



The Branch Collection

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THIS CHAPTER deals with the purpose of a branch collection, its size, balance, relationship to the central library, and policies and methods of selection. The objectives of the collection would, obviously, be identical with those of the branch library and as the 1956 ALA Standards put it, the community library (including the branch) is "the unit in the library system closest to the reader." It stocks the most frequently used materials or those "used regularly" and should "be able to draw upon larger collections, to meet the needs of readers with specialized interests."¹

This clear-cut theory of the branch library is also expressed by Wheeler and Goldhor, "The mission of a branch library is to give as much and as good service to as many citizens in its area as possible." Service is defined in small branches as "mainly . . . lending books [with] a high proportion of fiction, with some elementary reference work and reading guidance." The larger branch would lend a larger proportion of adult non-fiction and other special materials. The branch resembles the main library in scope if not in scale of function. The job is to "relate books . . . to the life interests of people." But they also note that: "Two main theories of branch library function have competed with each other. One envisages a branch library as a smaller-scale public library, offering reference and other special services as does the central library. The other assumes that branch libraries should be mainly agencies for the circulation of popular books at the neighborhood level. Both theories are valid, since they apply to different types of agencies . . . we need to distinguish between a book distributing branch and a library service branch."²

Sealock has also a considered summary of branch collection theory, touching a number of significant points, and concluding that the prac-

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tice has been to provide a general collection of books, without material in depth, but with a rather wide range of fiction and general non-fiction, with more books for children than for adults. The distinguishing characteristic of the branch collection, compared with other book distribution centers such as drugstores, stationery stores, and even groceries with book shelves, is that it is a balanced collection served by a professional staff. Even the smallest branch can make a contribution to popular, informal education with a carefully chosen collection. The branch collection will have many calls for materials related to formal education and for general information, and a more mobile population will require branch libraries to render a more comprehensive service. The branch collection has long had an important recreational function that can be met with excellent fiction, authentic biography, and readable books on current affairs.³

A different view of branch library purpose which, if followed exclusively, would have a considerable impact on the collection, was that stated by Ulveling in 1938: "the major part of a public library's opportunity to conduct a general educational service rests on its system of branch libraries." He added, "Branch libraries are not service satellites of a main library, but, in their own right, they have a definite educational responsibility . . . which is one of providing for the educational self-improvement of individuals."⁴

Being closest to the reader, the branch collection is also seen as the product of community needs. "The selection of books for the branch will be governed by the nature of the community each branch serves Thus there will be a variety of types of collections in the various branches."⁵

Baltimore has the same point of view in its book selection policy, specifying that "It is around these community functions that the average branch builds its permanent collection," although a sentence or two later this is modified by the statement that "each branch maintains a basic collection of standard works in the major fields of knowledge."⁶

The conflict in purpose that faces branch selectors takes other forms as well. Carnovsky saw the choice as between selection "according to . . . a set of literary . . . values," or "according to . . . public demand," and he sees value as the only defensible policy.⁷

Lacy says that there are two major kinds of library use: "pastime use and purposeful use. . . . By pastime use I mean that use for recreational reading that responds to a generalized desire to be entertained,

a desire that might be satisfied more or less indifferently by one book or another within the range of the user's taste or by another form of recreation entirely. By purposive use I mean not only use in seeking information but also use for a particular and discriminated cultural experience which . . . cannot be readily replaced by a different experience." ⁸

Professor Herbert J. Gans told a symposium on library functions in 1963 that there is a conflict between two conceptions of the community library.⁹ The "supplier-oriented" idea argues that the library is an institution which ought to achieve the educational and cultural goals of the librarian. The "user-oriented" conception argues that the library ought to cater to the needs and demands of its users. Gans charges that the usual solution of the library has been to "uphold the supplier-oriented concept in the professional literature, but to accept the user-oriented concept in actual practice, if only to get its budget approved. . . ." He was critical of arbitrary standards of size and program.

Library surveys provide some information about what librarians consider to be the purpose of the collection, although, curiously, not as much as might be expected. In most cases, surveys tend to deal much more extensively and specifically with such matters as site, location, size of building and of collection, number of branches, and circulation, than with the purpose of the collection. One notes that branch libraries have "a clear-cut function, the supplying of materials in the whole range of everyday, down-to-earth interests . . ." ¹⁰ and that "Branch collections are working collections of frequently-used items." ¹¹ Essentially, the branch purpose "is to serve the wide reading interests of the modern, active American community." ¹² It is also recommended that the collection should contain both educational and recreational materials, and that the standard of quality should be high. "The public library . . . should stand for *good* reading." ¹³ A survey by a management firm sees the branches as the primary home-reading agency of the public library, to provide both for the general and the more specialized needs of the population. Home-reading is here distinguished from reference needs and uses. In another survey, branch libraries are defined as a means only of extending certain services of the central library and not of increasing the level of the service available, of providing greater access to materials but not increasing the scope of the resources available. Surveys also refer to the branch collection as actively changing, useful, containing fewer expensive books than central, with a higher proportion of rec-

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reational reading, with emphasis upon current reading resources and materials used by students and children.

Some questions remain with respect to the purpose of a branch collection. Is it recreational or educational, or some of each? What value if any do these slippery labels have in practice? Is there a difference between demand and need? What segment of the demand, or need, will the library consider relevant? Whose value judgment will prevail? Is there a difference between need, as expressed by the individual library user, and need as expressed (or more likely unexpressed) by the corporate community?

The second point to be looked at is the optimum size of the branch collection. The answer was thought to lie, perhaps, in the literature (books, articles, surveys) and in a brief look at practice. Textbooks and surveys, at least the dozen or so examined, seem to agree on 25 to 35 thousand volumes, although Minneapolis recommends 45,000 volumes for a branch serving 25 to 35 thousand people. The Madison, Wisconsin, study is also based on population: "minimum of 1 per capita in service area or 10,000, whichever is larger [with] growth beyond the minimum where demands justify larger stocks."¹⁴ The per capita approach was also used in the 1943 Post-War Standards which recommended $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ volume per capita but noted that this was valid only if a substantial portion was of currently useful books, and also proposed a minimum of 6,000 volumes.¹⁵

Cory in his New Orleans survey recommended 25,000 as a "minimum necessary number of book *titles*" (my italics) for a regional branch¹⁶ and 15,000 titles for a neighborhood library,¹⁷ with the total number based on a formula of one volume for each six annual loans. Martin in the Dallas survey recommended "close to 30,000 volumes," for the large branch, divided into 8,000 for children, 3,000 for young adults and nearly 20,000 for adults.¹⁸ Greenaway in the New Haven survey recommended for the children's collection 3,500 to 5,000 titles, and 10,000 to 15,000 volumes; for adults, 8,500 to 10,000 titles and 12,000 to 20,000 volumes, and about 900 young adult titles, and 1,500 volumes, or a total of 22,500 to 36,500 volumes.¹⁹ Circulation is the basis for the size standard proposed by Wheeler and Goldhor: "A branch circulating 100,000 or more books a year should have . . . a book stock of 25,000."²⁰

Another way of finding out how big a branch collection should be in the opinion of librarians, is to look at the shelving capacity being provided in new buildings. For example, four Dallas branches opened

in 1964 provided for 45,000, 50,000, 61,000 and 64,000 volumes. Two Milwaukee branches opened in 1964 provided for collections of 60,000 volumes each, to serve populations of 60,000. Three in Tulsa were much smaller, one providing space for 12,250 volumes and two at 17,000.²¹

Apart from the question of how big branch libraries should be, how big are they in reality? Wheeler and Goldhor quote a 1960 report based on a sample of 162 branches in 61 library systems which found that the median size group was 5,001-6,000 and the modal size group was 10,001 to 20,000.²² For the present article, a sample was taken of 371 branches in 40 cities in 17 states as reported in the 1964 revision of *American Library Directory*. The sample included only cities of more than 100,000 population, and county or regional systems were not counted. One hundred twenty-one branches or about 33% had fewer than 15,000 volumes; 147 or about 40% had 15,000 to 25,000 volumes; and 103 listed 26,000 or more, with 13 of these listing 50,000 or more books.

Comparative data about size are not useful in point of fact, since they do not take into account a whole host of variables, such as the relative adequacy of school libraries, the number of branch libraries in the total area or the population per branch, population density of the area served, and most important of all, the aims and purposes or mission of the branch collection.

It is significant and has bearing upon the purpose of a branch collection that judgments as to size appear to be based on population served, or on circulation, on a combination of these, or on some other unspecified factors. One does not find in the literature or records of performance any indication that a branch collection would have to be of a certain size in order to achieve adequate representation of the basic and necessary books in the various fields of knowledge and interest. The way in which size is determined appears to indicate that, regardless of the fact that the branch is spoken of as an agency of informal education, and despite the fact that it is doubtless used in that way by a number of people in every community, the actual practice, administratively, is to regard it as an agency for the distribution of books for casual reading.

There is no evidence, for example, that the standards of size were arrived at by controlled experiment. What size branch collection would be needed if, say, one put into practice Dan Lacy's concept of purposeful use,²³ plus an aggressive and planned exploitation by staff

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with leadership quality, plus convenient and attractive quarters and accessibility? Would it be worth investing a sum in such an experiment to determine how big a branch collection should be? To choose one small area of reader interest—for example, consumer education; one might hazard a guess that the typical branch library might have at best ten books in the catalog and perhaps one or two of current vintage on the shelves at any given moment. A branch collection with that level of stock is not apt to be able to create demand in that particular area of informal education.

“The public library, as a social instrument in a democratic state, has the responsibility of providing the books which will contribute to an enlightened citizenry. The translation of this responsibility into action constitutes perhaps the most difficult task of librarianship—book selection.”²⁴ How are books chosen for branch collections? Practically no articles were found in the literature of the past thirty years on this question, so it was necessary to poll the field. Thirty librarians in various parts of the country, in large cities and medium-sized ones, were asked to write a paragraph or two about policy and procedure. The sixteen who responded were very generous and thoughtful and their assistance is much appreciated.

Several practices appear to be more or less common, judging from this very limited sampling, and are presented here first in summary form and then in detail. Initial choices are usually made by main library personnel, either in committee or as subject selectors. Sometimes there is branch representation on the committee, especially if it is a rotating one. Some responses indicated that branch librarians were “encouraged” to recommend titles, though one noted that they were more apt to have subject than title requests. The committee’s choices for addition to the Main Library are then usually listed, weekly or bi-weekly, sometimes by subject, sometimes with annotations. Books are made available for examination, sometimes after or in connection with verbal reviews by those who selected them. Practically all libraries agree that, for practical reasons, no branch library should stock a book that is not in the main library. About half the libraries prepare a list “for branches only,” and some break this down into books for larger, medium, smaller and so on. The practice seems to be equally common of opening up all system selections to branches. Various degrees of review and supervision are involved, although the consensus seems to be that the branch librarian knows best what his branch library should have.

"Each branch librarian decides what to buy on the basis of reviews, inspection, budget, discards and the existing book stock and demand." "The branch librarians are responsible for choosing the items the money is to be spent for." "Each branch librarian examines the titles and review information . . . and indicates those she wishes to order for her specific community." "The branch librarian decides . . . She brings her own selections to the meeting . . . considers the titles that others have brought, and makes her own selections from what the committee has approved." "Branch librarian looks at books approved for branch purchase and selects within an assigned budget."

Acquisitions regardless of method rely heavily on advance publication or approval plans. As high as 50% of titles are purchased in this manner after the book has been examined. In substantiating the value of particular titles or reinforcing a staff member's review, a definite core of reviewing media is widely used. These media invariably include *Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Virginia Kirkus*, *New York Times Book Review*, *New York Herald Tribune Book Week*, the *Saturday Review*, and in addition local media when available.

What proportion of the library's weekly or annual accessions is selected for branch collections? As an example, Toledo reported that 91 non-fiction and 15 fiction titles were chosen by one or more of eleven branches from one weekly list of 191 non-fiction and 18 fiction titles. No other data on this question were discovered. Toledo, by the way, has begun preparing a bi-weekly list of branch orders, so that Main department heads "can have a more informed idea of what the branches decide to get."

The general conclusions are now examined in more detail. Initial book selection is handled in one of three ways: by a committee, by division or department heads, and by subject specialists. The usual method of selection is by a committee or the division heads. An adult book selection committee varies in composition but is usually composed of administrators, such as the chief librarian and his assistant, the librarian in charge of branches, and the librarian in charge of readers' services. In addition to administrators, there are rotating committee members, who include at least one branch librarian. In only a few instances were all branch librarians members of the committee. The committee meets and agrees upon specific titles on the basis of commercial reviewing media and staff reviews. The results of the meeting are then communicated to various agencies in the form of acquisition lists or slips. The selection committees for children's liter-

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ature work the same way, except that the authority to purchase titles is more frequently centralized in the children's supervisor.

In libraries where division or department heads make the initial purchases, these heads are individually responsible and there is less apt to be a meeting. The acquisitions of the various heads are then co-ordinated on a requisition list. In the subject specialist method, each professional librarian is responsible for a specific area of knowledge, and he presents his acquisitions at regular meetings, which generally include the entire staff. The subject specialist would be responsible for reviewing media pertaining to his field, and for screening approval books in his field. Regardless of the system of selection, the initial selection results in a pool of acquisitions for the main library. The next step is to decide which are appropriate for the branches.

In many cases the committee or department heads have left the branches a free choice of any title that has been ordered for the main library. Highly specialized items, however, are frequently noted as such, and therefore not likely for branch acquisition. Frequently when the acquisition list is open, a supervisor is then responsible for reviewing branch decisions.

Almost as many libraries have placed controls on the acquisition list. Usually, the individual selector or the committee as a group will decide which titles are appropriate for the main library only, and which titles can be duplicated in the branches. Some systems differentiate between which titles are appropriate for only the larger branches, and those which are appropriate for all branches. Usually the designations for the titles are not iron-clad. For special community needs there is recourse to the branch supervisor. Under the subject selector system the selector decides which titles are branch material, and in which branches to place them.

The branch librarian makes his choices from an acquisitions list or from acquisition slips which are issued on a regular basis. The books appearing on the list frequently are available in a reviewing room so that the branch librarians may examine them. Adult selections by the branch librarians generally are not closely supervised. Children's selections are usually made with the co-operation of the children's supervisor. Thus, without the aid of a comprehensive guide, the branch librarian must know the needs of his community and how to meet these needs through currently available literature.

In many systems there are automatic additions to branch collections that do not require the individual approval of the branch librarian.

These additions, including reference works purchased by the Reference Department, are system-wide, such as a schedule purchase of encyclopedias. Some additions are temporary in nature, such as fiction or mystery collections that travel from branch to branch. Several systems reported using rental collections of current fiction in branches.

The branch librarian is also largely responsible for maintaining the condition and appropriateness of the branch collections, except in subject selector systems where collection maintenance (i.e., replacement, duplication, and weeding) is carried out by the subject selector. Usually the branch librarian enjoys considerable latitude in collection maintenance. However in some systems, replacements must be approved by the book selection committee, or by the branch supervisor. Frequently system-wide replacements are effected in specific areas through subject replacement lists issued by committees formed to investigate adequacy of specific subject areas in all the branches.

How are budgets allocated for branch collections? What criteria or standards are used? A study made in 1954 was based on practice in 32 cities of over 300,000 population.²⁵ Respondents cited a total of 20 different criteria, with use or circulation cited 24 times, special needs cited 8 times and the following, one or more times: registration, state of book collection, area served, population served, hard wear, future potentialities, type of reader, nature of neighborhood, reference use, size of building or space available, what is requested by patrons, work load, number of readers, age of branch, turnover, previous expenditure, and what each branch librarian requests. Some cities listed as many as four or five criteria for allocation; where only one was cited, it was usually circulation or usage. It would seem in general that about two-thirds of the budget goes for adult books and one-third for juvenile books. In the few cases where there was a budget for young adult books, it came out of the adult share. Not all libraries specified a percentage; some cited dollar figures for the current year.

Book funds are allocated by the chief librarian or by one or more division or department heads, sometimes with committee consultation and sometimes not. Indianapolis uses a detailed and comprehensive budget worksheet, which lists staff data including salaries, estimated service (reference questions), budget request (for each branch and department), book stock, turnover, the past year's circulation and the estimate for next year. These figures are compiled separately for adult and juvenile loans. Other factors, such as wear-and-tear in a poor neighborhood, are taken into account.

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As to balance in the branch collection, the 1943 Post-War Standards recommended that children's books comprise 20-25 percent and that non-fiction comprise 60 percent of the adult collection, with the "non-fiction ratio increasing with the population of the area served."²⁶ Put another way, if the total collection had 25% children's books, the proportion of adult non-fiction would be 45% and fiction 30%. No guidelines were discovered as to proportion of older, standard stock and of current, changing titles; and the present inquiry has not turned up anything on a theory of duplication beyond the rule of thumb that one more copy of a popular title may be added for each specified number of reserves, such as five or ten.

Relationship to the central library is implied in much that has been brought out under purpose of the collection and method of selection, although one could observe diversity on this score as well as on many others. It is clear that the branch collection is intended to be basically a duplicate of whatever part of the central library collection is thought to be most frequently or regularly used by the patrons of a particular branch service area. One might have thought that every branch library's collection would be simply a duplicate of the most frequently used 10 per cent of the central collection, but this appears not to be the case.

In conclusion, this inquiry seems to have more questions than answers, questions which seem deserving of attention, but which the present inquirer lacks the information or wisdom to answer. It may be observed, for example, that in both purpose and selection policy, the branch collection is seen as needing to be responsive to its community needs and it is clearly regarded as the responsibility of the branch librarian to "know" those needs. One may wonder whether this is a realistic expectation, in terms both of time available and of perceptive skills. What techniques or practices are there for discovering felt needs, and how does the harassed branch librarian protect himself against translating demand as need? What built-in method, other than circulation, is there for discovering how well the community needs have been met? Again, what is the responsibility of the branch librarian, as the community book person, to lead, guide, direct, stimulate and instruct the reading interests of the users? Is this a reasonable community expectation, and is this concept implied in the "responsiveness to local needs" concept of branch selection? The hypothesis that each branch collection is or should be unique, reflecting and responsive to the needs of its community, ought perhaps to be

tested by more research than appears in the literature. It might also be worth asking how the "smorgasbord" theory of branch book selection, with a little of everything, works out. What kind of branch collection results? Finally, what is the significance of the taste of the individual branch librarian? And are not his taste and judgment apt to have at least as much weight as the "needs of the community"?

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