The American Origins of Public Library Work with Children

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It was not the twentieth century which saw the beginnings of public libraries for children; that unique and endemically American institution which has played so great a part in the century of the child and won the regard of the nations of the world. The credit for its origins goes to the latter decades of the nineteenth century and to the straws in the wind preceding the 1880's and 1890's which gave promise of the structure to come.

There were the apprentice libraries, going back to the time of Benjamin Franklin, which were intended for the use of young men eager to advance their education. But before the existence of child labor laws children were apprenticed at twelve years of age, and for boys, at least, these libraries must have been an incentive to read. In Philadelphia, such a library, founded in 1820, had by 1876 grown to number 21,000 volumes. An Apprentice Library Association of Brooklyn established a Youth's Library in 1823. Boys over twelve years of age were allowed to use it, and once a week, for an hour in the afternoon, girls were admitted.¹

The Sunday School libraries, limited in scope to religious tracts and books narrowly dedicated to sectarian themes or morbidity dwelling upon sin and the need for salvation, helped to create an atmosphere of expectation, as far as the children were concerned, because they circulated books without fee.

The village and town libraries, supported by gifts or endowment and finally attaining the support of the municipality, created a climate of reading, a recognition of the necessity for books. No retrospective writing can fail to mention the name of Caleb Bingham, for in 1803, remembering his own boyhood deprivation of books, he left an inheritance to the town of Salisbury, Connecticut, for the founding of

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a library for boys and girls between the ages of nine and sixteen. "The Bingham Library for Youth is perhaps the first library in the United States to have received support from a municipality," writes Elizabeth Nesbitt, "and it is also one of the first libraries for children in the country." There is also the endearing figure of the hat maker of West Cambridge, Massachusetts, "Uncle" Dexter, who opened his own library to children on Saturdays in 1835.

Here and there school systems of the country undertook to obtain tax money for books. In 1842 Massachusetts established a library bounty system, allotting fees to school districts which would match such sums for a library. In New York certain private enterprises took cognizance of the needs of children. The Public School Society of New York City, which in actuality financed private schools as early as 1818, supplied 50 books to each school "for the use of the best behaved pupils." The books consisted mostly of gifts and discards from private libraries, and no doubt the badly behaved children suffered small deprivation in proving unworthy of them. It was New York State which passed the first law of its kind in 1835 providing "that the school district library should be supported by taxation on the same principle as the public school." These libraries were for the use of adults, not children, but this recognition by a tax body of the importance of books and reading was a great advance in the whole library movement.

In 1876, the same year in which the American Library Association was founded, the United States Bureau of Education published a report entitled Public Libraries in the United States of America. One section of that report was written by William Isaac Fletcher, who was later to become librarian of Amherst College, president of the American Library Association, and joint author of Poole's Index to Periodical Literature. But the subject of his report for the Bureau of Education dealt with none of the topics one might expect from the college librarian or the editor. Its title was "Public Libraries and the Young," and with that essay, the archives of children's librarianship were brilliantly begun. It is, indeed, the first paper in Alice I. Hazeltine's historic collection Library Work with Children, a book which is invaluable as source material of the profession's beginnings.

In the late nineteenth century the prime question of the day was whether or not children were the proper concern of the public libraries which were beginning to arise across the land, offering free reading to everyone except children under twelve or fourteen or
sixteen years of age. Mr. Fletcher answered the question: “Who will presume to set the age at which a child may first be stirred with the beginnings of a healthy intellectual appetite on getting a taste of the strong meat of good literature? . . . In every community there are some young minds of peculiar gifts and precocious development, as fit to cope with the masterpieces of literature at ten years of age, as the average person of twenty, and more appreciative of them.”  

It is a fascinatingly contemporary paper in its discussion of book selection, its statement of criteria for judging books for children, and its expression of concern lest learning be made too easy for the young: “But there seems to be danger that the ease and smoothness of the royal road to knowledge now provided in the great array of easy books in all departments will not conclude to the formation of such mental growths as resulted from the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties.”  

Not until 20 years later did the persistence of children knocking upon the doors of libraries succeed; not until then did the walls come tumbling down, although here and there children had earlier been admitted. Minerva Saunders, librarian of the Pawtucket, Rhode Island, Library admitted children as early as 1877, and reported on the success of the experiment that the adults were not disturbed, for the most part, by the presence of the young.  

Meanwhile certain librarians spoke out about what was to be done with the children, and the subject of proper reading for the young was discussed at library meetings before there was recognition of the need for a place in which children might read and procure books. The earliest record of direct testimony of a librarian’s interest is a quotation in the Library Journal from the Hartford Library Association Bulletin of 1878, in which Caroline M. Hewins, the librarian of the Hartford Public Library, described the reading in which the boys and girls of her community were engaged. It included shocking news of the appeal of the dime novel and the fervid romance for the young folk of Hartford. Four years later, in 1882, Miss Hewins’ Books for the Young, a guide for parents and children, made its appearance; a controversial list it was, too, since among its recommended titles was The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.  

At this distance in time, it is customary to assume that libraries for children and concern for the reading of boys and girls were the province of a handful of inspired and far-seeing women. But when one returns to a reading of the early literature of the profession, it
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is clear that service to children and the quality of the books which they read were a major concern of the day, and the administrators and pioneers among the men also waged war in behalf of children. Melvil Dewey, C. A. Cutter, W. C. Lane, R. B. Poole, and W. I. Fletcher—these men were, in fact, members of the first Publishing Section of the ALA, and the initial publication of the Association under their direction was John F. Sargent's Reading for the Young (1890).10

It is significant that the matter of book selection preceded the problems of space and service. A general discussion of library work with children was the subject of the Philadelphia Conference of ALA in 1897. Under the vigorous editorship of Mary Eileen Ahern, the issues of Public Libraries, monthly publication of the Library Bureau which had been inaugurated that same year, were filled with reports of progress. Miss Ahern published a list of libraries under the following categories: those with separate rooms for children, those with a substitute for separate rooms, and those proposing to have separate rooms. She requested that “additions to and corrections in the list” be sent to Melvil Dewey, then at the New York State Library in Albany. It was in an early issue of Public Libraries that Lutie Stearns of the Milwaukee Public Library and an early friend of reading children touched upon the problem of requirements for those who work with children: “If possible have a children's department in your library where their wants may be met apart from the crowd. At any rate, have a healthy, well-informed, sympathetic attendant for the children.”11

The reports which came in response to Miss Ahern’s command revealed a variety of arrangements: tables set aside for children, alcoves established for them, and in one instance, a small space behind the circulation desk.

In 1897 Mary Wright Plummer, librarian of Pratt Institute Library, reported that “Pratt was considering a separate room in the new building.”11 The children's room at Pratt was indeed the first children's room to be planned for in the architect's blueprint and brought to reality. In a paper read that same year before the Friends' Library Association of Philadelphia, Miss Plummer traced in some detail the development of space and books for children, beginning with the Public Library of Brookline, Massachusetts, which in 1890 had set aside an unused room in the basement as a children’s library, under the supervision of the janitor. Minneapolis Public Library had
opened a room in 1893; Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1894; in Denver of that same year, John Cotton Dana, the librarian, had opened a room for children, giving them access to open shelves with no supervision at all. Libraries in Boston, Omaha, Seattle, New Haven, and San Francisco opened their doors to children in 1895, and Detroit, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Kalamazoo, and Pratt Institute of Brooklyn followed suit.

By 1900 the need for a room of their own had been proved by the children themselves, and the rise of Carnegie library buildings across the land began to supply the demand. Meanwhile, enough professional librarians had become interested in work with children to warrant the formation of a Children's Librarians Club at the Montreal meeting of the ALA Convention in the summer of that year, with Mary E. Dousman of Omaha as Secretary and Anne Carroll Moore of Pratt Institute as President.

Within a matter of months the ALA invited the club to become a section of the Association, on equal terms with the sections for College and Reference Librarians and for Catalogers. Thus, in 1901 the officers of the club became the first officers of the section. Thirty-four years later, when the ALA was again meeting in Montreal, Miss Moore characterized the founding years as follows:

It is well to remember that no one person or library was responsible for the formation of the Children's Librarians Section. It was not the result of a program. It grew quite naturally out of the recognition on the part of leading librarians all over the country of the claims of children as part of the reading public of their libraries and the desire of a small and scattered group of special workers to unite in considering books and children. Impetus was unquestionably given to the movement by the strong personality of Lutie E. Stearns of Wisconsin who presented a stirring paper in 1894; the clear vision of Mary Wright Plummer which found expression in the first children's room to be included in an architect's library plan; the discerning editorials of R. R. Bowker and Helen E. Haines in the Library Journal; and those of Mary Eileen Ahern in Public Libraries; the broad civic application made by William H. Brett and Linda A. Eastman in Cleveland; the discriminating book selection of Theresa West Elmendorf, expressed first in lists issued by the Milwaukee Public Library and later in those of the Buffalo Public Library; and in the freedom of access to books accorded to children by John Cotton Dana of the Denver Public Library.12

The drama of beginnings is always moving to look back upon.
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The story of library after library opening its doors to children, offering them free opportunity to read, to borrow books on their own responsibility, without regard to age or mental capabilities, is in its way one of the most gracious and humane acts of faith in this great and fumbling democracy. It was accomplished against odds of small budgets and limited supplies of suitable books. The librarians, moreover, had the task of molding a philosophy of practice. There had never been an institution quite like the free libraries for children. They were to have their own unique character. There were schools, kindergartens, Sunday Schools, all serving children. At the turn of the century in the great urban centers—Boston, New York, Pittsburgh—settlement houses and other social services were beginning to grow, the result of the influx of the great immigrations from Europe, and the playground movement was under way. The children's libraries shared some aspects in common with most of these institutions. They were educational, in the broadest sense of the word, but they were to bear little relation to formal instruction and the classroom. They were playgrounds, but a certain amount of restraint and control was necessary for success in operation. There were no rules for silence, but a "vitalized silence nevertheless" was in order.

The founding librarians worked slowly, and by trial and error found and held their unique stance before the world. In Pittsburgh Frances Jenkins Olcott organized the work there in 1898; Clara Whitehill Hunt headed up the work in Brooklyn in 1903; Caroline Burnite supervised children's work in Cleveland in 1904; and Anne Carroll Moore moved from Pratt Institute to New York City in 1906 to give direction to the work which had grown there without plan. These were some of the pioneers who faced up to the questions of discipline, created the atmosphere of place, bespoke freedom and the enjoyment of books, gave children a sense of responsibility, and invented ways of extending the gifts of reading to schools, homes, and all the institutions which touched the lives of children.

In Cleveland children belonged to the "Library League" and took an oath on behalf of "clean hands, clean hearts, clean books." In Boston and Pittsburgh small collections of books were locked in cases in the homes of children, and the cases were opened and the books circulated by a librarian who went on her appointed rounds like a visiting nurse. Classroom libraries were set up in public schools as a means of introducing teachers and children to the services of the public library.

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Then came ways of dramatizing reading: book talks, storytelling, reading clubs, exhibitions—all the ways of keeping the enjoyment of books fresh and related to the whole lives of children. There were arguments among those practical "visionaries," the first children's librarians, and differences in points of view, and this variance was all to the good. But they were united in their insistence upon the ability of children to respond to the best in literature, picture books, and all the books of information they sought. The insistence of these women was to change the publishing picture in this country. It was they who were to write a brilliant chapter in the social history of this century and to bring the eyes of the world to focus upon the work they began in the children's libraries of the land.

In this day of the picture tube and the flickering screen, it appears almost prophetic that in 1911 Mary Wright Plummer should have made this observation: "A growing rival of the library is the moving picture show. Some libraries have thought to counteract this influence by having educational moving pictures at the library with reference to the books that treat of similar subjects. But the root of the difficulty seems to be deeper down than the character of the thing shown." 15

The character of the thing shown! The thing shown by the first libraries for children, and the men and women who created them, reaches now across these sixty years, and more. It has become an armature upon which education, publishing, literature, art, and psychology now mold the shifting shapes of our time.

References
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15. Plummer, op. cit., p. 1059

Additional References

