Classification in a Special Library

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A paper which is to be read before an audience of librarians and students at a conference held as one of the activities of a distinguished Graduate Library School should doubtless begin with a definition of terms. This would be fine, but this paper is scheduled near the end of a three-day session, and it seems likely that a great deal of defining of terms will have taken place already before this combatant takes the field. Already many a shower of word-arrows will have darkened the sky before this knight-errant thunders over the turf. In which quarter the battle will have been fought to a pale, pink finish and where the refugees may have fled before this Don Quixote is wheeled into position for the charge, there is no way to predict. But this paper has a specific title, and the writer has a specific purpose and even at the risk of repeating what is already well-known to everybody, I feel obliged to begin with a few general remarks, call them definitions, if you please, for the sake of the record.

The simplest definition of a special library is this: A special library is a collection of books devoted to a special subject. But for purposes of organizing a discussion of classification this simplicity is misleading. In 1953, the Special Libraries Association had a membership of 2,489. In the Special Collections index found in the American Library Directory, there are several thousand special collections listed. Many of the special libraries in the Association are very large research libraries; many of the special collections are found in very large general libraries. There are far too many subjects involved for me to attempt to deal with them, but out of the whole dilemma, several points finally emerge, which I would like to note in passing: The special libraries seem to revolve around about seventy-five subjects, no more. The libraries devoted to Law, Medicine, Theology, Music, and the Theater have formed large associations of their own; libraries serving the other subjects make up the membership of the Special Libraries Association. Even in 1951 the special classification schemes, which were then on file with the Association dealt, for the most part, with these seventy-five or so main topics. There is a 1958 list which I have not seen. How it has changed since 1951, I would like very much to know; but I do not believe that I will ever be able to arrive at the matter of how to organize a discussion
of classification in a special library from this approach, or this de-
nition, and I must search for something more specific.

Another definition of a special library is the one employed by John
L. Thornton who says in his book called Special Library Methods, 3
"A special library is one devoted to the use of special sections of the
community." He classifies by function rather than by stock, and all
libraries other than public and county libraries are considered. In-
cluded are the technical and commercial branches of university li-
braries and even the university libraries themselves which, he says,
are a string of special collections whose functions are special although
their stock may embrace all literature and all knowledge. This de-
inition is not at all satisfactory to me either. It would make my
paper overlap with several others. I wish Mr. Thornton could have
been more specific about functions. I think he is correct that it is
function rather than stock which makes a special library special, but
he seems to refer to the reference function only. He has not singled
out anything else.

The definition which is entitled "What Makes Us Special?" 4 I
find most provocative was proposed by Katharine Kinder in an article
in September, 1953. It is a simple, practical statement. She says in
the first place: "the special library exists as a service unit within
an organization having non-library objectives." I am aware that this
phrase "having non-library objectives" lacks precision. I wrote two
pages about it, but this paper is addressed to a special audience, and
there are easier ways of dying than being bored to death. Miss
Kinder is employed by the Johns Manville Research Center, and I
think we all know what she meant. I tore up the wordmongering and
propose to accept the phrase at its face value for the present. I will
come back to it shortly.

Miss Kinder says in the second place: "Library materials are
collected and information services developed with the needs of the
special organization in mind." And in the third place she says: "The
special library is usually a small one both in amount of material held
and in number of staff members."

To repeat, then the three characteristics of a special library are:

(1) Sponsorship by an organization which exists by non-
library purposes.
(2) Custom-made services.
(3) Small size

I think the effect of sponsorship on the library's stock-in-trade is
profound, and thus indirectly, by regulating the stock, it regulates
the choice of classification system. We shall refer to the stream-
lined services and small size in passing as we discuss the important
issue of sponsorship.

To make a beginning, let us take on one hand the scientific depart-
ment library of an average, medium-sized university. On the other
let us describe three specialized libraries in the highly specialized
city of Oak Ridge, Tennessee. In this assortment, two of the libraries would satisfy Miss Kinder's requirements as special libraries, two would not.

The first type for our consideration, the departmental library, meets all of Miss Kinder's specifications but one. It certainly functions as part of the departmental organization. The librarian does all sorts of odd chores for the department. Space is always limited, and the staff is sure to be small. Although the General Library tries to give satisfaction about the technical processes, the department is free to criticize the administration and you may be sure does so roundly. The departmental librarian can, if she wants to, arrange the books by size. But notwithstanding this appearance of freedom, one seldom finds any extensive collecting or cataloguing done in the departmental library. Indexing, yes, perhaps, but information files, if they are kept, are usually ephemeral, as, for example, trade catalogs in an Engineering library. The shadow of the Main Library falls across everything, and certainly it exists "for library objectives" if the phrase means anything at all.

The classification would have to be brought into some sort of harmony with the over-all scheme, and around this the criticism usually centers. The general library classifier does not have the department's special interests in mind. The classifier feels the pull of other departments and suffers from lack of contact with the men in the field. She is properly unwilling to force books into numbers or letters where the department has pet projects or vacant shelves, but no matter how correct she may be, when the books reach the department, they must be put on the existing shelves, and everything has to be shifted and dummies substituted if the books will not fall into the desired places. Some may have to be returned to the General Library to make space, but the department would hardly be free to throw them out, then and there. The department is a special collection, without doubt, but it functions as part of a whole, and nobody is permitted to forget it. Many of the special classification schemes collected by the Special Libraries Association, referred to above, were made by large libraries for their departments.

Several years ago E.M. Grieder contributed to Special Libraries, a fine article called "Functional Independence in Special Libraries." He writes especially of professional college or school libraries in universities, including large departmental libraries. He argues that the classification and subject heading work should be done in the department because it makes, he says, a better atmosphere. Even if this were done, it would not make any difference in the matter of sponsorship. The shadow of the Main Library would be none the less present.

Samuel Sass of the General Electric Company Library in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, estimated the number of special libraries which are really parts of large public and academic libraries at about 500. If these were withdrawn, the total number of real special libraries would be reduced to about 2,000.
When the visiting librarian goes to Oak Ridge, it is hard to see the woods for the trees, as we say in the vernacular. Fortunately, there was a fine article written in 1947, "A Cataloger's View of the Atomic Energy Commission Library Program." After the reorganization of the whole lay-out in 1948, another article appeared in the *Tennessee Librarian*. The two together give a much clearer picture than either one alone. The following account is abbreviated from the historical summary of events provided in these two articles.

When the atomic age dawned on December 2, 1942, the first operation at Oak Ridge was begun by the Manhattan Engineering District of the United States Corps of Engineers. At that time two significant decisions were made. One was to pursue several methods for separating the fissionable isotope of uranium. It was not known at that time which method would prove to be most efficient. One contract was given to the Tennessee Eastman Company working with University of California scientists and associated firms; a second was made with the Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Company working with scientists from Columbia University; a third contract was made with the DuPont Company working with men from the University of Chicago. In 1946, there was established the Atomic Energy Commission which took over from the Manhattan District. The contractors varied somewhat until at last Carbide became the chief contractor to operate the research and production activities of Oak Ridge. To carry out its training and educational activities, the Commission then made an agreement with a number of southern universities to organize and operate the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies. At present there are thirty-six universities sponsoring this Institute which purchased some forty acres of land for a permanent campus.

The Institute of Nuclear Studies, then, has a library to which I will return shortly. Since 1955, the Union Carbide Nuclear Company has operated the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the Oak Ridge Gaseous Diffusion Plant. Both of these plants have libraries.

The Oak Ridge National Laboratory Library which consists of a Central Research Library and three branches, now occupies 26,000 feet of floor space and has 70,000 scientific books and journals and 130,000 reports. The budget is $300,000 and the staff numbers 37 members. All the usual functions of procurement, organization of materials, reference, and loans are performed. A full-time translator is useful. A photocopying service is maintained. Indexing and bibliographical projects are carried on in connection with the large report collection. The whole operation is called a research laboratory. Much of the material is "classified" they say, but here the matter of semantics raises its head in elementary form. They are not using library terminology, but I shall not belabor that point for this audience.

The next library, that of the Oak Ridge Gaseous Diffusion Plant, also operated by the Union Carbide Nuclear Company, consists of three parts: the Central Library, the Engineering Library, and the Film Library. Reference, bibliography, abstracting, and indexing services
are performed. A reference collection containing one copy of each Atomic Energy Commission Report has a card catalogue of its own. For the Engineering Library, specifications and standards from federal and industrial sources are procured and kept. The Film Library consists of training and safety films for the use of the staff. The information that the library has broad activities, that it provides films for the Christmas party and garden books for the engineers, does not strike me as significant one way or the other.

Both the Gaseous Diffusion Plant Library and the National Laboratory Library are special libraries, I think. Not a single word to they let drop about how the books are arranged, but they are mighty sharp about some other things. The fact is that the librarians are simply not interested in anything but the purposes of the organization. We invite them to association meetings but they seldom come. I think that if I were asked to design a coat-of-arms for the city of Oak Ridge, I would emblazon for them on a field of electric blue an IBM computer, rampant.

The Oak Ridge Institute for Nuclear Studies Library is, however, a very different matter. The institute is, as I have said, a non-profit educational corporation of thirty-six universities. The most of its programs and activities are carried out under direct contract with the United States Atomic Energy Commission, but it also administers some programs for the National Science Foundation in cooperation with the Commission. The whole Institute has a staff of about 200 in four program divisions: (1) University relations, (2) Special training, (3) Medical Division, and (4) the Museum Division which operates the American Museum of Atomic Energy and the Atomic Energy Commission's traveling exhibit program.

A union catalog for the area includes cards for the Union Carbide Nuclear Company's Library in Paducah, Kentucky. A list of 3,000 serials available in the Knoxville-Oak Ridge area has been published. A strange silence is preserved about the physical arrangement of the books, but let us go on about the stock. Books and periodicals on the sciences and the uses of atomic energy constitute the major part of the library's 30,000 volumes. Over 2,000 of these are on microcard. An important segment of the collection is devoted to medical literature. Foreign language dictionaries and reference books and books on industrial management are important. The documents collection contains "non-classified" reports. It is felt that the library bridges the gap between the plant libraries and the community. The public has access to the shelves. A "Book notes" column appears in the local newspaper. The Library contributes cards to the National Union Catalog and new serial titles to the appropriate publication. Most of the material appearing in the Nuclear Science Abstracts is held in this library. All of these activities constitute, in my opinion, operation for "library objectives."

Still, nothing is said about book classification, but by referring to the earlier article by the cataloguer one finds that the Library of
Congress system was in use in 1949, and it is certain that it still is. This is not surprising. It is clear from the library's participation in national projects that this library sees itself not as a small self-contained unit like the others, but as a working part of the real whole. The whole may have no physical body; it may exist only as a disembodied ghost, but it is an entity in the mind of the librarian and the organization responsible for the financing, and it exercises a control over the library similar to that which the deceased King of Denmark exercised over Hamlet. A classification scheme had to be used which would place the books in some definite order, related to the order in other libraries which were also parts of the same whole—the embodied parts of the ghostly whole, if you please. The form of the ghost begins to take shape. Whatever it is, it was brought into being by the desire of some libraries to pull together—to cooperate.

Samuel Sass writing in Special Libraries for April, 1959, points this up nicely. He quotes Mr. Schwegman of the Library of Congress staff. Mr. Schwegman attributes the absence of special libraries from cooperative enterprises to their lack of cataloguing controls and fluctuating collections. He admonishes us, the special libraries, to raise our professional standards. A reply in the following issue of Special Libraries states simply that special libraries are not supported for cultural reasons but for their usefulness to business. "We" the author says, "work under pressure". There is a different kind of pressure, however, which has the opposite effect. We, too, work under pressure, but it is pressure of a special sort.

The Tennessee State Library, for example, belongs in the class with the Institute for Nuclear Studies Library. Our book stock, goodness knows, bears theirs no resemblance, but there is another function which I believe we have in common. This is a function simple to state, but very hard to live with. When it comes in, peace goes out. It is the function that might be called service to scholars. The trivia of today become the source materials of tomorrow. Discarding is a desperately serious matter. The collecting program is extremely heavy, and cooperation is the only hope. It is essential, if we are to survive, that we visualize ourselves as part of a whole. This may be some sort of logical fallacy that makes me connect our situation with that at the Institute. It may be argumentum ad hominem or it may be our old friend post hoc ergo propter hoc. Call it either one or both, but I believe that the same thing affects us that affects the Institute.

We could be a modern stream-lined library if it were not for the scholars we serve. We could stop our present method of cataloguing and punch cards. We could abstract articles from books, magazines, and newspapers, and we could number our ninety-five counties, the T.V.A., Jackson, Polk, and Johnson, Davy Crockett, Cordell Hull, and Sergeant York. If not that, we could make cards for about four hundred uniterms which would see us through with a number left over for Tennessee Ernie. Then we would be all ready to go. Go where? Oh,
we could answer all sorts of questions! What questions? Now this is no matter for jesting. 

There is no doubt whatever that a good index would help us. There is not a single good historical index for the State of Tennessee any better than the one in the Tennessee W.P.A. Guide. The index we want would cost us about $30,000.00. Very few states do have good historical indexes and we all need them. It is true that a large number of our questions are fact-finding questions, but there is another type, too. A searcher might want to see everything we have on a certain locality—Hamilton County, for example. You might as well say to a card catalogue “all those who are absent raise their hands.” Under how many different headings is that locality a subdivision? But a retrieval system would handle the question easily. So would about five hundred cross-references in the catalogue. There is, however, still another type of question, which we find difficult to handle. The client may say, “I am interested in the half-breed Cherokees in Tennessee. I think that many of them did not go to Oklahoma. I want to make a study of the Indian removal with the half-breeds especially in mind.” The best answer to that is found in the shelf-list under E78, E85, and E99. We shall be looking for books with biographical appendices. The notes on the cards, and the subject headings will do their share of the work. We need information retrieval all right, but we also need a good card catalogue and a good shelf list arranged by a well-made classification scheme. The Institute needs the same thing we do. It is the teaching function and its attendant responsibilities which require a library operated for library purposes. The book collection must be allowed to build itself up without too tight a rein put on it by discarding to make space; and the classification should be, as Mr. Ranganathan puts it, “non-critical.” It should have “Reticence.” Indeed it should.

For another reason, too, the classification is important to a library which aims at completeness in its chosen field. We need it to indicate to us where we stand on our collecting program. Nothing shows up gaps in a collection like a good arrangement, designed by an expert in the field. Again, when we must report our holdings to some agency preparing a Guide for Research (something like Dr. Philip Hamer’s projected Guide for the National Historical Publications Commission) we need a good classification. It would be impossible for a librarian “imperfectly educated” (to use Mr. Allen Tate’s courtly term) to write an adequate summary without a well-made shelf list to lean on. It is not an accident that there are four special libraries invited to the meetings of the Southeastern Research Library Association: the Air University at Maxwell Field, the Institute of Nuclear Studies, the Virginia State Library, and the Tennessee State Library. The reason for their inclusion in this group is, to paraphrase Edwin Markham:

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They drew a circle that shut us out,
Heretics, rebels, things to flout;
But Love and we had the wit to win—
We drew a circle that took them in.

Love is a strong word. Perhaps we were only possessed by an accretion of foresight. In any event, we saw what Ralph Esterquist wrote at the time of the organization of the Mid-west Interlibrary Center,10 "Few special libraries are able today to operate independently of the great university libraries, and in the world of tomorrow they are going to be even less able to be all things to their users."

As an example of the truth of this statement, I want to quote what the onetime director of the Kentucky Legislative Research Commission said to me several years ago. I went with a young woman from the Tennessee State Planning Commission to a meeting of the National Legislative Conference, which took place in Madison, Wisconsin. It was an excellent opportunity to make some observations about the operation of Legislative Reference Libraries. I was new at the Tennessee State Library and pursued the matter with great industry. The Kentucky director had a Ph.D. in history and I knew him to be well able to hold his own in research work. I sat by him in the plane going back to Chicago. He was most insistent that the Commission needed a specially organized library of ephemeral material, clippings, pamphlets, and such. "What do you do?" I said, "When you have a really weighty research report to work out?" "Oh", he said, "I go to Lexington, to the University of Kentucky Library." Yes, a special library is as independent as a hog on ice. Or, to use a more dignified quotation: "Let him who thinketh that he standeth take heed lest he fall."

At this same meeting, I made another observation which brings up the next point I want to make. I think that a special library often has an exceptionally large amount of non-book material in its collection, and from this circumstance some of the special expansions of classification result. For instance, in the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Library it was the custom to put items such as reprints, brochures, small pamphlets, and other oddments in envelopes which were classified to stand on the shelves. This is an old library and modern equipment for ephemeral material was not available. I believe that vertical files did not become popular until after 1912. Anyway, the shelves crawled with pamphlets in Gaylord binders just as the Tennessee State Library's shelves used to do. I think that the library had this material catalogued and that it tended to slow down the weeding and discarding of it at the same time that it slowed down the binding of monographs and periodicals. I think that the non-book material necessitated the creation of an expansion of the classification or the use of a special scheme like Glidden's to take care of it, and I think that separate uncatalogued collections of reprints, maps, and clippings would have been a better solution to the problem.
An article by Gracie B. Krum in the Burton Historical Collection in the Detroit Public Library\(^2\) was especially interesting to me since our field is local history. Miss Krum said that they, too, classify all sorts of things like clippings and photographs and programs. They did, at the time that the article was written, type the Dewey number for the locality in red over the subject number. They also prepared and filed in the catalogue analytical cards for articles in the *Michigan History Magazine*, now called *Michigan History*. The *Magazine* published an index to volumes one through twenty-five in 1944, but since that time there has been no other cumulation, and it is now necessary to search sixteen volumes individually. I have been investigating the matter of indexes for the purpose of making the Tennessee Historical Commission as miserable as possible. An index every twenty-five years is not unusual in the state historical field, but one longs for a big volume like Swem's *Historical Index of Virginia History*, or for a regular system of indexing like the beautiful *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* which cumulates a new one every ten years. How much better it would have been if the library had prepared copy for a printed index which all of us might purchase! New methods of off-set printing make this less expensive than it used to be.

Please do not think that I am comparing our library with its large rangy responsibilities as a state library with the beautiful Burton Historical Collection. I do want to say, however, that when each appropriate state agency shoulders the responsibility for a state-wide collection of newspapers, guide to place-names, list of state maps and atlases, guide to manuscript collections, and so forth and so forth, and when state historical agencies index their quarterlies, there will be less necessity for large, closely classified collections supported by special classification schemes and catalogues.

It is not the purpose of this paper to criticize or evaluate any of the classification schemes used by large public or university libraries. I do want to say, however, that in the special library world the silence which seems to brood over the subject of classification is explained, in part at least, by the 20\% who are members of the research family by birth, and the 20\% who are members of it by adoption. These libraries find fault with the systems used, but extensive departures would entail consequences which they do not care to face. We are guilty ourselves. We try to unload the responsibility on somebody else. We wish devoutly that somebody would put L.C. numbers on cards made by the Bureau of Railway Economics and oh, how we wish that the Library of Congress would get on with the K schedule.

But what about the rest of the libraries - the ones that exist by reason of their usefulness to the business which supports them, the ones whose major responsibility is to serve each his own master? Miss Kinder takes another step in describing them when she says: "Some less typical functions are records management and the arranging and indexing of company papers. Responsibility for historical and archival material is frequently delegated to the library." It
seems likely to me that "company papers" are, in many cases, manuscript collections, classified (if they are classified) by rules elaborated in the American Archivist rather than in library journals. This archival responsibility makes a complicated situation which, I believe, with Miss Kinder, is not unusual in a special library.

For example, in the Methodist Publishing House Library we had a collection which required book cataloguing and classification at the same time that it served an archival purpose for the organization. I want to explain what I mean by this because it brings up the last point which I want to make.

The Methodist Publishing House Library in Nashville was established long years ago as a service primarily for the Editorial Division of the old Methodist Episcopal Church, South. When the various branches of the Methodist church were united, the libraries from Cincinnati, Chicago, New York, and other centers were moved into the Nashville Library and combined. This gave us an exceptionally fine collection on the Church and on Methodism. We had, besides, copies of all books published by the various branches of the church on many different subjects. Gradually, as the Publishing Division came to trust us (and also, one might add, as their problem grew more acute) we became the custodians of the mint copies which were held by the Division as a very serious publishing obligation. Since these had to be kept sacred, we were obliged to keep additional copies for the use of readers. It was a collection of about 30,000 volumes with many different imprints. We found full cataloguing and classification necessary to keep the books in order. We used the Library of Congress system with a special expansion to take care of the Sunday School literature.

Every four years, after each General Conference, a new Board of Education designed a new set of Sunday School books. We arranged these in chronological order so that the output of each Board could be distinguished from that of every other. Soon we noticed that in the changes of format and in the subjects chosen for study we had an independently interesting and constructive historical record. I believe that the Publishing House Library is the only one in the world where such an observation on Sunday School literature could be made. The development, for instance, of the idea of friendly animals makes a curious commentary on a changing civilization. A bear came up to our car window one day in the Smokies. Looking in his face, I was not so sure about this friendly animal business. I think it would have been met with outright ridicule a hundred and fifty years ago.

The expansion we used was essentially an archive expansion on a subject classification number. It fit neatly into the closely classified Methodist collection making a contribution of its own in doing so. It was a unique expansion, but it was a unique collection serving a unique purpose. It did not occur to us to send a copy to the Special Libraries Association. I will come back to this in a few minutes.

The remainder of the library was a small working reference
collection for the use of the editors and the staff. Space in the refer-
ence room was limited; when a new book came, an old one had to go. We
found that we got along nicely with no classification at all. We
used the time saved to index obituaries, but Mr. Schwegman was cor-
rect. We lacked bibliographical controls and the collection fluctuated. I
think that this situation, great thoroughness on one hand and great
simplicity on the other, is characteristic of many special libraries.

Now to return to the Loan Collection of Special Classification
Schemes of the Special Library Association. I am going to crawl out
on the end of a limb by expressing a few personal opinions. It seems
to me that many of the special schemes are a clear waste of time.
Many of them are undated and consist of one or two typed sheets.
Many came from the same three or four large college or public li-
braries, not special libraries, but libraries hardly comparable to the
Library of Congress. Many of these expansions were made before
the L.C. schedules were published. If it is true that special libraries
are usually small and the librarians trained in the subject rather than
in library science, the poor things should be warned against special
schemes—the very thing which this collection seems to encourage.
The arrangement of books ought to facilitate the building up or the
rounding out of the collection, and it is impossible, I think, to make
a good plan based on anything but a very large collection. The leav-
ing of space in the scheme ought to indicate that books to fill the gaps
are known to exist. The library can then be selective, but the librar-
ian ought to know the framework of the whole subject from the start.

To repeat, then, I think that it is usual to find in a special library
great complication side by side with stark simplicity. For the former
a classification based on a larger collection is indicated. For the
latter either a system which can be simplified, as L.C. cannot, or no
classification at all would suffice. It would be found, I think, that
from the study of the complicated schedule—many of the non-book
collections would fall into place—and the whole conception of the
special library’s function would be clarified. The special library
would then stand between the company and the community to the ad-
vantages of both.

In closing, then, I want to call attention to the need in library
schools for more teaching of different methods of classification; not
that one expects them to be used, but that the contemplation of several
systems puts the ubiquitous Dewey in a better light. With the air
full of Documentation and the public libraries full of everything on
earth but books, it is no time for us to make babies of our young
people teaching them B for biography, F for fiction and a Cutter num-
ber taken from the author’s name. If the Library of Congress system
were taught first, the other system would be easier later and one
could be sure that the student had at least had a good look at a large
field. The conception of non-book material in the regular schedules
and the use of chronological and geographic tables would be of great
advantage no matter what scheme the student might use later. Then
if a brief introduction were given to archive work, government documents would not seem so alien and so difficult.

The current emphasis on Documentation seems to me to be wholesome, but I find myself in a position of some opposition to Mr. Ranganathan as he expressed himself on "Special Librarianship". He says that the special librarian needs to make a shift from the thought unit of the book to the thought unit of the periodical article. I say so does she need to raise her eyes from the microscope to take a look at the wide world of the whole profession. Documentation on one hand and cooperation on the other ought to see us through. For cooperation we need Classification; for Documentation we need Scholarship; let us attack the problem with renewed vigor. The game is worth the candle.

Notes


2. Bertha A. Barden and Barbara Denison (comps.), A Loan Collection of Classification Schemes and Subject Heading Lists on Deposit at Western Reserve University as of November 1, 1958 (4th ed.; New York: Special Libraries Association, 1959)


