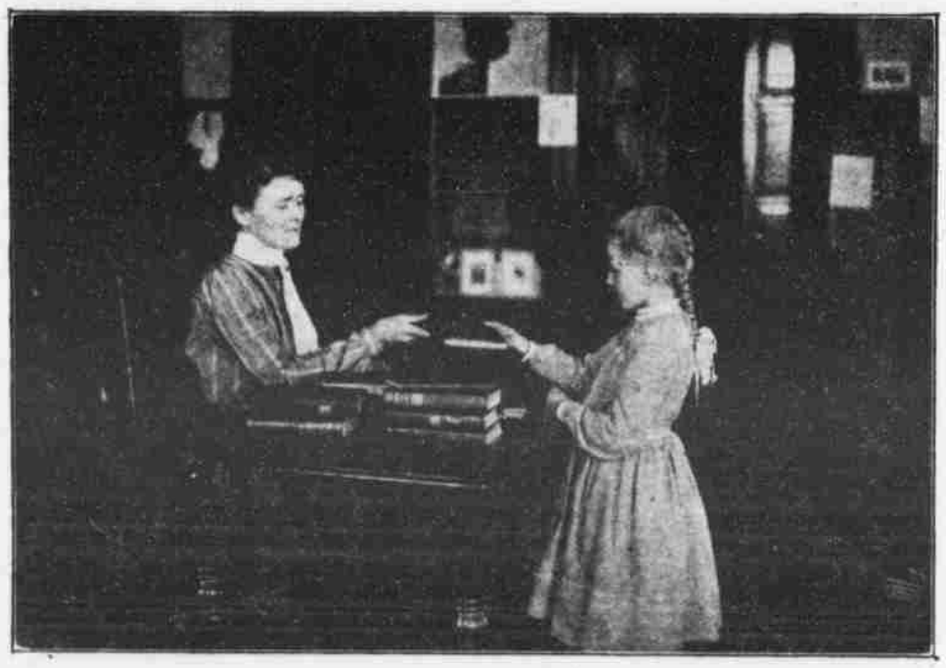
What Our Public Libraries Are Doing

Pictures from Photographs Made in Omaha Public Library and Omaha Public Schools by a Bee Staff Artist

CHILDREN GETTING BOOKS AT LIBRA RY.

SCHOOL CHILDREN IN LINE FOR BOOKS.

CHILDREN'S READING ROOM, OMAHA PUBLIC LIBRARY.



HER FIRST EXPERIENCE.

WHILE the library movement has been strikingly emphasized of late by the numerous Carnegie donations which have scattered new library buildings so lavishly over the country, the rapid development of our established public libraries and the wonderful expansion of their work have not attracted the attention they deserve. Time was only a few decades ago when a free circulating library meant simply a collection of catalogued books, which the public was free to inspect and to borrow for home use, subject to conditions imposed by rules and regulations designed more to prevent the destruction of the precious volumes by over-use than to facilitate their circulation. Had the old regime remained undisturbed it is safe to say that we would have no great public library institutions like those to be found today in nearly every progressive American city with book-borrowers numbering into the tens of thousands and circulation figures mounting into the millions. In the year 1901 the number of books loaned out by the public library in the city of Philadelphia aggregated 1,915,687, the Boston public library loaned out 1,483,513 books, the Buffalo public library, although the city has a population of only 352,000, loaned out 966,450 books, while Los Angeles with only 112,874 people loaned out through its library 472,543 books. The test of usefulness of a public library then is not so much its fine building nor its heavily laden book shelves as the number of people utilizing its treasures and the number and character of the volumes kept in circulation among its patrons.

The great circulation growth of American public libraries rests, of course, upon the spread of education among the people. A fine library filled with all the choicest volumes of the world's literature, equipped with all the most modern devices for making them accessible, if planted in a community where only a few people were able to read or write or to appreciate the productions of novelists, scientists and philosophers, would be as unprofitable as an ice plant in the Arctic regions or a cotton mill in the midst of the Sahra. But even with a population of universal literacy and thorough intelligence, a public library might fail of its mission by neglecting to make its contents known to those likely to utilize them, or by obstructing their use with over-caution. The object of the library administration to serve the public to its fullest capacity has only gradually been impressed upon library managements until in these twentieth century days all our libraries are exerting themselves to encourage book-borrowing and reading in ways that previously would have inspired strongest aversion. It is on this score that the great enlargement of library activity and the imposing expansion of the circulation figures are to be explained. To know just what the libraries have been doing to keep in touch with popular demands should throw an interesting side-light on this important factor in our educational progress.

As it is related that when the mountain did not come to Mohammet, Mohammet went to the mountain, so when the limit seemed to be reached for book borrowers to come to the libraries, the libraries went forth and took their books to their readers. In a few of the principal American cities supporting great libraries is the main library longer the chief mainstay of the institution. The main library is simply the seat of the administrative force. It is the repository of the more valuable books least consulted. It is the reference library for students and book worms. The branch libraries and the delivery stations have become the great arteries of circulation. In Boston, of the annual circulation, figuring nearly 1,500,000 volumes, more than 1,000,000 of these books were given to the borrowers through stations, branches and depositories. The branches there number 10, the stations 21, with depositories in 44 schools, 33 engine houses and 8 city institutions. In Philadelphia, of the 1,915,687 books loaned out only 526,150 were from the main library.

So far as mere figures can convey an insight into the situation as respects branch libraries and stations and the relative position they occupy toward the public library as an institution, a compilation of circulation exhibits authoritatively supplied shows that for the library year 1901, where 10,728,731 books were loaned out in fifteen representative American cities, 4,778,739, or nearly one-half, were distributed through branches and stations. In fifteen American cities, maintaining each one main library, the number of branches for the same year was eighty and the stations and depositories, 279.*

If it were possible to go into the subject closer without unduly burdening the reader with statistics, it could be shown that in almost every instance the growth of the circulation from branches and stations has been much greater than the growth of the circulation from the main library—in some instances at the expense of the parent institution. That this change has been reinforced by the shifting of population within the different communities and the growth of suburban districts as against the downtown section would also be demonstrated by more analytical examination. The traveling library and home delivery are simply steps in advance of the branch library and delivery station. If it conduces to larger patronage and greater usefulness to deposit books in each neighborhood so that the people may get them without the cost of time and money necessary for a trip to the main library, the same arguments hold good for delivering the books at the home of the book-borrower, taking his or her order there and making an exchange without further personal intervention.

Next in importance comes the upbuilding of the children's departments. It is conceded that the most inviting field for library work is to be found in encouraging children and young people to form the reading habit and cultivate a taste for good and substantial books. The purpose of getting wholesome reading into the hands of the children has prompted efforts in two directions. First, children have been admitted more freely into the library building—nay urged and tempted to come—and when they come receive special consideration, whereas formerly they were either driven away as intermeddling nuisances, or neglected as not worth attention. The most progressive American libraries have now set apart a portion of their building for the exclusive use of children. The children are allowed to regard the children's room as their own property; in it are stored the books they prefer; they are provided with chairs and tables in diminutive pattern for their particular accommodation; the walls are decorated with pictures and posters for their instuction and entertainment; personal attendants are detailed to their service; their wants are anticipated and their minds guided by slow stages from the stories of wild adventures that conform to their natural preferences to the books that carry instruction as well as recreation.

At the same time special exertions are made to extend the library advantages to children who may be prevented from enjoying the facilities provided by the children's room in the main or branch libraries. This is accomplished by utilizing the schools as distributing agencies. In speaking of branches and delivery stations reference has already been made to the fact that the Boston public library maintains book depositories in forty-four schools. Similar work is carried on in a number of other cities, notably in Detroit, Indianapolis, Omaha and Pittsburg. In this work teachers usually co-operate, relieving the library authorities in a certain measure and sometimes assuming responsibility for the pupils.

It must be remembered that the circulation of books, like the circulation of money, depends not only on the volume of the circulating medium and the number of persons to be served, but also upon the rapidity of movement. All three of these elements enter into the circulation figures of the modern public library. The number of volumes accessioned and catalogued and the number of book borrowers entitled to the library privileges, must be brought into relation to the mechanics of the loan desk.

In reading circulation figures the first allowance must be made for the number of books which each borrower is permitted to

BRANCH LIBRARIES AND STATIONS—1901.

City.	No. Branches.	No. Stations and Depositories.
Baltimore	7	2
Boston	10	106
Brooklyn	18	..
Buffalo	3	7
Cincinnati	4	41
Cleveland	8	31
Detroit	2	..
Indianapolis	6	49
Kansas City	1	9
Los Angeles	4	..
Minneapolis	3	8
Newark	1	9
Omaha	1	10
Pittsburg	5	3
San Francisco	6	4

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