
North Carolina Libraries Face the Depression:

A Regional Field Agent and the "Bell Cow" State, 1930-36

by James V. Carmichael, Jr.

Librarians, like other professionals, flatter themselves with the notion that their problems are unique. The generational arrogance that comes with an expanded knowledge base, new technology, and professional respectability often obscures the similarities of their situation with that of their forebears. Thus, with cuts in the serials budgets of most state universities, the closing of big city branches, and consolidation of services — all set against the national backdrop of the savings and loans scandal and what is now formally acknowledged as a "recession" — information professionals may forget that librarians in the Great Depression faced comparable challenges. New North Carolina State Library Commission Secretary Marjorie Beal addressed the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA) in 1935 on "The Lure of the Rent Shelf," and the doubtful comments which followed her suggestions for rental fees on non-fiction ("a product of the present stress")¹ echo the ambivalence expressed by today's librarians over fees for online searches. Moreover, "innovation" (the buzzword of the late 1980s and early 1990s), and educational and social concerns such as literacy and the homeless, have obvious parallels in the 1930s: for example, the regional library concept, the interest in literacy indices for the southern states, and the increased demand for services occasioned by the influx of the unemployed into the nation's public libraries. Certainly, there are differences of quality and degree, but it is instructive to note that in North Carolina, at least, federal dollars provided only a gloss on the very fundamental solutions adopted by librarians to their problems before the extra money became available. Edward G. Holley, for example, has noted the effect of the Great Depression on academic libraries and praised the extraordinary degree of experimentation that re-

sulted from hard times in such areas as interlibrary cooperation and lending.² This article examines the social and political context of North Carolina library affairs during the same era and the effect that "field work" — a predecessor of "consultancy" — had on them.

In one apocryphal story, a southern farmer interviewed by a Federal Writers' Project worker during the Great Depression claimed he did not know there was a depression going on—an indication, no doubt, of how poor southern conditions had been since 1865. Although many studies have measured the effects of the Depression on libraries, describing southern library service during this era becomes an exercise in selecting negative superlatives. When the University of North Carolina's Louis Round Wilson unveiled his master plan for southern library development at the Southeastern Library Association Conference of 1926, 73 percent of the southern population was without library service of any kind.³ Robert B. House, also at the University of North Carolina, summed up southern "mental life" as "inflexible, unresourceful, unimaginative. I don't know whether other sections have more wealth because they have more sense or have more sense because they have more wealth. But I believe there is a correlation between brains and wealth."⁴

Even given the grim reiteration of southern educational, economic, and demographic statistics, the end of the business progressivism of the 1920s boded well for southern libraries, particularly for those of North Carolina. Georgia could claim the region's first state library association, first library school, and first state library commission, but North Carolina had quickly outstripped that state's record of library support by 1909 when the initial

appropriation for the North Carolina Library Commission was received. Atlanta librarian Julia T. Rankin admitted to Annie Ross, North Carolina Library Commission director, that "Your news fills us with so much envy that we can hardly congratulate you."⁵ By 1929-30 North Carolina's \$24,900 appropriation, used to support the traveling library program, state field work, and rudimentary public library extension work, was the largest in the South.

Both Barker and Beal exemplified the ideals of missionay librarianship which a later generation has been quick to revile. They extended library service in lean times not through money, but by a patient diplomacy, nurture of constituencies, and frequent contact with lay groups and related organizations.

Other benchmarks had been set regularly — in 1917 North Carolina became the second southern state to adopt a county library law, thanks to the leadership of a progressive library commission; Greensboro claimed the first continuously operating countywide service south of Maryland (1915); Durham's book truck, the first in the region (1923), became nationally famous in the library press; and Nellie Rowe, Greensboro's librarian, after having

secured the state's second book truck in 1926, created a mild sensation at the 1929 Washington, D. C., American Library Association (ALA) conference by describing her successful scheme to secure a "dog tax" for maintaining county book truck service. At the North Carolina Library Association meeting of 1927, the nation's first Citizens Library Movement was formed and heralded a new era of grassroots support through district meetings, publicity, and lobbying efforts.

Southern library progress appeared to be on the verge of a new era of expansion when the Julius Rosenwald Fund announced a half-million dollar grant to fund county library demonstrations in the South in 1929. Of eleven U.S. sites which met the requirement for matching fund agreements, a county library law, and service to both the black and white segments of the population, two (Mecklenburg and Davidson counties) were in North Carolina. A historic joint meeting of the Southern Conference of Education, the Southeastern Library Association (SELA), and the southern state library associations at Chapel Hill on October 19-22, 1929, crowned these achievements with the dedication of the new University Library and the adoption of a program of foundation aid to southern libraries based on the outline drawn by Louis Round Wilson in 1926. Fea-

tures of the program included a survey of southern library schools, the appointment of state school library supervisors, the attachment of state field workers to each southern state library extension agency, and the appointment of a regional field agent to oversee the developments in thirteen southern states. One week later, however, the stock market crashed.

The ambitious southern library program drafted by the SELA delegates was adopted by the Rosenwald Fund, the Carnegie Corporation, and the General Education Board in January 1930, since the worst effects of the Depression had not yet been felt. The Rosenwald demonstration libraries in Davidson and Mecklenburg counties, receiving appropriations of \$20,000 and \$60,000 each over a five-year period, reported progress from 1929 through 1931 — new branches and stations, a book truck in Davidson County, and school library service in seventeen city schools in Mecklenburg County administered through the public library at

Charlotte with "a fine spirit of cooperation."⁶ Moreover, new public library buildings continued to be built throughout the Depression even without federal aid, including a handsome new small structure dedicated in Gastonia in 1931, a gift of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA).⁷ North Carolina boasted seventy-three public or association libraries in 1931, as well as nine independent libraries for the black population. These portents of progress were in many cases cosmetic, however, for as the new regional field agent for the South, Tommie Dora Barker, remarked, out of eighteen North Carolina "county" libraries, only ten received appropriations of more than one thousand dollars, and "possibly only five deserve the name of county library."

The regional field agent position was designed to represent ALA's interests in the South. Southern librarians had become increasingly disaffected during the 1920s due to their lack of representation in elective posts, the vehemence with which segregation in the South was discussed at national meetings, and the general subordination of southern library needs to national programs which favored the Northeast and

Midwest. Barker herself had been defeated for second vice-president of ALA in 1927, but she usually took the larger professional view of situations rather than a parochial one. For this reason, she was a trustworthy ally for ALA officials like Board of Education for Librarianship Secretary Sarah C. N. Bogle, Library Extension Division Chief Julia Wright Merrill, and ALA Executive Secretary Carl A. Milam. More importantly, as a native of the region, Barker was able to promote area library interests to the southern public and foster sound planning on such crucial matters as library legislation, state certification for librarians, the newly adopted Standards for High School Libraries of the Southern Association for Colleges and Secondary Schools in the Southern States, and acceptable levels of service and professional remuneration at local sites.

From her Atlanta office, Barker wrote over six thousand letters to state library officials; local librarians; government, civic and educational leaders; and foundation officials from 1930 to 1936 in an



Pictured right:

Tommie Dora Barker,
American Library Association
Regional Field Agent for the
South (1930-1936), 1940.

*Photo courtesy Robert W. Woodruff
Library, Emory University.*

Below: Helen Marjorie Beal,
Secretary of the North
Carolina State Library Com-
mission, circa 1935.

*Photo courtesy Division of Archives
and History, Raleigh, N.C.*



effort to preserve the aggressive southern library development program launched on the eve of the Depression. Through 165 field visits—23 of them in North Carolina—occupying over two years of days in the field, Barker shrewdly assessed local library personnel, a record of which she left in copies of “field notes” sent to ALA in Chicago and to the Carnegie Corporation in New York. Her communications with ALA probably explained to association officials as could no outside report exactly why library conditions were so bad, or why, for example, North Carolina declined a sustaining membership in the national association so that monies could be devoted to a legislative campaign to combat state salary cuts. She could be ruthlessly honest yet objective in her analysis of local library situations, for, as director of the Atlanta school, she had known many of the state’s professional librarians. Graduates of the Carnegie Library School of Atlanta included Lillian Baker Griggs of the Women’s College of Duke University; Nellie Rowe of the Greensboro Public Library; Janet Berkeley of the Winston-Salem Public Library; Julius Amis of the Stanly County Library in Albemarle; Mary Selden Yates of the North Carolina Library Commission (in charge of traveling libraries); and Anne Pierce of the Mecklenburg County Library in Charlotte. Her personal acquaintance with the capabilities of these graduates enabled her to discern underlying causes of failures as well as successes. For example, in spite of the high praise she gave to Anne Pierce’s work at Charlotte, her remarks regarding Pierce, who garnered support for the library single-handedly and ran the entire operation in Mecklenburg too much as a “one-man show,” seem prescient of its collapse, even without the temper of “economy fever” prevalent in the state.

Barker was necessary to the implementation of any larger program of library development because of southern mistrust of ALA initiatives. Ironically, her official contacts in North Carolina came through Marjorie Beal, the newly appointed secretary of the state library commission. Barker had first met Beal, a native New Yorker, at the 1929 Rural Library Institute in Madison, Wisconsin. Like Barker, Beal was married to her profession. Unprepossessing in appearance, diminutive and slightly walled, she met situations with a forceful personality tempered with tact. Moreover, according to Barker, she was “quick to take suggestions,” such as the field agent’s recommendation that the state library commission needed strengthening with board members who would be present at meetings, help with legislation and appropriation requests, and rise above their local interests

for the sake of statewide interests. Both Barker and Beal admitted that state librarian and library commission chairman Carrie Broughton’s interests were confined to her own agency, for example, but recognized in University of North Carolina President Frank Porter Graham an ally cognizant of the larger implications of adequate statewide planning.

Between 1931 and 1933 the state library situation bottomed. The Mecklenburg and Davidson county appropriations were cut and the Rosenwald demonstrations were discontinued. Lily Moore, librarian at Lexington, in Davidson County, suffered a forty percent cut to her salary and had to curtail library services to black residents of the county. Moore, professionally trained but northern by birth, also fell victim to a local ordinance requiring the county librarian to be a North Carolinian. As she

left the library, she noted that the gains of the past two years had been “torn to shreds and scattered to the winds.”⁸ Barker waited for “final obsequies” on the project, but warned Rosenwald officials that the program would “go off the map entirely” unless a compromise agreement could be arranged. She finally persuaded them to suspend the agreement until conditions improved. “I do not know what is going to become of the small libraries,” wrote Lillian Griggs from a lofty vantage point at Duke. “They had nothing before the Depression and now they have less.”⁹

From Charlotte, Anne Pierce reported that the Mecklenburg demonstration had been “knocked flat” by default on the Rosenwald agreement by county commissioners, and “shot all to pieces” by a new board unsympathetic with the library demonstration, a state of affairs



Pictured left:
Mrs. Mollie Huston Lee (circa 1935). Librarian at Shaw University, Lee founded the first black library association in America in 1934.
Photo courtesy Richard B. Harrison Library, 1944, 53.15.5297.

Below: Nellie M. Rowe, Librarian at Greensboro Public Library, circa 1933.
Photo courtesy Greensboro Public Library.



rendered all the more tragic due to Mecklenburg's previously unparalleled example of effective extension service.¹⁰ The demonstration libraries were not alone in their problems, however. Nellie Rowe in Greensboro, threatened by across-the-board salary cuts of sixty percent in 1931, learned that one county commissioner suggested that librarians drawing \$200 and \$250 salaries could be replaced by "high school girls," while another remarked in a commission meeting that if he had his way he would close the library and give the money to charity. Actually, such attitudes were not extraordinary, but they usually resulted in compromise cuts, such as the twenty percent cut to which Rowe was eventually subjected.

Beal estimated statewide salary cuts at ten percent, yet library leaders seemed less relieved that positions were being maintained than concerned that acceptable levels of library service were being sacrificed to politically expedient policies of retrenchment. A bill to discharge married women earning more than \$100 a month was seriously considered by the legislature in 1931, and while North Carolina did not have to revert to the use of scrip to pay city employees, the salary reductions cut deeply in spite of the offsetting effects of deflation. As Louis Round Wilson remarked, "taxes, church dues, memberships, doctor's bills, hospital charges, clothes, lights, water, gas, 'phone, insurance . . . can't be paid for by 85 cents on the dollar, even if [Governor O. Max Gardner] says so."¹¹ One concerned member of the dispirited Citizens' Library Movement observed that the state government officials had been willing to spend "money without any limitations whatsoever upon our automobile highways but are willing to let the highways of the mind go to rack and ruin. I think we are road crazy."¹²

Gaps between professional and non-professional service were glaringly apparent, especially when the librarians were political appointees or untutored incumbents of long standing, and the ineptitude of individuals was reflected in their library environments. The librarian at Davidson College was "elderly and untrained", the building "ill adapted to library conditions at best," while at the Olivia Raney Library in Raleigh, the "elderly, untrained" librarian gave little service "in return for \$3000 appropriation," and services to blacks there would have to await "a change of librarians." Dynamic professional librarians like Nellie Rowe, who had saved most of Greensboro's library appropriations in 1931 by mobilizing county residents to rally against cuts, were rare. At Gastonia, the librarian was "complacent over the present accomplishments of the library," in spite of the fact that the county appropriation of \$900 could barely maintain repair on the well-worn book stock. At Salisbury, "the whole set up, quarters, books and librarian, [was] about as hopeless as they could very well be." The notable exception to the generally haphazard administration of "volunteer" libraries was the Thomas Hackney Library in

Rocky Mount which, under clubwoman Nelle G. Battle, developed an unusually high level of support during the Depression. Even Mary Peacock of Salisbury, the state school library supervisor, had a limited background in her work, and her "lack of appreciation of that fact" presented an obstacle for Barker to overcome. The state's fifty-three school librarians provided cold comfort, given the fact that funds were lacking for state high school supervisor John Henry Highsmith to make accreditation visits to libraries.

While in North Carolina to inspect the troubled demonstration libraries in the fall of 1932, Barker saw other disturbing elements of deterioration in the state library situation. At Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, librarian Charles Stone, who had just received ALA accreditation for his library school program for school librarians, was reduced to teaching cataloging courses on the stage of Aycock Auditorium after a devastating fire gutted portions of the college library, including the reference and library science collections. State service also came up for review under the steely eye of the governor's new state budget commissioner. The State Library Commission budget had suffered a thirty percent reduction between 1929 and 1931, and the fund for state aid to public libraries had been cut completely. Barker, like North Carolina librarians, was powerless to reverse these specific situations: by 1933 the school library program for which Stone had attained ALA certification had fallen victim to Brookings Institution recommendations for consolidation of all library programs at Chapel Hill. By 1935 Stone had left Woman's College for the College of William and Mary in Virginia. As for the state work, Barker warned in 1933 that "it would be the last straw if the 'bell cow' state were to renege" on its commit-

ment to the library commission, but several days later, Beal lost another staff member.¹³

Working together in earnest by 1932, Barker and Beal launched a modest but forceful campaign to place library interests before the public, for with several notable exceptions, Tar Heel libraries had been too embroiled in local problems to cooperate in a statewide effort. Barker believed that "librarians need to be more aggressive,"¹⁴ and this belief extended to forging viable links with sometimes unlikely partners. At the University of North Carolina, she convinced sociologist Howard Odum to include library development as a factor to be considered in his massive regional study, *Southern Regions of the United States*.¹⁵ She also began negotiations to secure grant monies for the accreditation visits for high school libraries in accordance with standards adopted by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in the Southern States in 1927. At the countywide library committee of the State Conference of Social Workers in 1932, Barker outlined a program of publicity centering on the use of a book truck. It is hard today to realize what an impact the book truck had on people who were used to thinking of libraries as



State Library Commission Book Truck, 1937. Photo courtesy Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

monumental edifices or cultural ornaments, but Barker had used a model book truck belonging to ALA in several southern states with great effect, as well as simple tools such as maps showing counties without library service, demographic aids, and pamphlets which visitors to her exhibit could peruse at home. At a meeting of the North Carolina Grange in 1932, Barker set up a booth outside the meeting hall, and, although there were few visitors, she made contact with Grange officials who up until that time had been unaware of any library program in the state. She also reserved space at the 1932 state fair for a book truck exhibit, which apparently relied on the ALA model, as money could not be found to fuel Durham's book truck, and Greensboro's could not be spared.

Over countless cups of tea and coffee, Barker and Beal tried to change the way that people in high places thought about libraries. The vice-chairman of the extension division of the American Home Economics Association, for example, was "inclined to think of books and libraries as something that concerns only the young people's work," but Beal, who had begun speaking at home demonstration clubs about the value of reading and libraries, recounted the remark made by one club member who stated that she was glad that instead of talking about putting things in cans, they had begun talking about putting "something in their minds!" The vice-chairman then arranged a meeting with the state president of the home demonstration club, a meeting which eventually resulted in Beal's Home Demonstration Reading Program, still in existence.

Barker also arranged initial contacts with Clarence Poe of the *Progressive Farmer* for a series of articles on libraries which she wrote for all five southern editions of that paper. Barker and Beal placed North Carolina library statistics in the *University of North Carolina News Letter* with comparative data for other southern states. Most importantly, they presented university president Frank Porter Graham with a proposal for a Conference of Southern Leaders to gather together representatives from every phase of southern life—the ministry, academic disciplines, civic and state leaders, and library officials—to discuss ideas pertinent to the development of the South's economic and intellectual life. The conference, which took place at Chapel Hill on April 7-8, 1933, had been carefully tailored by Barker, Beal, Griggs (then NCLA President) and the ALA staff to reach a non-traditional audience with library themes. As such, it represented a radical departure from the cloistered, ill-attended and often dispirited southern state library meetings. Only slightly over a quarter of the 105 registrants were librarians, and Griggs had to go to some pains to explain to librarians like Anne Pierce that only state library workers in the region had been invited. Other groups represented were college and university deans and professors; library trustees; church officials; philanthropic foundation representatives; secondary school personnel; women's clubs; students; state, community and university extension personnel; plus representatives from the YMCA, the Boy Scouts, the National Municipal League, and Rotary International.

Not until the second day of the conference did the program shift from general discussion of the role of social agencies in improving the quality of life to that of libraries. Louis Round Wilson, whose reputation was irrefragable even if his oratorical skills were not (one Carnegie official later called him "probably the best president [ALA] ever had; [but] a weak speaker and a poor presiding officer"),¹⁶ had returned to Chapel Hill for the conference to advocate statewide planning. The impact of the conference can be gathered from the hundreds of copies of conference proceedings requested from ALA headquarters in the months which followed, along with copies of the promotional brochure, *Books for the South*,¹⁷ which Barker had thoroughly revised from headquarters copy. One indirect consequence of the

conference was a recommendation that library interests be represented in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) program, a resolution which became a reality the following year. On a more subliminal level, the conference paved the way for statewide plans throughout the South which eventually became part of ALA's National Plan for Libraries, unveiled in 1935.¹⁸ Even given the national economic emergency, cooperative national planning would have been sporadic at best in the southern states without the preliminary of patient field work in the bleak months of 1932.

The impact of the Conference of Southern Leaders and the careful groundwork laid by Barker and Beal in broadening the

The More Things Change ...

Are you, a librarian, satisfied with the present status of libraries in world affairs? Should librarians not rise now to stress the fact that libraries are educational institutions to be constantly and continuously advertised as "the people's university?" Should we not insist that librarians share with the teachers of America this great educational task — "to replace violence with reason and the human and generous spirit?"

North Carolina Libraries, March 1943, p. 2.

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vision of librarians to the possibilities of their own work resulted in similar conferences at Clemson University in South Carolina in 1934 and 1936 and in Texas in 1935, all built around broad social themes which gradually focused on libraries. The conferences consolidated a broad coalition of citizen interests representative of the temper of the times. Barker's visits to North Carolina tapered off after the Chapel Hill conference, and, although the Mecklenburg demonstration was never resumed, the Davidson County project showed steady progress on a reduced scale after the worst turn of the Depression in 1932-33. North Carolina's forty unemployed professional librarians eventually found work, including Lily Moore, thanks to the federal library projects which began in 1933 with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (F.E.R.A.), and reached a peak in the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.), which from 1935 to 1942 employed hundreds of southern workers in library service, extension, and construction.¹⁹

Nevertheless, federal dollars did not turn the tide in public library affairs in North Carolina. North Carolina, in fact, spent fewer W. P. A. dollars than any other state. True, the state, which had only three in 1930, by 1943 led the nation in the number of bookmobiles. North Carolina counties with library service increased from twelve to eighty during the same period, and federal dollars doubtlessly made such progress feasible.²⁰ Without the fundamental work which Barker and Beal performed in the political, social and diplomatic arena outside the library, however, it is doubtful that the money spent would have had such enduring value. In commending the work that Barker had done in 1935, NCLA noted that she had succeeded in "cementing the library interests of the entire South, even though the period had been unusual and difficult."²¹ When Beal received the "Woman of the Year in Rural Service to North Carolina" from *Progressive Farmer* in 1943, the publication noted her "outstanding service to farm families in North Carolina in helping to provide every family of every county in the State with an opportunity to know good books."²²

Both Barker and Beal exemplified the ideals of missionary librarianship which a later generation has been quick to revile. They extended library service in lean times not through money, but by patient diplomacy, nurture of constituencies, and frequent contact with lay groups and related organizations. The obvious parallels with current professional rhetoric aimed at "marketing the librarian" seem apparent. It behooves present-day North Carolina librarians to take heart in the simple power of hard work and plain words which no lament of budget limitations, technological panic, or corporate paranoia can refute.

The More Things Change ...

Librarians must take up educating people where the school leaves off. Education does not end at 17 or 21; it starts there, if anywhere. North Carolina asked for an educated man and got a football fan. Formal education fails in so far as its graduates turn to comic books and sports for sustenance and stimulation.

North Carolina Libraries, May 1945, p. 9.

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