

## Reference Services in University And Special Libraries Since 1900

**B**ETWEEN 1900 AND 1950 the number of graduate students enrolled in American universities increased forty times, and the number of persons earning the Ph.D. degree increased twenty times. By 1950 every major university expected most of its regular staff to possess the Ph.D. degree, and in high schools in larger cities teachers with graduate training were a commonplace.

Also at work were other factors which would influence reference service in university libraries. The number of subjects in which graduate degrees were granted grew larger, and within existing subject fields scholars became more and more specialized. With wider and deeper research, and an increasing number of scholars, came the demand for greater research libraries, which in turn led to larger and still larger concentrations of books.

Even as early as 1900 anybody could see that university research had come to stay, in fact by that year research had become a near monopoly of university scholars. Yet at first, university reference libraries were mostly concerned with service to undergraduates. Indeed, in a revealing article written in 1915, W. W. Bishop argued that librarians could not be experts in enough subjects to be of much help to scholars and graduate students, and as a practical matter he recommended concentration upon skill in library methods.

Normally, universities move slowly. For

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one thing, there is never enough money to do all things well. Where there is a scarcity of money, some services languish unless there is a determined and widespread demand for them. Few university library administrators in the first two decades of the twentieth century were subjected to the demand for extensive personal services to scholars. Getting money to purchase books, to catalog them, and to circulate them were challenges aplenty for university librarians. As for reference service, most administrators were willing to agree by 1920 that undergraduates needed help, especially help of a kind that would teach students to help themselves.

Few librarians could deny that graduate students in general were in need of instruction in library methods. Some librarians claimed that graduate students would learn from their teachers. Other librarians hoped (without looking into the matter seriously) that graduate students would be served well enough in general reference departments by librarians lacking special subject background. Yet by 1930, despite Mr. Bishop's influence, the desirability of subject specialization was definitely in the air. What was responsible for the change?

For one thing, in special libraries, which after the first world war grew rapidly in number, university librarians could see the example of experts served by librarians with good subject background. On the university campus itself departmental and professional libraries also offered a few examples of the efficacy of specialization. Beyond these examples, pride of professional service was a factor.

If the reference librarian knew enough only to serve the most ignorant, could the profession grow in stature? While it was true that many librarians could not meet the new challenge, there was no need to accept this situation as everlasting. Given the proper circumstances, persons with more advanced subject training would enter the profession. Among these circumstances was an economic depression which would drive would-be-teachers from the graduate schools into a profession which was receptive to subject specialists.

A good example of the growing attitude towards subject specialization could be found in Wyer's text book on reference work. Wyer wrote as follows:

It is true that admirable and ingenious professional techniques meticulously applied, have produced most effective library mechanics which are sometimes too much relied upon as full substitutes for an educated personal service. In plain truth, 90 per cent of what goes by the name of reference work . . . is elementary, of the ready made information bureau type; a good deal of it is trivial. . . . It is geared too low.<sup>2</sup>

What Wyer hoped for was the development of a scholar-librarian combination, a librarian who could give instruction to research students in the bibliography of their subjects and in the use of libraries, and who could engage fruitfully in book selection.

The scholar-librarian, according to Wyer, "because of his library training and experience will be a broader man than any that he serves. He will be able to suggest untouched sources, an unexplored path, a promising field, and library materials, tools, and aids which will save time or make sure that the search is a thorough one."

Still another example of the thinking of the thirties was the support given by the Carnegie Corporation to an experi-

ment which resulted in the appointment of research librarians at Cornell and at the University of Pennsylvania. The research librarian experiment did not stress subject specialization beyond the point already familiar to university librarians. At Cornell, for example, the research librarian was expected to help scholars in all the social sciences as well as in history. What the experiment did stress was a newly intensified service to university faculty, that is, the research librarian was to give the same kind of personal service already being supplied in special libraries and heretofore provided in universities only by research assistants. The extent of this personal service can be measured by these statistics: at Cornell in the first fifteen months only nine projects were completed by the research librarian. Perhaps this fact alone was enough to discourage librarians from developing this type of service.

In criticizing the Carnegie supported experiment, Herman Henkle deplored the transformation of librarian into merely another research assistant. What Henkle proposed instead was a library department to plan long range book selection, bring together bibliographies, and to conduct a continuous survey of the research needs of the faculty. Bibliographical assistants rather than research assistants were what Henkle had in mind.

In a survey of reference work written in 1941, Louis Shores wrote that the most significant trend "is in the direction of subject specialization." Shores found an increasing tendency to organize reference service by research fields. By that date, university librarians were already familiar with the divisional type of reference service at Colorado, a type which came to dominate library organization. But divisional service, while it implies broad subject knowledge, did not result in the extensive kind of research assistance given in the Carnegie supported experiment. This led one observer to be-

<sup>2</sup> James I. Wyer, *Reference Work* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1930), p. 131.

rate the feeble efforts of university reference librarians. Most administrators of university libraries would have disagreed. They would have preferred, with Henkle, to preserve the difference between research assistants and reference librarians.

Actually, university scholars today receive far more assistance than was possible in 1900. As the result of better academic preparation, reference librarians know more about research collections (as distinguished simply from reference collections) and they engage in book selection to a much greater degree than formerly.

At a conference on reference work held at the University of Chicago in 1943, John Spargo, a professor of English, said: "Falstaff, you will remember, said of himself that he was not only a source of laughter but the cause of laughter in others. In similar vein, I would have library folk be first of all scholars themselves before they try to beget scholarship in others."

Mr. Spargo overlooked the sad fact that when librarians are first of all scholars they lose interest in personal service to readers, if certain scholars who hold library positions can be taken as fair examples. What we need are persons who are first of all librarians, and this, in our tradition, means above everything else a desire to do what is best for the reader. This requires that the librarian who seeks to serve graduate students and scholars must have knowledge of more than reference books. He must know his entire collection and have a reasonable acquaintance with important collections elsewhere. If the librarian has the ability to do scholarly work, the process of engaging in it will make him a better librarian, just as scholarly work makes the researcher a better teacher. In the world of scholarship there is no substitute for scholarly endeavor, but in the world of

librarianship scholarship must not become an end in itself.

When the historian of reference work turns from universities to special libraries he finds himself in a world in which money is more plentiful, where applied research is predominant, and where the heavy hand of tradition is much less restrictive.

The historian must differentiate between professional and departmental libraries in universities, and those commonly referred to as special libraries. The former in the years 1900-1950 gave reference service comparable to reference service in general university libraries. In some instances, better reference service was given in professional and departmental libraries than could be obtained in general university libraries. But the kind of service given was quite different from the reference service given in libraries connected, for example, with industrial organizations.

First of all, the historian needs to explain the development of these special libraries. These were largely a twentieth-century phenomenon. Libraries in commerce and industry date almost entirely from the period after 1900, and the same can be said of legislative and municipal libraries.

The development and spread of legislative and municipal libraries is well known, and there seems to be little reason to doubt that their growth is explained by the spirit of social reform and the desire for expert guidance in government.

Typical of this spirit was the man who popularized legislative libraries, namely, Charles McCarthy of Wisconsin. In his book of 1912 on the Wisconsin idea, McCarthy wrote: "Laws can be so constructed as to lead to progress and at the same time preserve to the fullest all human betterment." He believed that the advice of scholars should be sought to the end

that business and human welfare might increase side by side.

Charles McCarthy regarded himself as a man with both feet on the ground. He praised Wisconsin for its tradition of orderliness and use of scientific knowledge in the hands of experts. He wanted progress, but he wanted it to be thorough and not to come in a hurry.

Even more spectacular than the legislative reference and municipal libraries were the libraries serving commercial and industrial firms; between 1920 and 1940 the number of industrial research laboratories increased about eight times, bringing with them one new library after another. One writer has estimated that in 1940 the number of *full-time* research workers in industrial research laboratories was at least four times the number of research workers in universities, few of whom were engaged in full-time research.

The growth of industrial research laboratories and of government supported research projects was accompanied by a modification of the methodology of research. This brought in turn a transference from universities to commercial, governmental, and endowed agencies of the major responsibility for the conduct of research. In these agencies research was commonly characterized as follows: It was applied rather than theoretical; and it was performed by teams rather than by persons working on their own. Those who have read *The Organization Man* by William H. Whyte will fully appreciate this characterization, which is probably exaggerated and to which there are no doubt many exceptions.

Applied research, we all realize, is research applied to the business of making profits. When profit is the motive, the

scholar presumably is not permitted to search the literature, to abstract it, or to document it. This becomes the responsibility of another member of the team, namely, the librarian.

Those who approach generalizations warily will suspend judgment of this description of the researcher in industrial and governmental establishments. Are all of them team workers? Are all of them willing to forego the search of their literature? Are all of them served by librarians who are capable of this type of service?

Similarly, the historian must also look with suspicion upon the actual extent of subject specialization among university reference workers. If graduate training in an academic subject is taken as the measure of specialization, a considerable number of persons in the library profession did receive such training. But only a few of these were employed in formal reference positions. Statistics are not available, but a brief inspection of *Who's Who in Library Service* leads to the impression that more subject specialists are in technical services than in reference departments.

Furthermore, even among those in reference, few were limited to service in the subject of their graduate training. For example, a person with a graduate degree in political science normally gives reference assistance in all of the social studies. True, the person with graduate training in political science is as a result a better reference worker in the other social sciences, but if subject specialization is a virtue, is greater subject specialization a greater virtue? So far, university librarians have not accepted this greater degree of specialization as a goal.