



Introduction

HANNIS S. SMITH

ONE OF THE REAL PHENOMENA of public library development in America in the past decade has been the expansion of the concept of the regional library.

At the time of the Public Library Inquiry (1949), there were not enough regional libraries to warrant including them in the sample, but the Inquiry did identify two varieties.¹ These came into the Inquiry through the state library extension agencies studied. The two types are familiar: (1) the regional office or branch of the state library extension agency exercising no control over local libraries, and (2) the multi-county library. The Inquiry suggested that the regional office or branch of the state agency should be the mainstay of library extension. In recent years, it has been possible to identify a third type: the regional office of the state agency which exercises some control over local libraries, and which actually operates direct public library services in its region. Today, one or more of these three types of regional libraries, to a total of over 200 examples, are present in forty-one states of the United States and in most Canadian provinces.

The literature of regional public libraries is indebted to a distinguished list of librarians which includes Louis Round Wilson, Carleton B. Joeckel, Helen M. Harris, Gretchen K. Schenk, and Lowell Martin. The literature reveals that this type of larger unit is in some ways no different from any other large public city or county library, and much of the general literature of library administration and service is fully applicable to regional libraries. However, this issue has been compiled in the belief that new insight and understanding might be contributed by focusing attention entirely on those regional libraries which have been organized by combining two or more counties or (in the case of New England) other large governmental units.

It is interesting to note that when the University of Chicago devoted its 1944 annual institute to public library extension, Helen M. Harris² Mr. Smith is Director of Libraries, Minnesota State Department of Education.

reported that prior to 1937 there had been only two multi-county libraries in the United States and four regional libraries in Canada. By 1944, fourteen more regional libraries (all in the southeastern United States) had been added to this meager list.

Oliver Garceau, in his volume for the Public Library Inquiry³ pointed out that states had generally approached the creation of the larger unit by combining counties rather than by attempting to create "the special district . . . for it had been found by students of government to contribute extensively to the chaos of American local government" ⁴ He reported: "Most of the active library extension agencies can now point to two or three regional units within their borders . . . the great majority . . . are two-county affairs."⁴ Their scarcity at that time may help identify the few extension agencies which the author regarded as "active." Garceau stated that at the time of the Inquiry "some regions organized less than ten years ago are already eroding, . . . counties have been glad to be on their own again."⁴ He took a generally dim view of this kind of regional library, and his label of the regional movement as "the bitter struggle to destroy or to swallow up village, city, and county libraries"⁴ has been a thorn in the flesh of many state agencies since its publication, and is not exact.

Concerning this alleged condition of "erosion" and "bitter struggle," by 1963 only two of the twelve multi-county regional libraries in the United States ten years before the Public Library Inquiry had dissolved into single county libraries. The other ten had been reorganized and proliferated into twenty multi-county libraries, with the number of counties involved having grown from forty-four to seventy-three. And, more surprising still, there were at least 140 additional multi-county regional libraries with more than 400 counties involved.⁵ The limiting "at least" has been used since it is highly likely that it has not been possible to identify all existing examples in all states, nor determine the status of all demonstrations.

In all but nine states some form, or combination of forms, of regional libraries has been put into operation. Twenty-four states have one or more multi-county regional libraries. Four of these plus five others are employing the demonstration method for the establishment of new multi-county regions. In fourteen states there are more than forty branches of the state library extension agency, with two states having both multi-county libraries and state agency branches.

In view of the recommendation in *The Public Library Inquiry*⁶ generally and of the doubts so well expressed by Garceau, the question

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arises of how to account for the rapid proliferation of the multi-county unit as opposed to the state agency branch. Unquestionably, the influence of "outside money" through the Library Services Act has served ". . . as a lubricant to overcome the frictions of initiating multi-governmental co-operation."⁷ But there is possibly another factor. Garceau reports that he found a general ". . . lack . . . [of] political acumen . . ." among librarians.⁸

By 1962, Phillip Monypenny, another political scientist, observed in connection with extension of the Library Services Act, "This is political skill of a really remarkable order which . . . can be equaled by very few professions in the United States."⁹ Regardless of what combination of circumstances and forces were at work, it is obvious that great strides are being made in getting a multiplicity of governmental units to work together to organize better and more extensive public library service.

In the pages that follow are contributions by a number of people who are doers of the word and not preachers only. In the first five papers will be found descriptions of a number of representative methods of organizing multi-county units, including the single system state approach for New England where the county is not a meaningful unit of local government. The influence of political acumen on the planning and execution of these developments is evident, as is the invaluable ingredient of flexibility. The five States (New Hampshire, New York, Tennessee, Montana, and Washington) represent five different approaches in five different parts of the country. The amount of flexibility and imagination is rivaled only in Donaldson's contribution from Canada. A second group of five papers is concerned with certain specialized aspects of the multi-county unit in the unified or cooperatively organized systems.

The multi-county library is not a status symbol. It is an attempt, in line with the concept of systems in the ALA standards, to achieve a viable administrative library unit which has some hope of achieving quality library service. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Lowell Martin has given a clear warning of the many factors which must be observed in bringing developments more nearly in accord with standards.¹⁰ With the flexibility which these papers reflect so clearly and with the political and social acumen which recent successes demonstrate, it is apparent that the nagging problems of multi-governmental library cooperation can be solved, and that the multi-county regional

library in one of a variety of incarnations can and will be the public library organization of the future.

Some day someone may know enough about the subject to write a book about it. It is the intent of both the editor and the contributors to this issue to provide some steps in that direction.

References

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3. Garceau, *op. cit.*
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 212, 226.
5. *American Library Directory*. New York, R. R. Bowker Co., various editions.
6. Leigh, Robert D. *The Public Library in the United States*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1950, Chapter 11, pp. 222-246.
7. Garceau, *op. cit.* p. 212.
8. Garceau, *op. cit.* Chapter 3, pp. 111-151; p. 149.
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