Special Collections in the Public Library

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Speaking at the official opening of the Chicago Public Library on 1 January 1873, Major Joseph Medill stated:

The influence and power of a city, state or nation, is not measured by its numbers, but by its enlightenment, by its thinkers.... An educated people are always a free people.... Now, I hold that no single agency will contribute more to this most important desideratum than a great public library, amply supported and comprehensively conducted—a library where books will find their way into every household, and their contents into every mind....

From the beginning, the mandate of the Chicago Public Library was clear—to serve the people of Chicago. The first board of directors saw the library as an educational institution that would assist the "common man" in his search for self-improvement. An early board report stated that the library would be a place where working men of the city might employ their idle time profitably in reading instead of wasting it "in haunts of vice and folly and places of ill reputation." In 1896 the directors of Chicago's three libraries—the Newberry, John Crerar, and Chicago Public—agreed to collect only in certain subject areas so as neither to compete for acquisitions nor to duplicate each other's holdings. As a result, the Newberry collected in the humanities, the John Crerar in the sciences, and the Chicago Public in "wholesomely entertaining and generally instructive books specially such as are desired by the citizens for home use. . . .

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This nineteenth-century view of the public library as an educational institution devoted to the improvement of its users is a vision which exists even today. With this as a stated purpose of a public library, one might wonder what the role of a special collections department is as well as what it might become. When Ellen Shaffer examined this subject in the April 1957 issue of *Library Trends*, she commented that rare book departments "are themselves a little rare....Certainly they are not common enough to be taken for granted....their curators are occasionally called upon to explain and justify the existence of such departments."^4

To look at the situation today, a survey was prepared (see appendix A) and sent to forty-three public libraries, twenty-four of which responded. Only fifteen of the respondents had special collections departments with full-time staff, permanent budgets, and a separate facility.\(^5\) The remaining nine libraries had no permanent staff. One of the responding special collections departments is staffed solely by volunteers from the Library Friends group. The following remarks are based on the fifteen.

The survey was designed to determine the types of special collections held in public libraries as well as the level of support that exists for them. Other questions dealt with the history of the departments, the audiences they serve, and how the departments perceived their institutional roles. Finally, one of the goals of the survey was to find out whether there are certain characteristics common to special collections departments in public library systems.

The Special Collections Department at the Chicago Public Library was founded in 1973 in response to a growing concern that among the books held in the central library and branches were items that required special treatment or storage because of their physical condition or bibliographic significance. By the beginning of the 1970s, the large collections in the system included not only thousands of rare books but also an unknown number of manuscripts, archival collections, and historical artifacts. The first staff members of the Special Collections Department were assigned the task of searching through the stack and storage areas of the system. The material that was "recovered" became the core of the Special Collections Department.

The department was formally dedicated in 1977 in specially designed facilities of the newly renovated Cultural Center. The design of the department was state-of-the-art, with temperature and humidity controls, a Halon gas fire-control system, and a sophisticated security system.

As with the creation of the Special Collections Department at the Chicago Public Library, the stimulus for the creation of the special
collections departments in almost all of the surveyed libraries was the awareness that among the holdings of the libraries were significant materials that demanded special care. There was a wide range of dates of inception for these departments. The Boston Public Library's Rare Book Department was founded in the "very early half of the 19th century" while the Special Collections Department of the Anchorage Public Library was dedicated in 1986. The Cincinnati Public Library Special Collections Department, founded in 1955, reported that their department's creation was a "gathering together of collections dispersed throughout the various departments of the library"; Philadelphia's department was founded in 1949 though rare books had been purchased since 1899.

The Chicago Public Library is a large system which includes the Central Library, the Cultural Center, two regional, and seventy-six branch libraries. It is the major library resource of the Chicago metropolitan area with a service population of 3,005,072. There are many other libraries and museums in the Chicago area which serve portions of this audience. However, most of them have admission fees or else require membership. Since the Chicago Public Library offers free access—as do most public libraries—the Special Collections Department serves a broad and varied clientele including many who are more unsure of their skill or knowledge and hence are readily intimidated by formidable institutions. Many come to the Special Collections Department to discover what we have or do, regardless of the level of their interest. The remarkable diversity of audience is the essential difference between the special collections department in a public library and that within an academic or private institution. Unlike those institutions, the public library's special collections department has a built-in audience which is composed of the entire population of a community; the only characteristic that the users share is geographic. The libraries queried characterized their audiences as "standard public library clientele," a "varied audience, all types who use a public library," and encompassing "5th grade on to senior citizens." Reflecting on the usage by the public, several of the libraries mentioned that they are used quite often for information about appraisal and conservation. This is certainly true of the Chicago Public Library where we have a handout listing professional appraisers and conservators in the area. Hence, public library special collections departments may act as referral centers informing patrons of resources that are locally available.

The Chicago Public Library is particularly concerned with the history of the city of which it is such a vital part; therefore, many of its collections relate to local history, drama, and literature. For example,
the Chicago Authors and Imprints Collection is a major holding with volumes of early and private editions by major Chicago authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Another large subject collection comprises materials from the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. Still other collections relate to Chicago drama and Chicago neighborhoods.

Many public libraries have some collections that relate directly to their communities; the Cleveland Public Library has a Cleveland Authors and Imprints Collection; the Atlanta Public Library has the Georgia History and Literature Collection and the Margaret Mitchell Collection; the Cincinnati Public Library has the Cincinnati, Inland Rivers, and Ohio Valley Collections. The Anchorage Public Library has the Alaska Collection, the stated purpose of which “is to gather, preserve and make available to the public materials of cultural and historical significance to Alaska and neighboring Pacific Northwest and circumpolar regions.”

Most of the public libraries surveyed hold significant subject collections which have no direct tie to the city, but rather reflect particular donations to the library such as the Grabhorn Collection on Printing History at the San Francisco Public Library, or the Louis E. Kahn English Language Dictionary Collection at the Cincinnati Public Library.

Several of the libraries hold outstanding items in their special collections departments merely because of the long history of the library since some books become valuable over time, or because of the initiative of a particular curator. The Boston Public Library reported significant holdings in Americana, especially abolitionism, slavery, the American Revolution, and the Civil War. One would expect such collections to be strong both because of Boston’s age and because of its geographical location. Yet an equally strong Civil War collection is held by the Chicago Public Library. The Civil War and American History Research Collection, the core of which is the Grand Army of the Republic Collection, was acquired by the library in 1948. Formed mainly by donations from Civil War veterans and their families, it is the largest special collection at Chicago Public accounting for over half of the reference usage.

There are two subject collections at Chicago Public which stand out as examples of what a special collections department in a large public library is uniquely capable of developing. For that reason, these will be described more fully.

At the turn of the century, small historical societies flourished in Chicago. Meeting on a regular basis, these societies gathered materials
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that documented the history of their particular neighborhoods. They collected a wide range of items—pamphlets, broadsides, newspapers, photographs, scrapbooks, and so on—that were later deposited with the local branch libraries. Eventually these historical societies closed and interest in and use of the materials diminished. In 1981, with the support of the Dr. Scholl Foundation, the Special Collections Department began a project to recover Chicago’s neighborhood history. A full-time archivist was hired to survey, organize, and transfer to Special Collections the individual neighborhood history collections. The resulting Neighborhood History Research Collection comprises forty-one individual collections. Public interest in this collection has been great, and the number of donations and reference queries has increased as knowledge of the collection spreads. Publicizing the existence of this collection to encourage donations has been an important part of this project. The archivist working on the project has become involved in community activities relating to local history such as genealogical society meetings and the annual history fair for high school students.

Exhibitions and programs have also been spurred on by the collection. In 1985 the department created a traveling exhibition that was mounted in fifteen of the branch libraries. In August 1986 the department presented a major exhibition on the collection entitled “Cities Within a City: The Idea of Neighborhoods in Chicago.” The exhibition included over 200 items from the collection and was accompanied by an extensive catalog. The department also sponsored a symposium on the subject of Chicago and her neighborhoods. Both the exhibitions and the programs have been well attended.

The Neighborhood History Research Collection is rapidly becoming one of the most heavily used collections, especially by the youngest and most inexperienced patrons who are receiving their first instruction in primary research. The public has enthusiastically supported the development of the collection. This seems fitting since Chicago is probably best known as a city of neighborhoods.

Another collection with great growth potential is the Chicago Theatre History Collection. Chicago is the home of a flourishing theatrical community. Over one hundred theaters and repertory companies are actively working in the Chicago area. In recent years the focus of the national theatrical world has been on Chicago playwrights, actors, actresses, and productions. Theater has always been part of the Chicago scene. In 1837, the year in which the city was incorporated, it had its first theatrical performance. The Special Collections Department holds a large collection tracing the history of Chicago theater. It includes material from theater in the earliest days to contemporary times, the corner-
stone of which is the Goodman Theatre Archives. In 1985 the
department produced a major exhibition with an accompanying
catalog entitled, "At the Goodman Theatre." This exhibition and a
one-year cataloging project which preceded it were funded by the Good-
man Theatre. In 1986 the department received funding to support a
twelve-month project to preserve and inventory part of the collection.

The Neighborhood History Research and Chicago Theatre History
Collections are representative of what a large metropolitan public
library is capable of developing. Both of these collections are of particu-
lar interest to the public library community. They involve a high level
of participation from the community in terms of donations and usage.
And these collections exemplify the kinds of materials that a public
library can acquire with a small acquisitions budget, for the key items
are ephemeral—the kinds of things that people have buried in their
closets and do not know what to do with but do not want to throw
out—so people are willing to donate them to public libraries. Collect-
tively such ephemeral items become an invaluable resource. Moreover,
both collections are actively supported by private organizations.

An important feature of all the special collections departments
surveyed was the emphasis on outreach programs. The Detroit Public
Library holds two appraisal sessions each year with antiquarian book
dealers acting as consultants. The Atlanta Public Library offers work-
shops on such topics as "Georgia History: A Community Approach." And
the San Francisco Public Library regularly presents lectures on the
book arts in cooperation with the Pacific Center for the Book Arts and
the Friends of Calligraphy. All of the libraries also indicated that they
mount exhibits.

The Chicago Public has a strong exhibition program with four
shows each year. Over 200 items appear in each show. Exhibitions have
included: "Urban Voices: Chicago as a Literary Place," "Setting the
Stage: Chicago Theatre Before the Fire," "The Little Giant: The Story
of Stephen A. Douglas," and "Collectors and Connoisseurs: The Cax-
ton Club of Chicago." In addition, the library emphasizes program-
ing directly related to the theme of the exhibitions. "Collectors and
Connoisseurs ..." was accompanied by a lecture series by members of
the Caxton Club on subjects concerning books about which they are
experts—conservation, selling, collecting, and design. Exhibitions are
well-attended with an average of 350 visitors each day.

Reviewing the surveys, the general commitment to special collec-
tions on the part of the central administration was generally good. All
the responding libraries suffer from staffing shortages though many felt
that this was not a problem unique to special collections departments.
The average staff had at least one full-time professional and one halftime clerical position. Each responding department reported having an acquisitions budget supplemented by endowments and funds from friends' groups. The reported budget range was from $5,000 to $150,000. The quality of facilities reported also varies widely. However, only eight libraries indicated that they have temperature and humidity controls and only three reported having Halon gas fire systems. Directors of special collections are usually two levels below the director of the entire library system.

Every department in the survey seemed to have a clear idea of its role in its institution. One response seemed to sum up the general sentiment: that the special collections department was an essential part of a major research library. However another response touched on what to me is the most important issue: "This rare book department represents the research facilities and collections of the Library; its purposes and functions are necessarily different from the overall purpose of the public library in this respect." This observation brings up the essential issue of whether or not the mission of a special collections department is necessarily divergent from, and potentially contradictory to, the general mission of the public library. A private or academic library rarely questions its ultimate purpose or its audience whereas the public library is many things to many people. Public libraries are constantly reassessing their primary audience and purpose. They must try to meet the day-to-day needs of the community. This may be done by providing a good collection of recent fiction or self-help books as well as services such as voter registration, literacy programs, and so on. Does a special collections department also address community needs and should it? Each library must determine this itself.

Each public library must decide where to put its limited resources. It is in this choice that a public library begins to define itself. Is a public library a research institution? Within one large institution there can be contradictory answers to this question; the librarian who works at the central location answers yes while the branch librarian says no.

No other unit better represents the research function of a public library than its special collections department. Yet many such departments must justify their existence. One comment from the survey was: "In my institution, although we attract scholars from all over the world, I see my department as a showcase, cited when we have to impress people, bring in visitors, or appeal for money," while another response was that: "On the one hand it is viewed as the institution's strongest asset, on the other hand, service for the collection is severely limited by staffing problems."
As was the case in 1957, separate special collections departments with full-time staffs are still a rarity in public libraries. Their presence in the rare book world is small with only nine of the over 260 librarians attending the 1986 Rare Book and Manuscript Pre-Conference in New York City representing public libraries. In Rare Books, 1983-84, only seventeen public libraries are listed as having special collections departments. My survey, sent to forty-three libraries, represents only large metropolitan public libraries.

The Chicago Public Library Special Collections Department assiduously maintains a high profile with the institution and the community. We try to acquire collections which will have a great deal of community and hence administrative support. Our outreach programs also garner community support and show the administration the important role these programs play in educating and providing services to the community. We actively seek outside support to fund special projects; such support allows us to provide programs which the library itself cannot fund.

In their first annual report, the Board of Directors of the Chicago Public Library wrote in true Victorian fashion: “The treasures of all knowledge contained in books will be dispensed in free and equal abundance to all, the same as the sun dispenses its light and the infinite magnificence of heaven is within reach of all eyes, and every human intelligence is blessed under that of God’s.” A special collections department can introduce to the public the world of knowledge and continue to fulfill its primary mission if not under the guidance of the heavens, at least under the direction of an innovative curator.
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Appendix A
Survey of Special Collections Departments

1. What year was the Special Collections Division founded? And under what circumstances?

2. What is the relative size of your collection?

3. Please give a short description of your collection and collecting interests.

4. What is the size of the staff of Special Collections? Give the number of professional and nonprofessional positions and job titles.

5. What is the amount of your overall budget, including personnel? What is the amount of your acquisitions budget?

6. Briefly describe your facilities. Does it include temperature and humidity controls, security controls, etc.?

7. Describe your position in the overall library's administrative chart.

8. What is your average usage? Describe the audience you serve.

9. Do you have an active exhibition program or other public outreach program?

10. How would you characterize the role of the Special Collections Division in your institution?

11. Please give any other remarks you feel would be helpful.

Name of person completing survey: ________________________________

Position: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________
References

1. Hoyne, Thomas. *Historical Sketch of the Origin and Foundation of The Chicago Public Library, Compiled from the Original Documents and Correspondence and Contemporary Publications as the Same have been Preserved in the Hands of the Compiler, Thomas Hoyne*. Chicago: Beach, Barnard and Co., 1877, pp. 28-29.


5. The libraries which responded to the survey that met the criteria to be used in this article were:

Anchorage Public Library
Atlanta Public Library
Boston Public Library
Buffalo-Erie Public Library
Cincinnati Public Library
Cleveland Public Library
Dallas Public Library
Detroit Public Library
El Paso Public Library
Houston Public Library
Minneapolis Public Library
New Bedford Public Library
Philadelphia Public Library
Providence Public Library
San Francisco Public Library

The New York Public Library—which is funded largely through private sources—was excluded. The criteria for the survey were for the libraries to have a separate special collections department, a full-time staff, an annual budget, and a defined space within the library. I sent surveys to each public library listed in the *Rare Books, 1983-84*. I then sent surveys to libraries listed in the *ALA Yearbook, 1986*. I selected large metropolitan areas primarily and attempted to send a survey to at least one city in each state.
