. Johnson, a native North Carolinian, has written the second book, *THIS AMERICAN PEOPLE*, in which he attempts to answer the question, "Is the American Idea still valid?" I think this is one of the most thought provoking books I have ever read. It is not a fly-by-night, flag waving essay. In its review *THE LIBRARY JOURNAL* had this to say, "It is a thoughtful presentation of what freedom and democracy meant to our forefathers and what they have come to mean to us today. While much scholarship and research have gone into the writing of this book, the author's colloquial style makes this good, exciting reading." This book should be available to all teachers and librarians. Genevieve Foster has not completed her book, *BIRTHDAYS OF FREEDOM*. This publication is being written for younger boys and girls. It will be a panorama of our culture, presented with many illustrations. We are all looking forward to its publication because it will give to the younger group what *LIVING IDEAS IN AMERICA* and *THIS AMERICAN PEOPLE* have given to the senior high school and adult groups. We are grateful for these publications. Recently the U. S. Department of State gave the American Library Association over \$3000 to use in distributing copies of *LIVING IDEAS IN AMERICA* to libraries overseas.

David Hoffman has compiled in his *READING IN DEMOCRACY* some very good material that makes an excellent source for the junior and senior high school student to consult. In this book is General Eisenhower's article from the *SENIOR SCHOLASTIC*

entitled "Freedom is Everybody's job," in which he gives the Nine Promises of a Good Citizen.

One of the best ways to understand our heritage is to read the story of the lives of people who have influenced our way of life. From d'Aulaires' *GEORGE WASHINGTON* for the youngest to Sherwood's *ABE LINCOLN IN ILLINOIS* for the senior high school group, there is a wide range of stories about people for every age.

We should not overlook the vast number of books giving a fictionalized account of historical periods or episodes.

To be informed citizens, whether young or old, we need to know about our government. Dorothy Fisher has done a good job in her *OUR INDEPENDENCE AND THE CONSTITUTION*, one of the Landmark books. One of the best books I have seen for the youngest is Mina Turner's *TOWN MEETING MEANS ME*. This book can be very effectively used with second and third graders.

Along with books about our government, our forefathers, brotherhood of man, we must have books of merriment. For the youngest the Petersham's *THE ROOSTER CROWS* and Opal Wheeler's *SING FOR AMERICA* present some of the verses and songs we have always enjoyed. Richard Chase has several collections of folk tales and folk games for the older boys and girls. Williams' *A LITTLE TREASURY OF AMERICAN POETRY* is a standard anthology for the senior high school age group. Boat-right's *FOLKLAUGHTER ON THE FRONTIER* is another book for the high school group. Along with our poems and songs we must have stories of wholesome family life. One of the best of the new titles is Sydney Taylor's *ALL-OF-A-KIND FAMILY* for the intermediate age. The old standbys such as *THE MOFFATS*, *TOM SAWYER*, *LITTLE HOUSE IN THE BIG WOODS* and all the others will remain favorites as long as boys and girls read.

We need books about social adjustment. *SEVENTEENTH SUMMER*, *TO TELL YOUR LOVE*, *FARM BOY* are all good examples of this type story for the teen-agers.

In selecting books that present our belief in God I chose four. *ONE GOD* by Fitch is known to you all. Use it with boys and girls. I thought Rickenbackers' account of the great faith he and his crew manifested when adrift on the ocean was perhaps one of the best examples of a faith for modern times we have had. His *SEVEN CAME THROUGH* would be excellent for senior high school. Bainton's *THE CHURCH OF OUR FATHERS* is another one for the senior high. Catherine Marshall's story of her husband, *A MAN CALLED PETER* I recommend to each of you. In it the reader will find the story of one of the finest religious faiths an individual could attain.

I am grateful to all the publishers and individual authors who have given special emphasis to our American heritage in many of the books they have produced. I am thinking too of all the authors who have tried to present in their books for boys and girls a picture of our American way of life. Their names are legion. I have not mentioned more here because the list would be endless.

Make your own list and believe in the books you select. If you do, you will be able to guide those who come into your library to a gate that will open a new world of understanding and appreciation to them.

Always remember that this heritage we hold so dear came down to us from the beginning of time and that many peoples from many countries contributed to it. We have an obligation to preserve it and share it with other people all over the world.

—Cora Paul Bomar, State School Library Adviser,
N. C. Department of Public Instruction,
Raleigh.