

A HISTORY OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S WORK
AT LAKEWOOD PUBLIC LIBRARY

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Library Science 502
June, 1957

Lakewood, Ohio, a western suburb of Cleveland, is a city with a particularly attractive, recently-remodeled public library building. And, we can tell - merely by watching the parade of mothers, bicycles, and baby carriages going into the library - that it is not only an attractive and inviting building, but is also a very busy and bustling place. If we want to see an especially busy time, let's go to the library early some summer evening. It is about 7:30, and for some fifteen or twenty minutes, many teenagers have been going in the front door, turning right, going down a flight of stairs, and assembling in a conference room in the basement. It is Summer Forum time. We shall pretend that this is 1956. For in that year, over sixty young people participated in these discussions on foreign affairs - the largest attendance was fifty-seven and the smallest was thirty-six. Six meetings were held, and in each session a different phase of the topic, "The Middle-East - Hot Bed for a Cold War?," was heatedly discussed. After each reluctantly-terminated meeting, many of the young people talked informally for fifteen or twenty more minutes on the front steps of the library and finally adjourned to "a hamburger heaven taking the foreign guests with them."

Later the Young People's Librarian, Miss Jane Ellstrom, heard their criticism, their requests, their praise:

"I may not have said much, but I sure learned a lot."

"Got any more books on Turkey? I don't think I know half enough about it."

"This group is what makes summer in Lakewood worthwhile."

Bud Weidenthal of the Cleveland Press came to moderate, and his parting remark was, "I am a confirmed East Sider, and for years I have

heard all about the West Side. I am delighted to discover that none of it is true."

Still later, Miss Ellstrom received approving letters from foreign students who had participated in the programs. Inquiries as to how to start such a group came from places as distant as Salt Lake City and Oakland, California.

How did Lakewood's program start? About eight years ago, a group of boys came regularly into the young people's alcove, sat around a table, cornered Miss Ellstrom, and talked about the topics nearest their hearts - from nuclear fission and tensured calculus to United States foreign policy. "However, these sessions of what came to be known as the Chowder and Marching Society, were characterized by rising voices as talk became more heated, and the Young Adults' Librarian spent many minutes commenting, 'Please, fellows, can't you keep it to a dull roar?' One night after the Young Adults' Librarian had pleaded for the fourth or fifth time, one young man looked up and said, 'You know, if you'd find us a place to meet you wouldn't have to keep shushing us.'

"Thus an idea was born."

And a tradition was established. Each spring since (except for 1955 when the building was being remodeled and Miss Ellstrom was on leave of absence) some six students have met with the Young Adults' Librarian to decide on the broad area of discussion. They divide this broad subject into various facets and decide on the number of meetings (usually about six) and the form (discussion, panel, etc.) for each meeting. This committee of students - most of whom are attending college - are usually able to meet together only once, but from this first planning meeting to the first forum meeting, letters, requests, memorandums, and ballots fly

back and forth from library to campus and from campus to campus. Miss Ellstrom is the coordinator, assembling reading material, keeping the planning committee members informed, working closely with the Council on World Affairs which finds most of the speakers, and smoothing out problems as they arise.

There have been many problems, but none so serious that they have caused the series to be anything but very successful. Topics over the years have been:

1950 - Democracy: Can It Compete In the Asiatic Market?

1951 - Let's Examine Our Foreign Policy

1952 - American Politics and United States Foreign Policy

1953 - Europe and the United States - Why Tension?

1954 - Communism Among Our Allies

1956 - The Middle East - Hot Bed for a Cold War

This summer, the group plans to discuss "Empire and Evolution - The British Lion Changes Its Roar."

The program has been responsible for much of the attention directed towards the Young Peoples' Department at the Lakewood Public Library. While this is perhaps the most glamorous and spectacularly successful of the achievements of the department, much quieter, less publicized, but just as valuable and successful work has been accomplished by the department.

But before we look at some of the other activities of the department, let us look to the past to see how young people's work in Lakewood has developed.

The alcove was opened in January, 1937. For several years previous to that time, the need for special attention to young people had been

strongly felt. The young people were already in the library, and because they came in such numbers, the library felt that they both needed and deserved special attention. In the 1934 Annual Report, Miss Mary Ingram, Librarian, explained the situation to the Board:

"A very definite problem confronts us as these young people whose needs are lost before the unassorted array of literature for adults would be wonderfully helped if we could do in a small way what the Stevenson Room at the Main Library does. We have no room to give up to this group, so personal service is more necessary. If greater help in guiding their reading could be done by more personal service we would thus obviate much bewilderment and a great deal of misguided reading."

By 1934 there had been several small attempts to devote special attention to this group. For three years, an adult librarian, Miss Hazel Caldwell, had conducted a High School Girls Reading Club. From fourteen to eighteen girls met every third Friday in the Trustees Room to discuss some of the more recent books, in the hope of gaining an "acquaintance with and appreciation of some of the better books and authors." Miss Caldwell felt that this continuous contact with a group of high school girls was valuable, and the girls themselves showed that they too felt the group to be worthwhile. As the girls graduated from high school, they interested some of their younger friends in the group - the group became self-perpetuating. Some of the members who hoped to go to college even asked for meetings during the holidays.

In 1936, additional impetus was given to the establishment of a young people's alcove. Connections with the Lakewood High School Library which had functioned as a branch of the main library were severed, and the high school library became responsible only to the Board of Education. Since the public library had no longer any financial responsibilities for the high school, Miss Ingram felt that work with young people could be more heavily emphasized at the main library and that a young people's

assistant could be hired.

Miss Frances Grim, the new young people's assistant, came to Lakewood from South Bend, Indiana, in September, 1936. Soon Miss Grim and Miss Ingram were using their appraising eyes, their yardsticks and their ingenuity to discover a possible location for the young people's center. The most obvious place was an empty room near the main entrance, but both agreed that, although the room might be conveniently empty, it was anything but inviting, light and cheerful. After more use of the yardstick and more arithmetical calculation, Miss Ingram and Miss Grim decided on the position of the alcove - to the left of the main entrance, almost directly across from the circulation desk, and very much visible to all who entered the library.

The alcove was opened in January of 1937 with a collection of some eight hundred titles. Some of the books had been taken from the adult collection, and many were specially ordered for the alcove. Every attempt was made to obtain books with attractive and well-repaired covers, as well as those with attractive, worthwhile, and interesting contents.

In 1937, Miss Grim took Miss Roos' course in young people's literature at the School of Library Science at Western Reserve University and began to establish relations with schools and youth groups. Gradually more teachers became acquainted with the services of the public library - some stopped in to talk to the young people's librarian and give her suggestions, others sent lists and bibliographies, and a few extended invitations to Miss Grim to talk to their classes. More requests for book talks came from church groups - from groups of parents and from groups of young people themselves. And, Miss Grim now reports that, "never before or since have I given so many book talks."

In the fall of 1937, several tenth grade girls expressed a desire for a book reviewing club, and in October, Miss Grim organized such a group. Twice each month - on the second and fourth Tuesday - nine girls met in the small club room of the library to discuss and review books. The girls' enthusiasm continued and spread, and the next fall, so as not to have too large a group, a second club was formed. This second group was moderately active, but never as enthusiastic as the first. In the original group, the sophomore girls became busy seniors, and the librarian once even suggested to them that she knew "they were busy, and if they felt that they were too busy to continue meeting, she would understand. . ." They were insulted that an end to the club had even been suggested - and met until their graduation.

The quieter, but just as essential work of the department also progressed. Each summer a special recreational reading list was prepared and distributed through the schools. Other lists were prepared by the young people's librarian throughout the year. The file containing vocational material was moved next to Miss Grim's desk, and she continued to expand it. She did not attempt any indexing until a special need was noted. A high school history teacher wanted her classes to read historical novels with American backgrounds - novels containing actual historical events, not just "period pieces." Here was a special need, and Miss Grim began an index to historical fiction. Later this file was expanded and other subjects were included.

Miss Grim, by virtue of her activities in Lakewood, was becoming more prominent and well-known in young people's work on a local and national level. In 1938 she was a member of a Round Table of Young People's Librarians that met in Steinway Hall at Halle's. That same year she was Secretary and

Treasurer of the Young People's Reading Round Table of American Library Association, and in 1939, became the Secretary of the Section for Workers with Young People of the Ohio Library Association. In the spring of 1942, Miss Grim resigned to head the Stevenson Room of the Cleveland Public Library. Merely the fact that she was chosen for this position indicates the high quality of her work at Lakewood, and the librarian stated that her resignation was "one of the heaviest losses ever sustained by our library during the time I have known it."

"If this pioneer field of library work with young people is considered on a national scale, Miss Grim ranks, in my opinion, second only to Miss Roos of Cleveland who is older and more experienced."

By the time Miss Grim left, the alcove had been rearranged and could - and did - accommodate some 1,500 - 2,000 books . . . "a good recreational reading collection."

The alcove had been the charge of one person for something over five years, but in the next five years (1942-49), four librarians worked with Lakewood's young people.

Mrs. Julia Lockwood Certain succeeded Miss Grim in the fall of 1942. Although Mrs. Certain's first interest was not in young people's work, the collection and indexes were kept up-to-date, and work was done with the schools. In an effort to further acquaint teachers with the services of the library, Mrs. Certain sent nineteen letters, requesting copies of reading lists and offering to place books on reserve, to high school teachers of English and social studies. She also experimented with a new type of club - a writers' group - which met monthly through the summer and early fall of 1943. We know, too, something of how her time was apportioned,

for early in 1944 - April - she kept a record of the young people's requests for help. 71.78% wanted assistance with school assignments, and 28.22% requested books for recreational reading.

In September, 1944, Mrs. Certain left Lakewood to accept a position with the University of Michigan Library, and the vacancy was immediately filled by Mrs. Jane Heath who had been first assistant at the Madison Branch for three years. Two of Mrs. Heath's innovations were particularly successful and are still used today. She set aside special shelves for books on classroom and thus saved time for both the students and the librarian. She also experimented with leaving jackets on the new books - an advertising stunt that helped to increase circulation. Miss Grim's debate index was kept up-to-date, and the vocational file was completely revised. During these years a large number came to the library for school assignments - the high school was unusually large, and the school library was not adequately equipped to fulfill its needs.

The war unfortunately affected young people's work in Lakewood for in the spring of 1945 Mrs. Heath took a leave of absence to join her husband who was in the service. Miss Grace Agricola filled this temporary vacancy, but later, in December, 1946, the vacancy became permanent, and the librarian had to report to the Board that Mrs. Heath who had "built up the department" and "contributed to it some of her own dynamic personality" was resigning to join her husband who had taken a position in Portland, Oregon.

Miss Ethel Conrad was then made acting head of the department. Miss Conrad's main interest was in reference work, and although lists were made and the indexes and book collection were not allowed to lag, this was a rather quiet time in the alcove.

By this time, work with young people was also being carried on at the Madison Branch Library. The collection was established in 1939 - two years after Miss Grim had set up the alcove at the main library. Miss Betty Anne Ryland, the first assistant at the branch, organized the collection with the help of Miss Grim and the branch librarian, Miss Cottrell. Miss Grim and Miss Ryland met once a month to discuss books, and the policy was established - which has continued to the present - that the main library should set the standard for the branch.

Miss Ewing, as first assistant, took charge of the collection in 1941, and in 1944, with the new name of Mrs. Heath, was transferred to the main library. The third person who took an interest in young people at the branch was Miss Jane Ellstrom. Miss Ellstrom, the desk assistant, came to be - unofficially - in charge of work with young people. The collection was located behind the circulation desk and so was Miss Ellstrom - a very fortunate coincidence for Lakewood. Soon Miss Ellstrom decided to go to library school at Western Reserve University, and while she attended school, she continued her work at the circulation desk - and with young people.

In May, 1948 she resigned to take a position in Cleveland, and, a little over a year later - in October, 1949 - returned to Lakewood to head the Young People's Department at the main library. While Miss Ellstrom is well-known for her creation, Summer Forum, she has done far more than organize an active discussion group.

Perhaps her most important - but least tangible - accomplishment has been in building up good will for the library. The alcove has come to be a place where returning college students will be recognized and welcomed and where real interest will be shown in their new activities. One very

effective means for making the library a sort of "clearing-house" for information has been the Noel Register. This was started in 1950 and is a convenient way to answer the young people's perennial, "Who's home?" In the register - a large book with a page for each letter of the alphabet - the returning students sign their names, school, when they will be home, and where they may be reached. This convenient directory - which Miss Ellstrom points out has often aided the seeker for a New Year's Eve date - enables the young people to keep in touch with the library and with each other.

Relations with the schools have become closer. The high school librarian, Miss Nancy Jones, has provided Miss Ellstrom with course lists for reserve books, and the two have exchanged various reading lists. This year, for the first time, Miss Ellstrom has been invited to speak to the seniors to recommend books for continuing reading after graduation. Miss Ellstrom has always spoken to the ninth graders who are about to enter senior high school. Her list, "Books for New Highs" is changed every year. It is an unannotated list (the titles are arranged only in broad subject groupings) and she hopes that by this means she will encourage the young people to ask her for more information about the books so that she will meet more of her "new readers."

Another way of gaining people's - especially young people's - confidence and good will is by making them feel that they are needed. Miss Ellstrom sometimes relies on the young people to judge whether a book being considered for purchase will be of interest to young people. If she is doubtful as to the "interest" of a book, she may hand it to any one of about twenty of her "book reviewers." These young people never meet as a group, but are on call at any time for their - usually very reliable - opinions.

Miss Ellstrom has organized a Junior Great Books Discussion Group (1949) and several contests - one, "What Makes a Book 'Good'?" was held in 1953. In 1954, an attempt was made through an American Heritage Discussion Group to reach out-of-school youth from seventeen to twenty-five. Because some sixty per cent of Lakewood's young people go to college, there was not a large percentage from which to draw. Fifteen people enrolled in the group, and nine came regularly to the eight bi-weekly meetings. Although the group was small, the calibre was excellent. A second group which met in 1956 was even more successful. However, it was decided after this second year that since there was considerable preparation involved for each meeting, the young adults' librarian's time could probably be used to better advantage on the floor, and the group was discontinued.

Young people's work has been somewhat neglected at the Madison Branch since Miss Ellstrom left there in 1948. In 1949, Miss Muriel West took charge of the work, and, that summer, organized a Teen-Tops Club, a sort of social service group for girls of foreign parents. The group was formally organized - with a constitution and officers - and their meetings dealt with such things as "style," "baths," "grooming," and "dates." Usually the meetings consisted of lectures followed by discussion. Books were handy for supplementary reading. When Miss West left the following year, the group was discontinued.

Since 1950, no one has done much special work with young people. When Mrs. Josephine Bienstadt became Branch Librarian in 1951, she moved the collection from behind the circulation desk to a more convenient place. And, since the fall of 1956, when the building was remodeled, the young people have had their own attractive alcove. It contains a fairly good collection of books and magazines, the vocational file, two tables, and is located near to the adult reference materials which the young people have much occasion

to use. Mrs. Bienstadt attends with Miss Ellstrom the meetings of the Committee on Young People's Reading of the Cleveland Public Library and devotes to the young people whatever time she can spare from her other duties.

A short time before the Madison Branch Library was remodeled, the main library was also enlarged. Since 1956 the young people have had more space and the "alcove" has become a "room." The present room is located in the rear left-hand corner of the first floor, away from the quieter adult study tables and near the adult books - travel and biography - which the young people use most frequently. Several comfortable chairs, a display area, a low table on which material of current interest is casually and temptingly distributed, and a browsing corner, make the alcove especially attractive. Recently the library has purchased for the room two water colors by a youthful artist who has just graduated from Lakewood High School.

The material in the room -- except for the browsing collection -- is arranged alphabetically by author's last name. Although a subject arrangement would probably be ideal, it is not easily used by adult librarians who are unfamiliar with the collection and who must supervise it when Miss Ellstrom is not on duty. As an alternative, this straight alphabetical arrangement has been chosen. It is hoped that it will cause the line between fiction and non-fiction to become more blurred in the minds of the readers and that the young people will be encouraged to browse more widely.

The combination of this new room, a fine collection, and an enthusiastic librarian - this year's chairman of the Association of Young People's Librarians - has made the Lakewood Public Library outstanding for its work with young people.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since there has been little written on young people's work at the Lakewood Public Library, most of the material for this paper came from personal interviews with those who have been associated with the department. I thank Miss Jane Ellstrom, Miss Frances Grim, Mrs. Jane Heath, and Mrs. Josephine Bienstadt for generously imparting information that would otherwise have been unavailable.

Some information was also obtained from Annual Reports (1934-1956) and from newspaper clippings for those years. I am indebted to Mrs. Mary Bloom, the Librarian, for permitting me to examine library records.

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