The Public Libraries of Johannesburg

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THE JOHANNESBURG PUBLIC LIBRARY, serving a privileged section of the citizens of the area, was mainly a lending library until 1911. Between 1911 and 1936, the chief emphasis was on reference work, and many sets of learned publications were acquired. It is said that novels were not purchased until six months after publication. On the whole little was done to attract the general reader. In 1936, Johannesburg, a city of some 54,000 acres populated by 474,908 people of all races, had one public library service point in an up-to-date and attractive building on the Market Square with a total staff of thirty-six and a stock of 150,465 volumes. On July 17, 1936, R. F. Kennedy, Deputy since 1921, became Chief Librarian, and immediately began to plan changes that would bring the Johannesburg Public Library into line with modern public library concepts. From the time of his appointment until his retirement in June 1960, he persuaded the City Council of Johannesburg to institute libraries in schools; to start deposit libraries in fire stations, residential clubs, and factories; to open hospital library services with qualified staff; to establish branch libraries in the suburbs; to introduce library services for non-whites in residential areas, schools, and hospitals; to maintain a municipal reference library in the City Hall for the use of councilors and officials; to expand the music collection into a special library; and to establish traveling libraries to serve the outlying suburbs. In the years from 1936 to 1960, the Johannesburg Public Library changed from a small-town library with a good basic stock to an urban system with perhaps the best book stock in the country and certainly with the largest number of qualified staff to be found in one institution in South Africa. Johannesburg took the lead in the late 1920's and early 1930's in training librarians and in appointing qualified staff to posts carrying commensurate salaries. The Library's tutorial classes ceased only after library

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schools at the universities had become a reality, but even today senior members of the Johannesburg Public Library staff are part-time lecturers and examiners in various schools of librarianship. It is not surprising then that this library has served as a reservoir and training ground for staff throughout the country. The emphasis both in teaching and in organization has always been on the practical side of librarianship.

In 1938 Johannesburg abandoned the deposit system, and thus became the first urban library in South Africa to operate on a free basis, setting the pattern since followed by most of the library authorities. It was such a revolutionary step at that time in a city notorious for its ever-changing population that few realized the enormous saving caused by abolishing much unproductive and costly accounting. At the same time, the number of users of the Library increased rapidly.

By 1945 the staff was divided into professionals (i.e. those with academic or library qualifications) and generals (those with matriculation or typing qualifications). The duties were reorganized in such a manner that qualified librarians were expected to do the work for which they had been specially trained instead of trying to be typists, stenographers, bookkeepers, or routine workers. This method has been most successful in improving the standard of service to the public, important in raising the status of librarians, and invaluable as an argument in defense of increases in salaries. Today fully qualified librarians are college graduates with a postgraduate diploma in librarianship.

In 1955/56 full catalogs in the branch libraries were abolished, with no ill effects. In suburban libraries (with limited stocks continually replenished from a central pool), which are mainly used by general readers, the important factors are (1) which books are on the shelves, and (2) whether a particular work can be obtained on application by the reader. The reader is not interested in whether the book he wants belongs to the stock of the library he normally visits or whether it has come from a library five miles away, provided that he gets it in a reasonable time.

Methods of accessioning, cataloging, and issuing books are subject to careful scrutiny from time to time to see if they can be improved or simplified in the interests of efficiency and economy. Much duplication of records has been avoided in this manner, and unnecessary details excised from all records.

The Johannesburg Public Library has never been afraid to break away from traditional methods if it was thought advantageous to do
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so. It has an extensive collection of government publications of most African territories and some other countries which are fully cataloged in a classified catalog in a rather unorthodox but most practical manner, enabling readers to obtain what they require with a minimum of effort.

The trend in Johannesburg since the middle 1930’s has been to provide some trained staff at all public service points to assist readers not only with their choice of books, but also, in the Reference Library and subject collections, in the use of the catalog. It is believed that the catalog of a library of any size is too complicated a tool for the average reader to use effectively, and as every effort is made to exploit the resources of the Library to the full, skilled librarians are at hand to explain the entries in the catalog and to assist in tracing the required information. Still more is needed to be done in this direction as the book stock expands.

South Africa is a developing country in which much thought in recent years has been given to the importance of libraries and their resources. Efforts are being made to bring to serious students such book materials as the country as a whole possesses, by every possible means including interlibrary loans and photocopying services. Here the Johannesburg Public Library has played its part well, particularly in relation to the many special libraries attached to mining houses, industry, and commercial firms in the vicinity. All these libraries draw on the Johannesburg Public Library’s collections, particularly for learned and technical journals and for material outside the scope of their interest. There is also the closest cooperation between this Library and that of the University of the Witwatersrand. The compilation of bibliographies and indexes, particularly in the field of Africana, is a major library activity because of the lack of such tools. The Library’s best-known publication, issued annually, is the Index to South African Periodicals.

The Johannesburg Public Library is financed by the municipality from the ordinary rate fund and from the native revenue account. Some bequests and gifts of money are received from firms and individuals, but the City Council is responsible for maintaining an adequate and properly organized supply of reading matter for the community. Recently it has been suggested that, as the Johannesburg Public Library plays a large part in supplying the book needs of students outside the municipal boundaries, some grant should be made by the Government. The Johannesburg City Council considers it both
a duty and a privilege to maintain an efficient library service for its citizens, and over the years it has given the Library sympathetic consideration and a sufficiently large grant to maintain a reasonable service with due regard to economy. The Council has, nevertheless, stated that a grant for the supply of very special material (for example, foreign patents to supplement those the Library has from Britain and the United States of America) would be welcome, but is prepared itself to foot the bill for the day-to-day needs of its citizens.

The city of Johannesburg is considered an excellent employer, and the staff of the Johannesburg Public Library enjoys equal pay and conditions of service for men and women (married or unmarried), a pension scheme with provision for widows and orphans, good leave privileges and sick benefits, opportunities for overseas exchanges, subsidized education, and scholarships for postgraduate study in librarianship. Library workers are in great demand throughout the country, especially because of the serious shortage of qualified librarians for the expanding library services in the towns and in the rural areas. By general standards, the Johannesburg Public Library is understaffed, and it is not easy to maintain a stock of nearly 900,000 volumes (excluding unbound material), a circulation of well-over four million volumes a year, and a system with just under thirty major service points, seventy traveling library stops, eight hospital services, some thirty schools, a few old-age homes, a busy reference department, and four special subject libraries.

The estimated population served by the Johannesburg Public Library (June 1963) is 1,222,903 of whom 406,200 are white, 711,595 Bantu, 65,568 Eurafricans, and 39,540 Asiatics, living in an area of 115 square miles or 73,842 acres. Johannesburg is a complex and vital community and its residents make great demands on its library service not only for its educational and cultural needs but also for its scientific and technical requirements. Its various peoples differ in language, in standards of living, in educational background, and in religious views. Where the white population (both Afrikaans- and English-speaking) resembles that of many British or American cities of similar size as far as its library needs are concerned, the non-white peoples are entirely different. Where the Eurafrican (or Coloured as he is generally called in South Africa) and the Asiatic more closely resemble the white man of the same education as far as his reading tastes go, the Bantu (or African) is in a different category.

The average adult African has had very little schooling and may
even be the first generation of his family in an urban environment. Here one has the perennial problem of finding reading matter which will interest him and not present too much difficulty in view of his elementary standard of education. In practice it has been found that when the contents interest the reader, he frequently does not read fluently enough to manage the book with ease. There are exceptions, of course, but reading for pleasure is unusual among adult Africans. Their demand is for works of information and study to help them to pass an examination or to better themselves financially. Ever since the first separate library for Africans was opened towards the end of 1939 (because they were debarred from using the existing public library by the conditions on which the subscribers handed over their assets to the municipality), the endeavor has been to provide study books for the small proportion of readers able to make use of them. But even today the libraries in most African areas serve nine children to one adult. The problem of providing books for this section of the community is further complicated by the fact that some seven different African languages are spoken in Johannesburg, and there is very little literature in any of them and no real children's books at all. The Library is therefore called upon to provide attractive but simple English or Afrikaans books so that the children can become accustomed to the idea of a library and make use of its facilities as they grow older and master the mechanics of reading.

These libraries are administered by the Johannesburg Public Library on behalf of the Non-European Affairs Department of the City. This Department is responsible for recreational facilities of all kinds, and encourages people to read instructions for games and handicrafts. The result is that the ability to read easily has become a status symbol, and the decline of illiteracy is very noticeable during the last five years or so as educational facilities have improved. As the African becomes more educated, he becomes more articulate in his demand for books, and in recent years the rise of the vernacular press and radio has had a marked effect on the requirement of library users. Johannesburg spends lavishly on these library services which are far more costly per capita than similar services for whites owing to heavy wear and tear and losses due to the lack of a library tradition. The service points in these libraries are operated by matriculated or graduate Africans, and the same standards of book selection are maintained as for any other part of the library service—that is suitability of content and physical make-up. During the year 1963/64, there were 23,282 regis-
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tered members (3,799 adults and 19,483 children) who borrowed 215,714 volumes for home reading. Just as each branch in a white area has a basic reference collection, so each non-white library is provided with some dictionaries, encyclopaedias, yearbooks, atlases, gazetteers, etc. In addition, the libraries for non-whites include newspapers and representative collections of study books, for which the whites have to visit the Central Library, and a beginning has been made with special services by providing music scores in some of these libraries.

It has recently been said that an efficient library service should concern itself with the kinds of people whose needs are to be met, the numbers who are being and who should be served, and the ways in which the service is working in actual practice. If these criteria are applied to the white population of Johannesburg, the library service is reasonable, but when they are applied to the non-whites, the present service is inadequate and much remains to be done to make them readers and conscious of the benefits of a library service.

The present trend in South Africa is to provide more educational facilities for all groups in the community, and at the same time there is a strong movement afoot to improve all library service. To achieve these objectives, increased funds are necessary; various committees (on which Johannesburg is represented) appointed by the Government are at present investigating the matter. Johannesburg itself needs still more public libraries near the homes of its people, particularly in the non-white areas, and plans have been made for half-a-dozen to be completed within the next year or two. It has also been agreed in principle to include a library for students in the Civic Center near many educational institutions to relieve the congestion in the Reference Library. The immediate future should see the completion of an underground stack below the gardens in front of the Central Library to provide the necessary expansion required by a Central Library which has occupied the same building for thirty years. A separate Art Department should be in operation in a nearby building in 1965, and consideration will have to be given to separate departments with specialized staff for science and technology, and for business and commerce. The policy of subject departments staffed by qualified librarians with a special knowledge of the subject has been accepted, because it has been illustrated in Johannesburg that far better use is made of the book stock in these departments than can possibly be the case when these subjects form part of a general collection.

The Johannesburg Public Library cannot escape the problem which
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confronts any library except the very smallest today—mechanization in some form or another. It is believed that at present it would be uneconomical to introduce computer methods at the Johannesburg Public Library, as the necessary programming would take as much time as the manual preparation of catalogs and indexes, and moreover, it is also thought that reference library work in Johannesburg is not of a sufficiently repetitive nature to warrant the outlay at present inherent in such a system. But as mechanical methods of information retrieval improve and become less costly, and as the Johannesburg Public Library grows, consideration will certainly have to be given to these newer methods if Johannesburg is to run an efficient library service.