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# “Children who read good books usually behave better, and have good manners”: The Founding of the Notre Dame de Grace Library for Boys and Girls, Montreal, 1943

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## ABSTRACT

The founding of the Notre Dame de Grace Library for Boys and Girls in Montreal in 1943 provides a unique and interesting case study in Canadian library development. It was founded and operated by an umbrella group of local community organizations, using money raised locally, initially to combat a perceived rise in juvenile delinquency during the Second World War. The arguments made in favor of the library by the general public and the organizers were widely reported in the local press. The documentary record provides a rare account of the beliefs held about the efficacy of reading and libraries to shape children, a neglected aspect of children's library development in Canadian historiography.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1942 a number of community groups in the Notre Dame de Grace district of Montreal came together to discuss a matter of great common concern. The Second World War had been raging for three years, and many felt that one of the major consequences of this on the home front had been a rapid increase in juvenile delinquency. Frightened by newspaper reports of increases in youth crime in Britain, the United States, and Canada, including incidences occurring locally that were being reported in the weekly district paper the *Monitor*, over forty groups joined together to create the Notre Dame de Grace Community Council. The community council was formed to tackle youth crime and other problems. Their first major undertaking was to raise funds to open and run a library for local children and youths up to age sixteen. After much effort and support from

the local community and Montreal's newspapers, the Notre Dame de Grace Library for Boys and Girls was officially opened on November 8, 1943.

This brief description of the founding of a children's library in wartime Montreal raises the question as to why a community group would feel that a children's library was a relevant way to combat juvenile delinquency. This is a difficult question to answer because of the paucity of studies on children's library history in Canada. In his articles on Canadian library historiography, Peter F. McNally notes the almost complete absence of works dedicated to children's libraries (1986a, 1986b, 1986c, 1996a, 1996b). This is in keeping with the trend in American historiography identified by Christine Jenkins (2000). She points out the general lack of work that analyzes children's library development within a larger social, political, and cultural context, or that considers the opinions and attitudes toward children's library services held by nonlibrarians (Jenkins, 2000, pp. 127–29). The insular approach of much children's library history is reflected in and reinforced by the prescriptive statements made by librarians and others in the past who did not examine the documentation that could have provided a much-needed context for library history (Jenkins, 2000, pp. 123–24). There is also a lack of literature related to the Canadian home front during the Second World War. Wartime jitters over juvenile delinquency is an ill-remembered and, in Canadian writings, virtually ignored aspect of the home front experience (Brannigan, 1986; Keshen, 1997, 2004). In this sparse material there is no mention of Canadian libraries. The primary material relating to the foundation of the Notre Dame de Grace Library for Boys and Girls, especially newspaper accounts, gives a clear picture of the beliefs people held about the power of books to shape character. This episode in Canadian library history suggests the numerous factors that motivated a community to develop a children's library, one that was in keeping with the public library movement in Great Britain and the United States. This study of the creation of the Notre Dame de Grace Library for Boys and Girls will draw on a variety of primary and secondary sources, adopting what Michael Harris calls an externalist approach, in which developments in libraries are placed within the broader social and political context (1975, p. 107).

#### THE PUBLIC LIBRARY MOVEMENT AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Generally, the development of public libraries and children's services in them is explained as a response to societal problems. Writers concerned with the founding of public libraries in nineteenth-century America and Britain usually describe how an underlying belief in the power of books to affect profoundly people for good or ill lay behind the development of the public library movement (see, for example, Robson 1976; Black 1991; Harris, 1973; Harris and Spiegler, 1974; and Dain, 1975).<sup>1</sup> There also seems to be a similar pattern to the explanations offered by leading scholars of the emergence of children's library services in the United States (Long 1969;

Jenkins, 2000; Garrison, 1979; Parker, 1997). These services were considered to have developed as part of the child welfare movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A number of organizations were founded or expanded at that time to improve the lot of children, such as Children's Aid Societies, settlement houses, and the YMCA/YWCA. Many of these early organizations included among their services the provision to their charges of what they considered to be good, uplifting reading, as well as attempting to shelter them from harmful "trash." This resulted in child welfare agencies and public libraries eventually making common cause, and the two groups often worked together to reach children. By the early twentieth century serving children became one of the principle activities of public libraries.

But how relevant is this U.S. model of children's librarianship for Canada? A first observation is that ideas flowed north into Canada in the form of pioneering Canadian children's librarians such as Patricia Spereman (McKenzie, 1999, p. 139) and Lillian Smith, who had studied in the United States and returned to Canada (Johntson, 1990). Canadians also read U.S. library journals and were active in the American Library Association (ALA). Early writings on children's librarianship by Lillian Smith and others repeat the claims made in the United States about the benefits of their work for the formation of children's characters. A study of the creation of the Notre Dame de Grace Library for Boys and Girls suggests that these beliefs were held by Canadian child welfare advocates and the general public as late as the Second World War.

### THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

The Notre Dame de Grace Library for Boys and Girls library was organized partially in response to fears of growing juvenile delinquency during the war. The juvenile delinquency scare that swept over Britain, the United States, and Canada during the war is a little-studied phenomenon. Although historians Jefferey Keshen (1997 and 2004, pp. 204–27) and Augustine Brannigan (1986) have determined that the problem in Canada was more apparent than real; public perception was inflamed by sensational reports in the press and other media about youth running wild. A number of causes were blamed. For example, there was a perceived lack of parental discipline because of absent fathers in the military and busy mothers (a situation made worse by the federal government's campaign to induce women to work outside the home to help relieve the labor shortage in wartime industries). Bad housing was thought to force children to stay outside or put them into too close intimacy with others; and there was the corrosive influence of the war itself and what was believed to be the influence of crime and of horror comics from the United States (Brannigan, 1986, pp. 111–18).

The *Monitor*, a substantial and award-winning local weekly newspaper, carried a number of stories about juvenile crime within and outside Notre

Dame de Grace. One article, for example, described how two youths had snatched a woman's purse and were planning to commit more crimes until arrested by the police. Interestingly, the reporter linked this incident to bad media influences on the young criminals. He explained that "reading dime novels, sensational detective stories and other similar literature, the too frequent visits to movies, and the present day custom of youngsters of playing 'police and robbers,' evidently influenced the minds of two lads who were arrested by the police of number 23 police station after they had snatched a purse from a woman."<sup>2</sup>

Notre Dame de Grace was an anomalous district in Montreal in that three-quarters of its 60,000 inhabitants were Anglophone in a city whose population was overwhelmingly Francophone (Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1941). Notre Dame de Grace was also wealthier than average, being predominately a middle-class, white-collar suburb (van Nus, 1998, p. 62). The district's developers in the early twentieth century had intended it to be an attractive and orderly place, and later community leaders were not about to let that change. It was within this emotional background that the Notre Dame de Grace Community Council was formed in early 1942. The dominant force behind the movement to unite the various local community groups was Jack Duckworth, a United Church minister and executive secretary of the Notre Dame de Grace branch of the YMCA, who wanted to create an organization that could deal with large community issues, such as juvenile delinquency, and foster a sense of community spirit and involvement (Blum, 2002). Within a year about forty community organizations had affiliated with the council. Altogether, they represented a broad cross-section of interests, from churches, synagogues, and the local hospital to branches of the Canadian Legion and businessmen's associations. By far the most numerous of the organizations involved were connected with children, such as home and school associations, the Boy Scouts, Big Sisters, the Child Welfare Association, the Parks and Playgrounds Association, and, of course, the YMCA.<sup>3</sup>

This interest in children, and the related issue of juvenile delinquency, was reflected in much of the early work of the council. Its first high-profile action after its foundation in 1942 was to mobilize enough public pressure to have the city take away the license of a pool hall that had opened in the area. Other early activities included supporting the Kiwanis Club of Montreal's call for a ban on gangster radio shows. The rationale for censoring these shows was parental concern over the "possible effect on the morals and character of their children and the consequent danger to their entire future."<sup>4</sup> It also sent to the Member of Parliament for Notre Dame de Grace a resolution calling for the criminalization of "crime comics which luridly portray crime and violence in all its forms and tend to persuade juveniles to violate the law or at least to corrupt their morals."<sup>5</sup> The most prominent undertaking, however, was the establishment of a children's library in 1943.

### CHILDREN'S LIBRARY SERVICES IN MONTREAL

The public library situation in Montreal was surprisingly weak in the 1940s (Hanson, 1997; Chabot, 1963). Despite being the largest city in Canada, Montreal's library system lagged far behind Toronto's. In 1944 Montreal had a population of 900,037 but only one municipal library, whereas Toronto had twenty libraries for a population that was more than 25 percent smaller (Waldon, 1944, p. 171). Montreal's public library only began to offer children's services in 1941, whereas Toronto, under Lillian Smith's pioneering efforts, already had children's departments in fifteen of its branches, plus the separate Boys and Girls House (Riley, 1944, p. 174). The reason for this paucity of service in Montreal has been generally thought to be the hostility of the then-powerful Roman Catholic clergy to the dissemination of ideas outside of its control. The church kept a close, censorious eye on municipal library issues (Lajeunesse, 1995, 2004). Thus, it is not surprising that Montreal's impressive municipal library building, opened in 1917, held less than one-tenth of its 400,000 book capacity as late as 1933 (Carter, 1945, p. 3). Moreover, until 1943 users had to pay a \$3 to \$6 deposit to borrow books. The library also closed each summer until 1943 (Lajeunesse, 1995, p. 149).

Library services in Montreal up to the mid-twentieth century were essentially provided by nonmunicipal bodies. French readers were served in a very limited way, for example, by parish and other church-run libraries stocked with religious books. Anglophone Montrealers were slightly better off.<sup>6</sup> Children's services appeared with the establishment of the Montreal Children's Library in 1929. This was created by the local Council of Women, a philanthropic group that raised the money for books and a librarian. The Montreal Children's Library set up branches in downtown Montreal and two suburban municipalities. Although this library did have some French books, Francophone children really only began to benefit when the Bibliothèque des Enfants opened in a poor area in the east end of the city in 1937, also as a philanthropic gesture by a committee of French-speaking women (Putnam, 1939, pp. 186–88). This library and the Montreal Children's Library later combined to establish a bilingual children's library in the Rosemont district of Montreal in 1941, which was helped along by a \$5,000 Carnegie Foundation grant (Crooks, 1946, p. 63). As Louise Riley described it in 1944, "in Montreal, Canada's largest and one of her oldest cities, library work with children is in the pioneer stage" (p. 174). None of these libraries was located in Notre Dame de Grace.

### THE FOUNDING OF THE NOTRE DAME DE GRACE LIBRARY FOR BOYS AND GIRLS, 1943

At the fourth meeting of the Notre Dame de Grace Community Council, held on January 14, 1943, a Library Committee was created to investigate the idea of creating a library. As part of its investigations, the council invited

Donalda Putnam, head librarian of the Montreal Children's Library, to discuss the requirements for establishing a library. Council members were also asked to canvas their sponsoring organizations to find out the extent of support for the proposal.<sup>7</sup> The response must have been sufficient because on April 8 the Library Committee decided to go ahead with the work, even though the whole council only formally endorsed the decision on April 27.<sup>8</sup> A fundraising goal was set at \$5,000.<sup>9</sup> New committees were created to deal with finances, publicity, and finding a location for the library. One of the first acts of publicity appears to have been the launching of an essay contest on the theme "Why I Would Like a Children's Library in Notre Dame de Grace." Prizes were to be given out in three categories: children under 11, children between 11 and 14, and children 14 and over.<sup>10</sup>

The project enjoyed support in the Montreal press from the beginning. One of the English dailies, the *Gazette*, published an editorial requesting that people support the campaign because "the city has failed to do its duty" in providing adequate children's library services in contrast to Toronto.<sup>11</sup> It was the *Monitor*, however, that really took the campaign to heart. From the moment the Library Committee decided to go ahead with the project, the *Monitor's* editorial policy was to back it. Like the *Gazette*, the *Monitor's* initial editorial took the municipal government to task because "of all the large cities on this continent, Montreal is probably the most backward in the matter of providing public reading facilities for its citizens." A library was seen as "a great boon to the district, as it would tend to give the youngsters a worthwhile alternative to the trash they are picking up now with their spare nickles [*sic*] and dimes."<sup>12</sup> The *Monitor* also supported the campaign by printing many stories and favorable letters about it, and by reporting verbatim "man in the street" opinions in its "Roving Reporter" section. What is especially interesting are the claims that emerge about children's libraries and the value of reading in general. As was noted earlier, much of the library literature simply reports the claims made by librarians and other insiders, such as board members, about the value of children's libraries. The stories and letters carried in the *Monitor* give us a chance to see what the public actually had to say about them. It should be noted that although the paper explicitly supported the campaign, opposition to it was not ignored. In fact, the May 20 Roving Reporter column stated that "he is still looking for an outright opponent of the project."<sup>13</sup> The lack of criticism leads one to conclude that public opinion, at least that segment of the public that was willing to make the effort to express itself to the *Monitor* and other newspapers, heavily supported the library campaign.

Some Notre Dame de Grace residents emphasized the educational benefits of the library. Robert A. Spiers, one of the Library Committee members, stated that a library "would be giving our children not only the answer to the thousand and one questions that arise in their inquiring minds but also the key to open the door that will reveal a new world of

knowledge and adventure.” Mrs. Cartier used the familiar medical analogy to make her point that books are “like a vital, candy coated medicine. The youngsters take it and like it. No compulsion, no resistance. Presto! Religion, education, music, art and health all to be discovered within the walls of the library.”<sup>14</sup> The *Monitor* also reported many other expressions of belief in the educational benefits of the library, often by parents with children in elementary or high school.

Another frequently offered argument for the library was the equally conventional one that reading and libraries would have great benefits for the character and morals of children. Mrs. F. C. Donovan told the Roving Reporter that

There is so much unfit and indecent literature in circulation today and its evil influence upon the minds of readers is far reaching, especially among the young and impressionable. The proposed N.D.G. Community Library for Children is highly commendable, inasmuch as suitable and supervised reading can be easily available to those whose character is in the forming and who will need a solid foundation upon which to face their problems in the difficult years of this war’s aftermath.<sup>15</sup>

On May 6 C. J. Dandy of the Boy Scouts Association discussed the relationship between the rise of juvenile delinquency and bad reading, and he stressed the idea that good books made available in libraries was an ideal antidote.<sup>16</sup> On May 13 Rabbi Julius Berger wrote to the *Monitor* linking the importance of good influences found in libraries to the future conduct of children. He stated that “Biblical precept tells us to train a child in the way he should go so that when he is old he will not depart therefrom.”<sup>17</sup> A few citizens focused on how a library could also combat juvenile delinquency simply by offering a recreational alternative to hanging out in the street and getting up to no good. Mrs. E. N. Little, for example, told the Roving Reporter that the library was needed “especially at this time, when so many youngsters are running wild. I am convinced that the appalling increase in Juvenile Delinquency is largely due to the fact that there is no place for the children to go after school.”<sup>18</sup> Another fairly common argument was that libraries help preserve democracy because they provide children with access to ideas and information with which they can develop their own opinions.

How pervasive these arguments were in Notre Dame de Grace at the time is revealed by the submissions for the children’s essay contest. Six winners were chosen out of the hundreds of essays submitted.<sup>19</sup> Inevitably, the essays reflected the commonly held ideas of the general public at the time. Robert Armstrong, the first prize winner in the under eleven category, wrote that “when they have the library the children will go there after school. A library will keep children off the streets.” The second prize winner in this category, Glenda Anderson, wrote that “the books would all have good stories in them and the mothers would not be afraid to let their children have the books,

for they know that they are good for them. Children who read good books usually behave better, and have good manners." The essays also highlighted the educational arguments that had been made. The second prize winner in the eleven- to fourteen-year-old category, James Ambrose, claimed that the library "also would improve my English tremendously. This would give me more knowledge so that if one of my friends asked me a big word I could tell them in a jiffy." The winning entry in the over fourteen category, sixteen-year-old James McIlwain, highlighted both the educational and moral benefits of reading good books found in the library.<sup>20</sup> While these winning essays may have been selected because they reflected the beliefs of the professional librarians judging the competition, these beliefs, as has been pointed out, were also widely held publicly.

The extent of the support for founding a children's library in Notre Dame de Grace is also reflected in the fundraising for it. The most important official in the city administration, executive committee chairman J. O. Asselin,<sup>21</sup> told a delegation from the Library Committee that the city could not give the library any money, in part because the city's policy on libraries in general was under consideration.<sup>22</sup> Some interpreted this as a smokescreen for municipal indifference. It did mean, however, that the Finance Committee had to raise locally the \$5,000 that had been set as their fundraising goal. Remarkably, several hundred dollars over this target was raised, the money mostly donated by individuals who gave small amounts of between one to ten dollars either directly or through collections raised by local organizations. Donation patterns are easy to trace because the *Monitor* published long lists of donors each week along with the amounts they gave. A few individuals or businesses gave more substantial sums, but individual donations of modest amounts dominate the lists.<sup>23</sup> The final, audited receipts showed that \$251 was collected from district stores, \$1,893.29 from community agencies, and \$3,550.75 from personal gifts and through mail canvassing.<sup>24</sup>

Once the financing was in place, the Library Committee began to set up the library. Although unwilling or unable to give any money, the city did provide a rent-free location for the library in the city-owned Notre Dame de Grace Community Hall.<sup>25</sup> This location was somewhat problematic in that it was on the eastern edge of the district, but it was accepted anyway. The city also redecorated the rooms and built the shelves and furniture. The idea was to strive for a bright and cheerful interior. In the library proper, the door lintels and curtains were red. The shelves were light yellow with turquoise-blue edges. The room also had six large windows. There were four tables, one being circular with specially built small chairs for very young children, and a circulation desk. There was also a work and mending room.<sup>26</sup> The library was only open for a limited number of hours: from 3:00 to 5:30 PM on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and from 10:00 AM to noon on Saturday.<sup>27</sup>

The Library Committee made an agreement with the Montreal Children's Library to help establish and run the new library. A librarian from the Montreal Children's Library, Grace Crooks, was designated to work a quarter of her time with the new Notre Dame de Grace Library for Boys and Girls. The *Monitor* assured its readers that she was very highly qualified, having trained at the University of Toronto Library School and worked as a librarian under Lillian Smith at Boys and Girls House and in several Toronto Public Library branches. Mrs. F. C. Warren was named her assistant. Mrs. Warren had studied librarianship at McGill University and had also worked at the Montreal Children's Library.<sup>28</sup>

Notre Dame de Grace Library for Boys and Girls had 1,256 books in both English and French when it opened, as well as access to the Montreal Children's Library rotating collection of 10,000 books. The stock consisted of works of fiction and nonfiction for the very young to the high school level student. There were also special activities such as storytelling, exhibitions, and hobby shows planned.<sup>29</sup> The Notre Dame de Grace Community Council appointed a Library Management Committee to oversee its activities. Jack Duckworth was named chair. Other members included Robert Spiers, the president of the Notre Dame de Grace Community Council, and Mrs. J. O. Asselin, wife of the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Montreal City Council, which was surely a political move on the community council's part. To ensure that the library served all the children in the community, the council also appointed representatives from the Francophone and Jewish communities, the school boards, and the Montreal Children's Library.<sup>30</sup> Given that the library was created by all segments of Notre Dame de Grace to benefit all the children of the locality, the community council wanted to ensure that this spirit of collective cooperation was maintained.

Unfortunately, there is no record in the archives or the press of any attempt to assess the impact of the library in combating juvenile delinquency, one of the ostensible reasons for creating it. The library's popularity survived this specific wartime need, however, and in fact it prospered after the war. It continued to operate for almost a half century, eventually opening six additional branches in the area. It also began to receive municipal grants, as well as continuing to raise money locally. The library closed in 1992 after the city cut off its grants, in part because the city had built its own library near the main branch of the Notre Dame de Grace Library.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to explain why a community organization would launch a campaign to develop a children's library as a means of combating juvenile delinquency during the Second World War. The extent of the support that this vision would receive in words, deeds, and donations suggests how widely it was held. The reports of public opinion, especially in the pages of the local weekly newspaper, the *Monitor*, give us a

rare insight into the arguments that were instrumental in moving the people of a local community to do what in so many other places was generally the work and responsibility of the municipal government. What happened in Notre Dame de Grace in the 1940s was just one layer in the history of the conviction that reading maketh the man. In the social, political, and economic upheavals of the nineteenth century, this idea was an important factor in the creation of the public library. In the United States the idea strongly motivated those who developed children's library services in the last decades of the nineteenth century. These pioneering efforts were, as pointed out at the beginning of this article, also influential in Canada some fifty years later and help explain why the Notre Dame de Grace Community Council acted as it did in 1943 to create its own children's library. Was it unique for a library or more typical of library development in twentieth-century Canada, especially during such a stressful time socially as that of World War II? Only more research along the lines advocated by Christine Jenkins will tell (Jenkins, 2000, p. 130).

## NOTES

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1. Although there is much to criticize Harris (1973) for, such as the fact that he builds his thesis almost solely on the utterances of a few men, it is hard to fault him on the basic idea, perhaps simply a truism, that public libraries were perceived and developed as solutions to social problems. For an example of criticism of Harris's work, see Fain (1975). Dain (1975) takes issue with Harris's idea that libraries were essentially the creation of a social elite. She states that a variety of people, including immigrants, believed in the value of reading. The fact that diverse groups, such as workers and ethnic and religious groups, founded libraries attests to this.
2. "Young Bandits Caught after Purse Snatch," *Monitor*, October 1, 1942, p. 1.
3. List taken from the stationary of the NDG Community Council, found in the Notre Dame de Grace Library for Boys and Girls Scrapbook, NDGC.
4. Letter, Gordon Paterson, Corresponding Secretary, to members of the Notre Dame de Grace Community Council, February 14, 1944, NDGC.
5. "Minutes of the 14th Meeting of the Executive of the Community Council held in the Library on October 12th, 1949," NDGC.
6. I am not including the Westmount Library in this description since this was in a separate municipality, albeit surrounded by Montreal. Montrealers did not have the right to borrow from it, although they could read material there.
7. "Library Scheme Makes Progress: Community Council Hears Plan," *Monitor*, March 25, 1943.
8. "Library Location Committee Named," *Monitor*, April 15, 1943; "Higher objective is sought for children's library," *Monitor*, April 29, 1943, p. 3.
9. "Library Location Committee Named."
10. "1st Prize Winners in Essay Contest Chosen by Judges," *Monitor*, May 27, 1943, p. 1.
11. "A Children's Library for N.D.G.," *Gazette*, April 24, 1943, p. 1.
12. "The Children's Library," *Monitor*, April 8, 1943, p. 4.
13. "Roving Reporter," *Monitor*, May 20, 1943, p. 5.
14. "Inquiring Report Finds Old and Young Eager to See Project Realized," *Monitor*, April 15, 1943, p. 1.
15. "Roving Reporter," *Monitor*, May 13, 1943, p. 18.
16. "Letters to the Editor," *Monitor*, May 6, 1943, p. 2.
17. "Letters to the Editor," *Monitor*, May 13, 1943, p. 2.

18. "Roving Reporter," *Monitor*, May 27, 1943, p. 2.
19. "1st Prize Winners."
20. "Winning Essays in Essay Contest," *Monitor*, June 3, 1943, p. 5.
21. Changes in the city's charter in 1940 had created a City Council consisting of ninety-nine members who were selected by three distinct groups: property owners, lease-signing tenants, and appointees of various organizations. The council selected a six-member executive committee, the chair of which exercised the powers usually associated with a mayor. The elected mayor of Montreal was little more than a figurehead.
22. "Hope Fades for City Help to Library," *Monitor*, May 6, 1943, p. 1.
23. "Children's Library Fund: Testimony of Edison to Libraries Recalled," *Monitor*, June 24, 1943, p. 3.
24. "Community Hall Will House Library," *Monitor*, September 30, 1943, p. 1.
25. *Ibid.*
26. "Children's Library to Be Inaugurated on Thursday Next," *Monitor*, November 4, 1943, p. 1.
27. "Boys' and Girls' Library to Be Opened Tonight," *Monitor*, November 18, 1943.
28. "Children's Library Opening Plans Matured for Thursday," *Monitor*, November 11, 1943, p. 1.
29. *Ibid.*
30. "Library Management Committee Appointed," *Monitor*, December 9, 1943, p. 1.

## ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Notre Dame de Grace Community Council Archives, Box 1 (1943–1949). Cited as NDGC. The items cited in the text from the local newspaper, the *Monitor*, are found in Notre Dame de Grace Library for Boys and Girls Scrapbook in this source.

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