

**INTERLIBRARY LOANS: MYTH OR FACT?**

By DOROTHY BAKER THOMAS\*

One of the axioms of library service is the virtue and necessity of interlibrary loans. In actual fact, however willing the spirit of librarians might be, the process itself has been so difficult that only a few hardy librarians have had the time, energy, and audacity to engage in much interlibrary borrowing or lending.

The small public library may or may not be able to boast of owning two books per capita, but it's an empty boast when it cannot supply the one book a patron particularly wants and needs. On the other hand, library stock gets a boost when the special need can be met through library service if not through the local book collection.

If the average reader actually existed, it would make library service much simpler for the small public library. Our libraries are more average than our borrowers. The "average reader" proves to be an unpredictable character. The man who regularly mulls over the shelf of western stories, in conversation turns out to be a cabinet maker who needs a book on contemporary Swedish design, Shaker clocks, or some other material equally unlikely to be found on the shelves of the small library. The housewife who faithfully borrows light romances for herself and picture books for her small children comes up with a request for the latest price book on early American glass. The local preacher ignores the current, popular volume of inspirational sermons and asks for help in obtaining early American imprints in connection with his master's thesis. The avid reader of mystery stories turns out to be also an author needing maps of 13th century Venice.

Prodded on by grimly determined borrowers, some of us in small libraries have braced ourselves to make requests of the larger public libraries and the college and university libraries. Frequently and generously the larger libraries have lent. Often, however, they have been obliged to refuse. The hesitation on the part of the small library to ask and some reluctance on the part of large libraries to lend are equally understandable. University libraries hold many books for reference use or reserved for required reading. The rare book may be more safely handled in the fire-proof vault of the large library or in its well-staffed reading room than in the usual small public library with its minimum staff, maximum overcrowding and confusion, and its frequently fire-trap construction. On the other hand, the large city library cannot always identify its borrowers personally as well as the small town library. The ordinary librarian faced with somewhat irresponsible borrowers blithely asking for expensive books sometimes thinks longingly of the possibility of requiring borrowers to be bonded instead of the library treasurer. Without any financial arrangement, the small library must ask a favor when it borrows from its larger and stronger city or university library.

For the most part, librarians have had to meet requests for special books in a haphazard way. The North Carolina Library Commission has served as an emergency reservoir of books and information but its general collection leaves many gaps in special subject areas that cover detailed or technical fields. Librarians coming from Ohio remember regretfully the Buckeye state's union catalog of the non-fiction holdings of its large public libraries.

Sparked by an idea developed by Miss Gladys Johnson of the staff of the Library Commission, a plan was worked out in September 1950 by a group of public librarians meeting in Greensboro whereby libraries might build up special subject collections of books that would be available on interlibrary loan to all libraries in North Carolina.

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## NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIES

At first only libraries serving populations of over 75,000 were asked to build up such collections. In January 1951, the plan was set in motion when each of seven public libraries began to develop a book collection on a specific subject, a collection which should serve as a state-wide resource.

The North Carolina Library Commission Board gave a boost to the program by making \$750 available from State Aid to each library agreeing to participate. Each of these libraries contracted to purchase books in the special field of information, to make them available to other libraries, and to send a main entry catalog card of each title to the Library Commission. As time and staff permitted, each library agreed to send entries for older titles already held in the special field.

College, university, and special libraries helped greatly in the original planning of the project procedures. At the request of the University of North Carolina Library, catalog cards for the special collections are also sent to the North Carolina Depository Catalog in Chapel Hill. This catalog is microfilmed at intervals and is integrated into the National Bibliography being developed by the Library of Congress. Symbols of the National Bibliography have been assigned to the participating North Carolina Libraries.

As each collection has grown, the Library Commission has issued a basic bibliography and distributed copies of it to the county and regional libraries in the state. When the growth of a collection warranted it, a supplementary bibliography has been issued. The Library Commission has also provided printed post cards and report blanks to simplify the handling and reporting of requests.

The test of the value of the interlibrary loan collections has been the steady increase in the use of these collections and the amazed gratitude on the part of library borrowers when the local library has been able to meet special requests. If public libraries wish to outgrow their reputation as purveyors of light fiction for women and school children, the new resources available through the interlibrary loan program have given librarians a chance to prove that public libraries also stand for the organization and dissemination of knowledge.

The building up of special collections has had a double value to North Carolina libraries. It has not only relieved the pressure on the local library book budget to buy books in special fields, but it has also opened up to general knowledge and use the already existing specialized collections in some of the larger libraries.

It is safe to say that in four years the program has not organized "all knowledge," but some important areas of knowledge have been built up and made accessible in North Carolina. Over 4,000 titles are now listed in the Union Catalog at the Library Commission in Raleigh, and each week additions are being made. Requests are cleared through the Commission and relayed on to the appropriate library. The program is not a closed one. Eleven libraries are now developing collections, but any local library that has sufficient professionally trained staff, and space to house a growing collection, may contract to develop a special subject that is agreed to be of importance within its community and in demand throughout the state. Additional subjects are needed and several libraries are considering the possibility of joining in the program.

Subject fields and participating libraries at present are:

Architecture—Pack Memorial Library Asheville.

Art—Olivia Raney Library, Raleigh.

Business and Industry—Greensboro Public Library, Greensboro.

Family Life and the Home—Durham Public Library, Durham.

Gardening and Landscape Gardening—Rowan Public Library, Salisbury.

Human Relations (Including Politics and Government), Cumberland County Library, Fayetteville.

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Industrial and Vocational Manuals—Public Library of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County, Winston-Salem.

Minerals and Mineral Industries—Mitchell County Library, Bakersville

The Negro: Books by and about Negroes—Richard B. Harrison Library, Raleigh.

Textiles: Knitting, Yarn Manufacturing, and Machinery—Gaston County Library, Gastonia.

Textiles: Weaving and Design, Chemistry and Dyeing, and Synthetics—Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, Charlotte.

The Interlibrary Loan program in North Carolina doesn't succeed in filling all book requests received by willing but baffled librarians in local libraries. Nevertheless it goes a long step forward in meeting some of those requests. It begins where we are and meets some of our most urgent needs. It decentralizes library resources (not a bad technique in this atomic age) and coordinates them. The program can be expanded almost indefinitely. It is hoped that other libraries may join and that eventually it may be possible to include all unusual or especially valuable books or groups of books in the Union Catalog.

The greatest value of the program cannot be measured in any statistical record of books owned or books used, but it is a value that is felt through the whole process by borrower and local library and lending library alike. That value is a sense of understanding and pride in the library resources of a whole state and in the cooperative spirit that makes them available to every responsible citizen.

*The above article describing the special interlibrary loan collections of North Carolina's public libraries is the first of a series on library resources in this state. The next issue will carry a description of the microfilmed document collection at the University of North Carolina by Associate Editor William Pullen. The purpose of the series is to acquaint all librarians in the state with resources they may not know about. Suggestions from members of the Association for future articles will be most welcome.* EDITOR.

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