

Film Service to the Elderly

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PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE to the elderly is traced to the Cleveland Public Library, which established an Adult Education Department in 1941. This library was important both to the beginning of public library film service, and to film service to the aging. Its film collection was begun in 1942 with a small deposit of films from the local Federation of Settlement Houses,¹ and by 1943 the Adult Education Department was planning recreational programs for persons in settlement houses and churches. The library's "Live Long and Like It Library Club," with programs centered on problems of the aging, began in 1946.²

In 1942 — an important year for film — the Educational Film Lending Library (later the Educational Film Library Association) formed to assist agencies such as the Office of War Information in setting up film deposits; sixty libraries received deposit collections as a result. Gerald McDonald's study, *Educational Motion Pictures and Libraries*, commissioned by the ALA Joint Committee on Educational Films, was published with the conclusion that "public libraries could become *the* link between producers and distributors and the general community by providing information on film and their sources, assisting patrons in borrowing films, providing exhibition space and equipment, and by actually developing film collections that would meet community needs."³ The Cleveland Public Library's film collection grew to 400 films in two years under the direction of Patricia Blair. In 1947 Blair was appointed Film Advisor to the ALA Film Office, a 4-year project established with Carnegie Corporation funding. Leadership of this office assisted scores of libraries in developing film

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collections and led to the formation of two demonstration film cooperatives, one in the Cleveland Public Library and the other in the Missouri State Library. By 1951, when the Film Office closed, films had become established,⁴ but the lack of ALA leadership, which characterized the Film Office period, has influenced the development of film service.

Other libraries followed Cleveland in offering services to the aging. Among them, the Boston Public Library organized the "Never Too Late" group in 1950, and in 1952 the "Senior Citizens" met at the Flatbush branch of the Brooklyn Public Library to "read, talk, view films, play games, have teas and birthday parties."⁵

Public library film service and service to the aging share a common period of development — almost the same "birthday," one might say — and initially, librarians active in one field were active in the other as well. The growth of these services has been influenced by the materials available, by the concerns of the elderly, by changing concepts and emphasis in the fields of gerontology, and by changing structures in library service. Governmental response to the aging in terms of legislation and funding is important to both.

During the 1950s a "travel group using films" was one of several special interest groups which the Cleveland Public Library established in a 1953 ALA-administered experiment using a grant from the Fund for Adult Education.⁶ Provision of audiovisual material ranked high among library services offered the aging, according to Eleanor Phinney's postcard survey of 1391 public libraries conducted in 1957.⁷ This popularity continued; in the 1971 National Survey of Library Services to the Aging, films were the most frequent content medium for programs for the elderly, whether inside the library or out.⁸

Today's significant film service and film service to the elderly are indebted to Title I of the Library Services and Construction Act, a source of well over 1 million dollars for films in New York State's library systems alone. In 1963, only 10 of New York's library systems owned 200 films or more; 15 years later, in 1978, more than 10 system film libraries have holdings exceeding 1000 titles.⁹

The possibilities of system-level film service to the elderly are indicated by statistics from a rural library system in western New York. The Chautauqua-Cattaraugus Library System covers 2399 square miles and serves 228,971 people. Film service began in 1966 with 25 films; at the end of 1977, the system owned 686 titles. With a staff of one librarian and 1.5 FTE clerks, augmented by Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) and social services personnel, 13,867 films were

Film Service to Elderly

circulated in 1977. In January 1978 alone, 198 films (about 16 percent of a total circulation of 1214) were used by nursing homes and senior citizen organizations, including an adult basic education program for the elderly and local Offices of the Aging. Presently, twenty nursing homes throughout the two counties served use the library's films for weekly programs. The elderly are also served as individuals and as members of service groups and church organizations, and have access to films on concerns of the elderly for viewing by community groups. (The cost per circulation is roughly estimated at \$5.49.)

A new national consciousness of the aging resulted in the Older Americans Act of 1965 and the creation of the Administration on the Aging (AOA). The AOA has supported film and television production, special programs involving visual media in public libraries, and graduate programs to prepare librarians for specialization in service to the elderly. Wayne State University's Division of Library Science, for example, began such a program in 1970 in cooperation with the Michigan Institute of Gerontology.¹⁰ The University of Wisconsin-Madison's more recent post-master's course, "Library Service to Aging," conducted within the interdisciplinary program of the Faye McBeath Institute on Aging and Adult Life and coordinated by Margaret Monroe, is also a recipient of AOA funds.¹¹ Such university programs may be very important in attaining a meaningful integration of film and service to the aging for the entire profession.

Many of the projects supported by the AOA were print-oriented, but ORIFLAMME (1973-75), funded by Title III of the Older Americans Act as administered by the California Office of the Aging, was more media-oriented than most projects and offered discussion groups, guest speakers, slide and film shows in the library and in convalescent homes: "Films were the most popular. The types of films which drew the largest audience were travel and nature films."¹²

Although film service and film service to the aging have "grown like kudzu vines" (to borrow a metaphor from a current best-selling short film¹³), they have received little attention in library literature. This perhaps may be because film service developed during the 1960s and 1970s at the system level and, during that time, was the responsibility of librarians whose primary concerns are visual media and, on a day-to-day basis, service to organizations rather than age groups. This is in contrast to the 1950s, a decade when Muriel Javelin, involved in services to the aging and film, founded Boston's "Never Too Late" club and served as chairperson of ALA's Audio-Visual Round Table.¹⁴

Films are often mentioned in accounts of service as a kind of bait, such as using "magic lanterns" to attract an aging audience which can then be led to the book truck: "The librarian planned a film showing at the first group session. It was hoped that a film might be a drawing card to attract people."¹⁵ Although the attraction of film is acknowledged, its informational and experiential content is ignored. With few exceptions, the films mentioned are travel and nature films, referred to as the most popular. There is no denying the appeal of nature (*Bear Country* is reserved six months in advance); however, this continuing emphasis on nature and travel indicates an absence of a "film ministry," a consequence, perhaps, of the specialization mentioned above and the public library's slowness in responding to the developing concepts of gerontology as documented by Kanner.

Another indication of increased specialization is found in the "1975 Guidelines for Library Services to an Aging Population" which suggests that the library "locate sources of appropriate materials including large print books, talking books, tapes, films and pamphlets" and should identify "areas of programming including programming with all-age appeal."¹⁶ Otherwise, the guidelines emphasize print material, suggesting reading lists, the inclusion in library collections of books meeting the particular recreational, informational and bibliographic needs of the aging, the rotation of institutional collections, plus a variety of interesting activities. Similar stipulations for film materials, activities and collections are not included, and the right of the elderly to access to visual material is not mentioned. Subsequent guidelines might be developed in cooperation with the ALA Audio-Visual Committee. The public library has yet to assume responsibility for providing visual materials as it has for print materials.¹⁷

Programming for the elderly may be divided into: (1) library programming, (2) organizational programming, and (3) institutional programming. Additional insights on library programming may be obtained from the section "What They Are Showing" of *Film News*, which regularly publishes notes on screenings at libraries, universities and museums. In 1970, Boston's "Never Too Late" groups were the busiest users in town, showing films in many locations. For instance, the May program, "Tales of Two Cities," featured *Brendan Behan's Dublin, A City Called Copenhagen, Alaska, Nanook of the North, Portugal, and Crayon*.¹⁸ The Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore planned a series entitled "Tuesday Afternoons at Two" around a theme of "Individual Courage: A Study of Spirit" and showed *George Grosz Interregnum* (Spirit in Germany) and

Film Service to Elderly

The Daybooks of Edward Weston: How Young I Was (Spirit in Art); *Frank Lloyd Wright and Antonio Gaudi* (Spirit in Architecture); *Dag Hammarskjold* and *Martin Luther King* (The Spirit of Peace), etc.¹⁹

The miscellaneous nature of the films and the somewhat forced couplings under the "series" umbrella are less characteristic of film showings in 1977 and 1978. Several libraries showed *The Ascent of Man*. Recent screenings of Boston's "Never Too Late" program have dealt with concerns of the aging, e.g., *How Old is Old?*, *Three Grandmothers*, *The Art of Age*, and *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. Programming now reflects the increasing wealth of film collections, adding plausibility to the film librarian's requests for consultations and funding in the field of continuing education and attracting support from the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities. Programs dealing directly with the problems of the aging are possible now because of the production in the 1970s of many new films on this subject. Semkow's *Booklist* article gives helpful advice for would-be film programmers and is an example of the kind of assistance the film librarian can provide the service specialist.²⁰

There are special filmographies and film catalogs which can be of assistance in planning service to the elderly. The most comprehensive of these is "About Aging: A Catalog of Films," listing over 300 titles with annotations and a categorical index published by the Andrus Gerontology Center at the University of Southern California.²¹ Other lists are *Aging: A Filmography* by Judith Trojan,²² the *KWIC Film Profiles*²³ and *Films on Death and Dying*.²⁴ *The Gerontologist* regularly publishes critical reviews of old and new film releases. When inaugurating this service, audiovisual editor Richard Davis said that only a few years ago the column would not have been possible, because there would have been little material to review.

Penny Northern's work with the staff of the Mid-America Resource and Training Center on the Aging, a federally funded center in Kansas City, provides an example of film used to "improve empathy and understanding among (trainees) . . . as it relates to the anxieties and uncertainties of the elderly." Trainees were asked to view films on aging at the Kansas City Public Library in order to become familiar with film resources; in the process, their sensitivity to the concerns of the aging were heightened. A success the first year, the program was expanded the second year and was given additional structure, "emphasizing specific areas of concern, using discussion leaders for additional impact."²⁵ The expertise in visual media on the aging which the participants gained was put to good use in the film library as well by forming a film evaluation committee

which reviews new releases on the aging for the Educational Film Library Association. With film, as with print, the major emphasis must be on collections rather than programming. If libraries have the material, professionals in other fields can be taught to program.

Bibliotherapy is recognized as a desirable part of library service to groups such as residents of nursing homes. The use of films as therapy needs to be investigated. Films may be useful, for example, in enhancing the process of "life review," in sparking social interaction, in supplying role models, and in coping with bereavement and death. With sufficient information and materials, volunteers trained by library staff could make a real contribution to nursing home residents. Too often, the purely entertaining programs in nursing homes consist of that familiar pair, travel and nature films.

Films are an efficient means of communication. People who will not take the time to read a book on consumer protection, health and safety, retirement lifestyles, grandparenting, or any of dozens of other senior citizen concerns may watch a film as part of their organization's program and join in the discussion afterward. They will have received information and shared with their peers a concern and an experience — sometimes quite an experience, as *The Speaker* viewers attest.

Although film as a library material continues to gain in popularity, tomorrow's aging population will undoubtedly receive much of their information from video and the disc. Already the average elderly person spends many hours a day watching television for information and companionship; the television personalities substitute for friends and family. Henry Loomis, president of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, has stated that "Over Easy," a one-half hour daily series with a magazine format designed for people at or near retirement age, points the direction in which public television is headed. It combines vignettes on the lives of older persons with information on coping with Social Security and Medicare bureaucracies, and deals with other changes in social role and lifestyle associated with retirement. Programs such as "Over Easy" on the education of the elderly respond to recommendations made in the 1971 White House Conference on Aging in the Education Task Forces report.²⁶ A 24-hour daily radio service is planned for the blind and print-handicapped listener, and a method of broadcasting "closed captioning" for deaf viewers who are equipped with a special receiver²⁷ is now in an experimental application stage.

Access to visual material will improve as less expensive formats are marketed. Library schools are beginning to deal with films and video for-

Film Service to Elderly

mats as significant library materials. The University of Wisconsin-Madison's Library Service to Aging uses film and video to "sensitize and inform students about aging" and will include film literature in its new course, "Creative Use of Literature with the Elderly."²⁸

In the meantime, librarianship as a profession can improve film service to the elderly in a variety of ways:

1. Service specialists, those serving the aging and those working with visual media, need to reestablish warm working relationships. Film librarians should be involved in planning service to the aging and adult education.
2. Institutes and special workshops on the use of film with an aging population should be offered by library schools and/or by state associations in connection with annual conferences as part of a continuing education program in visual media.
3. Public library film service to the elderly needs to be funded at realistic levels; access to film should be of concern as is access to print.
4. Guidelines on service to the aging might be reconsidered in cooperation with members of ALA's Audio-Visual Committee, and concepts in film and video service clarified.
5. An appropriate public library response to the programming, materials, and information needs of community organizations and institutions should be the subject of professional discussion.

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JEAN HAYNES

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