

Research Collections in Public Libraries

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MANY LARGE AND MEDIUM-SIZED public libraries in the United States have extensive collections of historical children's books. The development of these collections has been a natural outgrowth of quality service programs for children, as well as a result of notable gifts from private collectors. Because of the way these resources have developed in public libraries, collections are often scattered within one library system, and may be housed in rare book departments, special collection departments, research divisions, and/or central children's departments. Some of these collections also include modern works that may be considered historical by future researchers. Sometimes these collections are promoted through brochures, articles and bibliographies; in other instances, little has been done to make the public aware of their existence.

This article covers collections of historical American children's literature in public libraries and is based on responses to a survey mailed to major U.S. public libraries. The list of libraries contacted was taken from *Subject Collections in Children's Literature*,¹ and letters were sent to the library directors as well as to heads of children's departments and special collections librarians. Since collections of early children's books at the New York Public Library, Boston Public Library and the Free Library of Philadelphia are well known, information on them was obtained from the literature. Survey questions focused on the following topics: (1) history and scope of collections, (2) degree of concentration of pertinent research material within a library system and a library, (3) user access and biblio-

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graphic control, (4) budget and acquisition policy for maintenance of historical collections, (5) preservation of the collections, (6) person(s) responsible for the collections, (7) amount and nature of publicity devoted to the collections, and (8) the perceived role of the public library in providing research material on children's literature.

The Free Library of Philadelphia began to compile its "general collection of children's books and original paintings and drawings illustrating them" when it initiated its services to children in 1903. However, it was not until 1947 that its Rare Book Department acquired the notable collection of A.S.W. Rosenbach, which included books from 1682 through 1836. This gift "definitely committed the institution to the acquisition of rare children's books." Six years later Elisabeth Ball of Muncie, Ind., donated her "collection of over 150 hornbooks." Later, the American Sunday-School Union donated a historical collection of its publications for children to the Rare Book Department. In 1951 the Howard Pyle collection, assembled by one of Pyle's students, Thornton Oakley, was also given to the library and housed in the Rare Book Department. "Although not primarily a children's collection, it does contain a wealth of juvenile classics." Other notable collections of children's material housed in the Rare Book Department are the Arthur Rackham collection, the Beatrix Potter collection and the Kate Greenaway collection. In 1977 the library also acquired the collection of Mrs. Ludwig F. Ries.²

Today the Central Children's Department of the Free Library of Philadelphia houses historical collections which include children's periodicals, series, folklore, framed original illustrations, the Katharine H. McAlarney Collection of Illustrated Children's Books, and a historical bibliography collection to support research. Emphasis is on collecting American children's books in general, and in particular books written, illustrated and published by Pennsylvanians, especially Philadelphians. These collections, dating from 1837 to the present, supplement the collections of early children's books which are housed in the Rare Book Department.

When the Central Children's Room of the New York Public Library opened in 1911, "a long cherished dream of a visible and accessible collection of rare children's books placed in the heart of a children's room began to be realized."³ These books, primarily intended for exhibition, "later served as the basis for the research collection of the Central Children's Room."⁴

In 1932, the research division of the New York Public Library purchased the Walter Schatski collection, consisting of approximately 700

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items: "Most of the material is in German, published in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries."⁵ Originally, the policy of the research division of the New York Public Library was:

to acquire selectively only foreign children's literature, leaving the selection of English and American children's books entirely to the Central Children's Room, along with the general acquisition of books in other languages. This policy has changed considerably. By 1965 the General Research and Humanities Division of the Research Libraries (responsible for book selection in the field of the humanities in Western European languages and in English) was acquiring selectively English and American children's books representative of book production and illustration. Only in German was any systematic selection of children's books as literature being made.⁶

The New York Public Library divisions that acquire children's material of specialized subject and historic interest include: (1) the American History Division which "is particularly interested in children's books about American Indians"; (2) the Local History and Genealogy Division which "is concerned with [books] about New York City and, to a lesser extent, children's books about heraldry"; and (3) the Countee Cullen (Schomberg) Center for Research in Black Culture,⁷ housing the James Weldon Johnson collection "of books for children about the black experience."⁸

At Boston Public Library, "the children's research collection has been growing and evolving by purchase and by gift almost since the Library's beginnings in 1852." In 1940 Alice M. Jordan wrote, "the Library has recently purchased about fifty charming early children's books to add to its already interesting collection."⁹ Today the Jordan collection, which contains early children's books, is attached to the Research Library. "Older, non-rare book materials that have been in the general stacks are being transferred to the Jordan Collection, while rarer children's books will remain in the Rare Book and Manuscript Department."¹⁰

Less is known about some of the other collections of historical children's books belonging to public libraries in the United States. Forty libraries, representing twenty states and the District of Columbia, replied to the writer's survey questionnaire. Ten of these libraries were in California, and replies were received from libraries in the ten largest U.S. cities.

Responses to the question "What is the history of your collection?" indicated that some began as parent-teacher collections. For instance, the

Louisville Free Public Library's collection began years ago in the Children's Department: "as part of what was known as a teachers' and parents' collection. It was housed in the so-called parents' room." Often collections have been created from and supplemented with books found in attics and basements of homes. The response from the Minneapolis Public Library and Information Center indicated that this was the case for their collection of old children's books; some of these books "were valuable and/or useful, while others were unimportant or duplications of what we had already." Librarians also consider adding last copies of worn and out-of-print circulating books to historical or special collections. Often, the coordinator of children's services examines these books, keeping early editions, award-winning books and books representative of trends in the history of children's literature or illustration.

The scope of these collections varies considerably in terms of publication date, subject type and format. Series, foreign-language books, folklore, children's periodicals, Sunday School publications, hornbooks, toy books and chapbooks are some examples of types of materials collected. Collections are sometimes centered around the works of an individual author.

Some collections of historical children's books have no defined scope, since they have not been carefully examined or cataloged. In 1954 the Quigley collection was established at the Grand Rapids Public Library. The librarian recently commented, "Unfortunately, the whole collection has not yet been cataloged, so it's next to impossible to define its scope." Other collections of early children's books located in large research-oriented public libraries, such as the New York Public Library, Boston Public Library and the Free Library of Philadelphia, are clearly defined.

Materials in these collections of historic children's books are often located in more than one place within a library system or library. Librarians were asked for their opinions on whether this scattering was satisfactory, or the collections should be centralized. From the Seattle Public Library came the comment: "A truly valuable research collection needs supervision and proper housing. If items are scattered, it is impossible to provide for either need." Librarians at the Detroit Public Library felt that "a division of source material always makes reference study more difficult." The response from the San Francisco Public Library stated that access to the historical collections of children's literature would be facilitated: "for both staff and patrons if the collections were in one physical location. In this library, part of the material is in the Main Children's Room and part in the Special Collections Department."

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Realistically, however, it is not always feasible to gather an entire collection in one place. As stated by the librarian at the District of Columbia Public Library, this decision should depend on "local needs and requirements." The Dallas Public Library respondent felt that branch libraries in a large system need a certain amount of "basic reference material" for the study of children's literature; "the main research collection, however, should probably be housed in one building for convenience and for the prevention of unnecessary duplication of materials." At the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library: "current titles concerning the history of children's literature are available in community and regional libraries. Older material for more in-depth research can be found at the Central Library." The Cleveland Public Library's: "Treasure Room Collection of Historic Children's Books is now a part of the library's rare book collection. The Children's Literature Department has access to it." The response from the New York Public Library clearly expresses the situation these librarians are faced with: "Ideally all materials relating to children's literature should be housed under one roof. However, limitations of space, establishment of special collections . . . and the separation of the collections of the Branch Libraries from those of the Research Libraries in the New York Public Library have resulted in the dispersion of historical children's books in many different divisions."

Organization of these collections ranges from fully cataloged to uncataloged. Some are only partially cataloged, indexed or inventoried. At the St. Louis Public Library, for example, "the collection has been cataloged and information concerning the titles is available through OCLC." Staff of the Multnomah County Library (Portland, Ore.) report they are in the process of making a descriptive card for each book in the historic collection which would give a "complete physical description of the book, information about the author, the artist and/or the place of the book in children's literature (or reference to this information)." Of the estimated 12,000 volumes in the Illustrators Collection at the District of Columbia Public Library, 3000 titles have been fully cataloged to date. Others are indexed on three-by-five-inch cards. The Rachel Field collection of old children's books, which also belongs to the District of Columbia Public Library, "has a descriptive catalog done by a former staff member as a thesis for [an] MSLS at Catholic University." Newark Public Library, Tuxedo Park (N.Y.) Library, and the New Orleans Public Library reported that their special collections were not cataloged.

Retrieval of material from these historical collections is facilitated when the collection has been cataloged or indexed. Printed catalogs in

book form are especially helpful, since the user thus need not necessarily be on the premises to learn about the contents of a particular collection. Twenty-seven public libraries have reference and bibliographic tools to support their special collections. The Free Library of Philadelphia has a catalog of the Rosenbach collection, *Early American Children's Books* by A.S.W. Rosenbach, and a *Checklist of Children's Books, 1837-1876* compiled by Barbara Maxwell and Katherine Ashley, Special Collections, Central Children's Department. The Fort Worth Public Library has *Little Truths Better Than Great Fables* compiled by J. W. Roginski, which is about the collection of old and rare books for children in that library.

There are as many different means of funding and planning for these collections as there are public libraries. Funding for acquisitions ranges from nonexistent budgets to federal funding, and planning includes gifts and the transfer of books from the circulating collection. Responses received from librarians offer a representative sample of budgets and acquisition plans.

The District of Columbia Public Library receives a portion of its annual book fund from the Children's Services Office. The Minneapolis Public Library and Information Center obtains "the most wanted items as they are available, usually out of special funds; however, there is no set amount of budget allowed." The St. Paul Public Library receives "special funds for foreign language books quite regularly"; when it wants to acquire a fine edition, the purchase comes from the regular budget. The Tuxedo Park Library has an annual budget, but no policy plan, since the collection is extremely small and "not likely to be enlarged." At the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County: "The Goldsmith books are bought with the Goldsmith memorial fund. There is no set budget for the purchase of rare or historical books." The Cleveland Public Library has: "no annual budget or acquisition policy plan. It has no nucleus of a collector's gift, but is the result of fifty-odd years of gifts, a few purchases and transfers from the main juvenile collection. Under these circumstances, it is surprising to find numbers of good and valuable books of the period represented." The amount allocated for materials for the historical collection at the Dallas Public Library varies from year to year. Fort Worth Public Library receives "income from a trust fund." Both the Seattle and Los Angeles public libraries rely on gifts, and occasionally purchase items using funds from the regular book budget. There is no special budget at the Hartford Public Library; however: "some fine or limited editions are purchased out of the materials budgets. Gifts are welcomed and the local

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colleges' used book sales are watched." At Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library "acquisitions for the Illustrated Editions Collection are purchased from the annual Books and Materials Budget." San Francisco Public Library has no budget allocation for special collections in children's literature, but its "Replacement Committee regularly reevaluates the children's collection and designates titles to be withdrawn from the circulating collections and added to the historical collection."

The annual budget for special collections at the New York Public Library is: "not separate from general collections, except for endowed collections. The Central Children's Room is allocated one materials budget from which are purchased the books, records, cassettes, posters and other nonprint materials for both the circulating and noncirculating collections. Some special items are bought from a limited memorial fund. For more than ten years, no books or other items have been purchased for the Old Book Collection, but many items have been received for the collection through gifts." At the Free Library of Philadelphia, books no longer in print are purchased with money from special funds and the collection has also been augmented through gifts. The Rare Book Department there assigns "a large portion of the budget" to collecting children's books. The Riverside City and County (Calif.) Public Library has: "no annual budget allocation. A very small fund has been established and is drawn from for new purchases."

Preservation of these collections is also provided for in various ways. Books are never withdrawn from the Research Libraries of the New York Public Library. "If physically worn out, [a] book may be microfilmed, if condition, funding and use warrant." At the St. Louis Public Library, "volumes which are judged to be of permanent value to [the] collection" are rebound. The Free Library of Philadelphia covers some books which are in poor condition with acid-free paper cut to fit the particular book. Some books, manuscripts and illustrations are protected by specially constructed boxes.

Persons responsible for historical or special collections of children's books in public libraries may have a background in either rare book librarianship or children's literature. When this survey was made, only one library, the St. Louis Public Library, had a "full-time librarian designated as a children's literature specialist with [a] full-time clerical assistant." The Free Library of Philadelphia has a half-time special collections position in the Central Children's Department. The staff hopes eventually to have a full-time head of special collections. Libraries housing historical collections of children's books in the rare book department have full-time curators.

At the District of Columbia Public Library, the coordinator of children's services acts as curator. The head of the Michigan History/Genealogy Rooms at the Grand Rapids Public Library is also responsible for the Quigley collection of children's literature. The Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County reports: "there are full-time curators in the Rare Book Department. The Goldsmith collection and the historical collection are in the care of the staff of the Main Children's Room." Curators of the Rare Book Department at the Free Library of Philadelphia devote a "good share of time" to the historical collections of children's books. At Dallas Public Library, the children's literature specialist: "selects materials for this collection, supervises its physical maintenance, and assists patrons in locating and using the materials. There is no curator as such." The Seattle Public Library has "no curator position, but a member of the staff is qualified in the field of rare children's books." The Los Angeles Public Library presently has no curator, but "a committee has been formed to assess the historical collection and establish guidelines for its future growth and maintenance." At the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, "the head of [the] Riley Room at the Central Library is responsible for the maintenance of all special collections." Six special collections at the New York Public Library each have full-time curators; in the Central Children's Room "the supervising librarian acts as curator of the room's Old Book Collection." In the San Francisco Public Library there is no curator in children's services: "in the Special Collections Department there is one librarian and one library technician." The staff of the Children's Room at the Riverside City and County Public Library maintains: "the order of the collection. The coordinator of children's services is responsible for additions and withdrawals." Berkeley Public Library "patrons are assisted by the Young People's Room staff."

Ten responding libraries have published brochures or articles in periodicals describing their special collections. Angeline Moscott of the New York Public Library published an article in the fall 1976 issue of *Phaedrus* entitled "An Historical Account of the New York Public Library Central Children's Room Research Collections." Sarita M. Worthing, Riverside City and County Public Library, wrote "Preserving the Old: Historical Collections of Children's Books in California Libraries," published in *California Librarian*, July 1975.

Greater promotion of historical children's collections is needed, however. Books and nonbook materials, such as original illustrations, should be displayed; talks should be given; and additional brochures describing col-

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lections, bibliographies and other publications should be prepared. Collections may also be promoted on a one-to-one basis, since users are usually enthusiastic about such materials. Reasons for use may vary from a search for books remembered from childhood to advanced research in literature, art education, psychology and sociology. Book collectors, booksellers, authors, artists, librarians and parents also use such collections, as do news-writers, television personnel and advertising people.

Most of the respondents felt it was their responsibility to provide access to historical children's books and to promote their availability. The librarian at Cleveland Public Library stated that "availability of material often engenders response." Most librarians emphasized the necessity of budget, space and user considerations. The majority believed that public libraries are particularly obligated to provide collections of historical children's books that research libraries do not provide or do not provide well. A New York Public Library representative pointed out that many readers, "including researchers for publishers, have no access to academic, research libraries or school media centers and need the materials and services provided." A librarian at the Kern County (Calif.) Library System noted that the current and historical children's materials in that particular library system "surpass those at either our junior college or our state college." Some respondents indicated that it was important to collect historical children's books of significance to a public library's community, particularly if space and funding were limited. The San Francisco Public Library staff suggested the desirability of public libraries cooperating with local colleges and universities in organizing a network of resources of historical children's books.

In conclusion, public libraries which have historical collections of children's books have made a commitment to research collections of children's literature. In most instances, collections in large city public libraries have been in existence many years and are well organized. However, among public libraries there is still great variety in the degree of organization and accessibility of collections.

The public library's role in providing and maintaining historical collections should be reevaluated periodically in the same way that any existing policy or program should be reevaluated. In general, financial and staff support given to these historical or special collections in public libraries has a low priority at the present time.

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