The Role of the Branch Library in the Program of Metropolitan Library Service

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Exerted in coalition, a series of broad changes have sharply affected the role of the branch library in the program of metropolitan library service. Once upon a time, when the 1900's came rolling in, there was only a scattering of library branches around the United States. They were probably looked upon by their system's central library as small and poorly-stocked stepchildren. Today a network of branches serves every city of size, and branch development programs usually stand at the top of administrative planning priorities.

The branch libraries we are building today are predicated on decades of painful growth and experimentation. At one time, when urban people lived pretty well within small and defined neighborhoods, municipal library systems sought to reach out with a scattering of branches supported by a broad base of delivery stations and sub-branches. Chicago and Jersey City, for example, had numerous delivery stations, Chicago's service being especially famous; Boston and Pittsburgh offered a combination of branches and delivery stations.¹ The delivery station and the sub-branch honored that majority of American city dwellers whose lives were geographically defined.

Field experience dramatized to earlier librarians the superiority of the branch library over other types of stationary extension agencies. People responded to the wider collections, the longer service hours and the professional service offered by a branch. As the first decade of the century ended, working professionals had come rather solidly to regard the branch as the preferred mode of extension.¹

Branch-type operations were conducted at one time or another in different cities in fire stations, civic centers, converted residences, and abandoned business buildings; interestingly enough, St. Louis even

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operated a branch for more than a quarter of a century in a downtown department store.  

This era of colorful locational innovation has more or less declined except for an occasional outcropping, such as the "booketeria" of the 1950's. Most contemporary public library administrations are dedicated to the notion that a branch should operate in a facility located and built for the purpose. Here and there, branches operate from leased quarters. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this type of operation. It offers the advantages of geographic flexibility and, as such agencies are usually part of a shopping center, the closeness to pedestrian traffic which so heavily conditions the quantitative response to a given branch. The idea of the branch in rented quarters has gained only limited acceptance, however, probably in part because it does not offer the sense of stability and ownership that is likely to be sought by institutions, and in part because boards and city councils do not often approve of them.

Metropolitan branches have achieved considerable status and are acquiring even more as a result of the forceful changes in population, education, transportation, municipal retailing patterns, and library building planning. Like algebra and romance, the educational explosion is something more often referred to than understood. There is a fairly general knowledge of the widespread and dramatic increase in student enrollment at all levels. There is not so general an understanding of the equally if not more dramatic change in the level of public education. In the past, cities and whole nations underwent decades during which the public education, if any, remained stable. Yet, in the United States between the years 1940 and 1960, the educational level—the number of years of formal schooling of the average adult—rose more than two years. Our knowledge of the relationship between educational background and reading habits gives us insight into the groundswell of usage and support being experienced by branches today, particularly when we observe that the more highly-educated outer core of the cities is served almost solely by branches.

The character of public education has altered too. Educators are more and more leading the student away from the confinement of the text and toward corollary and enrichment reading. As a matter of training and assignment, the student finds himself directed to the library.

Prior to the phenomenon of modern transportation, the typical city dweller lived in a small neighborhood, maintained face-to-face relationships, and was confined geographically. The coming of the family
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automobile and the development of networks of freeways have created a new way of life for the citizen. The automobile and the freeway have made obsolescent those smaller service units such as the delivery station and the sub-branch which were predicated on the neighborhood way of life.

The changes wrought by these forces were distinctly catalyzed and focused into library potential by the reshaping of the urban retailing structure. Before World War II the downtown business district enjoyed an easy dominance; since then, the new outlying shopping centers, offering convenience and free parking and a wide selection of merchandise and services, have made gains of such an order that they have captured a healthy percentage, at a rapidly increasing rate, of the market. And the shopping center expansion continues energetically: the number of shopping centers had grown from 1,000 in 1955 to a planned 8,600 at the close of 1965.

Taken together, these conditions produced a climate conducive to the establishment of a series of large and successful branch libraries. Today's branches are usually built close to shopping centers in the interest of accessibility and a favorable parking situation. And they are being planned to be much larger than before. Branches were formerly on the order of 2,000 to 6,000 square feet; to judge by the new buildings reported in the 1961-1964 architectural issues of the Library Journal, branches now appear to be averaging 12,000 square feet.

Branch libraries began to appear in this country during the latter part of the nineteenth century, but it was not until the 1930's that the elbowing-out population and the depression-prompted high readership forced public librarians generally to begin planning in terms of systems of branch libraries. Thus really began the era of the surveyor and outside expert.

The branch in its new image—larger, better-located and architecturally distinct—is doing well indeed. Most cities of large size now have at least several branches in this category, each recording an annual book circulation of 200,000 to 600,000. Service statistics from annual reports of the larger public libraries show that branches are responsible for as much as 85 to 90 percent of the system's total book loans. There are, in fact, a number of cities, Corpus Christi and Dallas, for instance, that have individual branches registering more book loans than the central library.

The central library still represents the administrative nexus, but in some cases it is losing its ascendancy as a service unit. Although diffi-
cult to prove, because of the absence of broad-spectrum historical statistics, it is common knowledge among field librarians that branches have broadened their reference and periodicals collections to help meet increased demands. It is not uncommon to find reference collections numbering three or four hundred titles in branch agencies. Branch collections are growing in general, to keep up with their patronage. The writer recently collected data from 427 branches in cities having a service population of 300,000 to 900,000, and found that the average branch in the sample held 22,300 volumes.

As urbanization persists, the time is not too far away when the bulk of public library book loans will be issued from branches. According to the 1964 American Library Directory, 666 public library systems already maintain a total of 3,376 branches, or an average of five branches per system. The 1960 United States Census showed that 63 percent of the population resided in the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas. Estimating that two-thirds of the library patrons in these areas went to branches—probably a conservative estimate—it appears to be a fairly valid proposition that a minimum of 42 percent of the public library usage is accounted for by branches.

The general lack of controversial publications concerning the scope of branch library service indicates consensus. The widening scope of branch collections suggests that a serious attempt is being made to offer fairly full services to adults and students. Researchers are, of course, still referred to the central building, but most reference and school-oriented questions are handled at the branch.

Metropolitan branches today characteristically contain an adult department, children's department, young adult department or section, basic reference and periodical collections, and a limited vertical file. Larger branches in a few cities offer a collection of circulating phonograph records, but this service is not yet typical.

The meeting rooms included in many of the branches constructed during the last two decades permit a wider variety of programs and services. To the traditional children's story hour have been added book discussion groups, book reviews, panel programs, cinema (the films are usually borrowed from the central building's film collection), guest speakers, art and hobby displays, and an occasional fillip in the form of a magician or puppet show. These programs are most often planned by the branch librarian with the collaboration of the appropriate administrative office. In the larger systems, a coordinator may assist by planning and scheduling programs for a series of branches.
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Branch libraries tend to be individual if not autonomous in the sense that the responsibility for book selection, and preparation of programs resides normally in the branch head or staff. Even in those systems where branch book selection is conducted by a committee or coordinator, or limited to items appearing on a prepared list, the branch head is almost always afforded procedural redress on the decision concerning a particular title.

Service to young adults has become one of the newer aspects of branch work. Branches often have a section of reading materials for young teens, and give consideration to the selection of materials for this age group. Some cities—Baltimore, Boston, and Dallas, for example—have in larger branches a young adult librarian who visits schools, offers book talks and book fairs, and, like the children’s librarian, essays programs for a defined patronage.

The growth and specialization of branch library collections appears likely to continue. For many years branches have offered foreign language books for patrons. The recent establishment of programs for adult literacy has prompted branches here and there to carry a shelf of titles for beginning readers. As the number of educated senior citizens spirals upward, it seems certain that branches will respond with at least small collections for the visually handicapped.

Evaluating the effectiveness of a branch presents real and theoretical difficulties. Wheeler and Goldhor developed the “Arbitrary Service-Unit-Cost” formula which obtains the unit cost per book circulation by dividing circulation into operating costs. The formula is useful in that it affords insight into the efficiency of an operation, but efficiency is only one aspect of effectiveness. A branch is effective in the degree to which it reaches the potential library users in the service area. A better measure is provided through the computation of readership per capita for the service area population. But a basic problem here arises from the difficulty of defining the service area and its population; our theoretical descriptions of a branch service area are not consistent with the conditions of reality. City-wide circulation per capita is rather easily determined, as the information necessary for that determination is available. But branch circulation per capita is statistically as weak as the population estimate of the real service area, which is at best of a general nature. An additional weakness of the circulation-per-capita approach lies in its inability to show us the pattern of penetration in the community’s neighborhoods. The pattern of penetration can be gained through the preparation of a map of patrons’ residences.
ing time and tedious effort to draft, even when based on a minimal sample, the map of patrons’ residences shows clearly where the branch is extending service and where it is not. These present objective modes of evaluating branch effectiveness share the weakness of being essentially quantitative. For qualitative assessment, we must make judgments based on the experience, intelligence and service attitudes of the librarians staffing the branch and shaping its collections.

Even as the branch library has gained in scope and independence, so has its responsibility for publicity and public relations taken on a broader base. The branch librarian is expected to be knowledgeable about the community served by his agency, to remain in contact with its leading organizations, to be available for speeches to local clubs, and to work with suburban newspapers in publicizing the branch.

Responding to the energies and outcroppings of an abundant and diverse society, the branch library has gained a maturity and a steadiness that will ready it for its future as the principal popular institution among American public libraries.

References