

Libraries in the Future of North Carolina

Mr. George H. Wright, Attorney and Library Trustee,
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I've done a few things in my life of which I am proud. One of them is that I persuaded Miss Margaret Ligon to go to Library School. When she asked me to appear on this program I am frank to say I was very much flattered. More so than I let on, and I think that it was under the influence of that flattery that I accepted.

You are not going to find me giving you any advice this evening on any technical aspects of your activities. As Miss Ligon told you, I have had an interest in library matters for a long time. I have seen our local library grow from a very small institution to a rather respectable group of libraries. I think in the course of that time we have made almost all the mistakes that could well be made, and perhaps occasionally we have had slight attacks of skill and ability.

This evening, against the background of that experience, I would like to look for a little while at the library movement in North Carolina to see very briefly what has been happening in that movement; what progress has been made; and having done that to see if we can, as Mr. Churchill said, do a little "peering" into the future.

It must be a great satisfaction to you who are actively engaged in this profession to look back over the record of the last few years. I do not know of any state that can show more library progress in

that period. Just the mere comparison of where you were in 1941 with where you are today makes you stop and realize that something's been happening.

I suppose 1941 is one of the key years in the history of libraries in North Carolina. Prior to that there had been a record of effort going back many, many years. We have record of the North Carolina Library Association going back to 1904. And we have a record of the North Carolina Library Commission going back to 1909. I believe this evening we are going to recognize the 40th anniversary of that. Then we have the record of the Citizens' Library Movement, going back more than 20 years, and other activities.

But 1941 was the beginning of state aid. I think the labors that resulted in state aid were statesmanlike. I don't know of anything that was more needed at the particular time than state aid for libraries in 1941. I don't want to worry you with statistics but I want to give you one or two figures as a basis for some observations.

In 1941, 51 per cent of the people of this state were receiving library service. At the present time, 92 per cent are receiving that service. That is a tremendous increase, and when you consider the fact that the 51 per cent represented very largely the easier half to reach, you realize even more the progress that

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has been made in extending library service so nearly throughout the entire state.

There are now, I believe, nine counties, with I suppose 200,000 population, not receiving state aid and having no county-wide library service.

And now may I turn completely aside for a few minutes to drag something in that I want to say at some time. I might as well say it now. The work in this state among the negroes has lagged. Of an estimated 900,000 negroes in this state, there are still about 300,000 outside of the field of library service. (We're going to try to remedy that situation in Buncombe County this year.) I think the burden of extending that service to all of the negroes of the state ought to rest somewhat upon the shoulders of this association and upon you people who have the professional know-how. I do not think that any other group exists that can hope to extend that work effectively.

The Library Commission and others are working hard, I know, on these nine counties I have referred to, and I suppose they're the nine tough counties, if I may say so. It would be a great thing to be able to say that in North Carolina there isn't a man or woman or child of any race who does not have access to library service and privileges. That's the ideal, and it occurs to me you're getting near enough to the end to have some hope of realizing the ideal in the relatively near future.

But to go back to my little comparison. In the same period that service was extended to 92 per cent

of the population, as against 51 per cent, the circulation of books in North Carolina has increased from 6 million a year to 6 million, 700 thousand a year. I think it's perfectly obvious what's been happening. The mere fact that you have been able to take library service into a county that didn't have it, through state aid, and to fit out a small country library and perhaps to start a bookmobile, doesn't mean that you have, in any sense of the word, covered that county with library service.

So, although this extension jump from 51 per cent to 92 per cent is a magnificent job, as far as getting your hand in, is concerned, the great bulk of the work still remains to be done. It isn't just establishing the service. It's developing the service.

At the same time I discovered that in 1941 the income of libraries in North Carolina was \$366,000. In 1947-48 it was over \$1,300,000, an increase of almost \$950,000. To my mind, that is the most astonishing fact of all. For, you see, although state aid came in there, yet if you examine this increase to see where the increase came from, state aid doesn't begin to explain it.

State aid, in this last figure, amounted to \$266,000. That was entirely increase over 1940-41 receipts. In the same period, funds provided by counties increased \$275,000. That's more than state aid. Local funds (I suppose that means largely municipal tax money) increased \$172,000 and other sources of income increased \$237,000. I don't think I ever saw a clearer example than this of a little leaven leavening the

whole lump. It's perfectly obvious that this state aid was, as it were, the spark that set fire to the library movement, that this little money offered to these various counties was just what it took to induce those counties to participate in this work.

There's a comparison that I've made before and I want to make it now. I hope it won't offend you. I think that acquiring a taste for books is somewhat like acquiring a taste for liquor. Here's a man who's never been told or experienced the effects which, I am told, come from the use of alcoholic beverages. And he's perfectly content. Then some friend takes him out some evening and demonstrates to him what those effects are. And if he's that kind of a man, the first thing you know he wants to have a demonstration every single evening. He just can't get along without it.

People who never have experienced library service just don't know what they're missing. But if you can tease them into introducing the service and let them find out, it isn't very long until they simply can't get along without it. I never will forget as long as I live what happened in Buncombe County when, during the depression, outside groups brought a bookmobile into the county for a few months and took it around offering service. At that time, nobody in the county was asking for bookmobile service. They didn't know what it was. But let me tell you after six months you simply couldn't have stopped that bookmobile no matter what happened.

Now I think that the ground work

has been done for the work throughout the state in a magnificent way. I think that the field is fertile for development. But I want to talk for a few minutes about what seems to me to be a very great obstacle that is going to have to be overcome. I want to call your attention to something. Back in 1940, local sources—city funds—were furnishing about 45 per cent of all the money received for library purposes in this state; and counties were furnishing about 40 per cent—other sources 15 per cent. As of the present time, state aid is 20 per cent; the city contribution has dropped from 45 per cent to 26 per cent (although it has increased in amount); the counties are contributing 31 per cent and other sources 23 per cent.

The point I'm getting at is this: the county is looming larger and larger as the source of revenue. When all is said and done, state aid can never be anything but a help to get the work going. If the Legislature would take off all the wraps and give you tremendous sums of money, when you divide it by 100, for the 100 counties, you haven't much per county.

The real problem in North Carolina it seems to me, is to provide adequate funds on the county level to support your library work. And that is a real problem. Now here's a field where I can talk with a little bit of assurance because it involves just a little bit of law. As you know, a county has no right to use money derived from taxation of property to support a public library unless the voters approve a special tax for that purpose. Under our

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constitution, those funds can only be used for necessary expenses. And our Supreme Court, by some remarkable series of convolutions, has arrived at the conclusion that a library is not a necessary expense. That being so, no county is allowed to dip into its tax money, its general tax revenue, to operate libraries, and as you know, counties have very little revenue except from their taxes on land and other property.

It seems to me, and this is the point I'm getting to, that as we look forward in the North Carolina library movement, if we're going to develop this thing properly we're going to have to start programs of voting special taxes for libraries. Personally, I'm very sorry that I think that is so. I have tried my best to close my mind to this, because I know it's a very difficult thing to do, but I don't see any other way we can possibly hope to finance an adequate library movement throughout the state in the future unless we can persuade these counties to vote a small special tax.

If that is done, that money will be available to support libraries. Nine counties, I believe, and nine cities have such a tax at this time. Mecklenburg, of course, is an outstanding example of what can be done when it has to be done. There's no use in the world of closing our eyes to it. When we start out to convince the taxpayers of North Carolina, county by county, and particularly in small counties, that they ought to vote a tax of 3 cents to 5 cents per \$100.00 for libraries, we are undertaking a very big job. That can never be done unless the ground is prepared by what has

happened already. All of your counties are becoming library conscious, and as the service is rendered in the various counties, I believe that more and more people will realize the benefits from the service. But I think that the librarians of North Carolina and the trustees and others interested in libraries have a tremendous selling job on their hands. It's a job, of course, that is going to have to be undertaken and pushed largely by you people who are in the business professionally. You will have to furnish the intelligence and direction. It's a job in which you're going to have to have a considerable amount of assistance—the assistance of trustees, and many more.

I would like to refer to something that has been happening in Buncombe County that is suggestive. Many years ago, in order to meet a special need of a special library, there was organized in the county (largely in Asheville), a group known as "Friends of the Library." This group was well organized and well directed and has accomplished results, I believe, of which it is unaware and which are more important than the results they have striven consciously to achieve. They must have from 1200 to 1500 members of Friends of Library in Asheville. They're always doing something, writing about it in the paper, talking about it. It's very hard to circulate in Asheville very long without hearing about libraries. That publicity has made our community very library conscious.

The point I'm trying to make is this: As a trustee, it seems to me that the

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library movement in North Carolina needs a lot of friends. It needs a lot of people interested in what you're doing. It seems to me that one of the best things that you could do would be to go back to your various communities and try to organize groups willing to work in almost any way to help you meet your needs and make the public library conscious. If you'll do that, then you'll have some hope of getting the public in the mind to vote

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these taxes. As Miss Beal pointed out to me today, it's easier now than it used to be. Time was (until last fall when we had the constitution amended) if you wanted to vote a special tax, the tax had to be approved by a majority of the registered voters. That meant that a person could just stay at home and vote "no.". But to vote "no" now, the voter has to go to the polls and vote "no." The result now is determined from the votes cast. That makes it much easier to carry a special tax election.

So, if I were to bring you any message at all this evening, it would be to congratulate you upon some very fine work done in recent years, and in that connection, I want to pay a tribute to Miss Beal and the Library Commission, who have planned so wisely in much of this work. Another thing I would like to say to you is that you have just started. You have most of the work yet to do. Another thing is that you're going to have to solve most of your problems on the county level. The state can't do it for you. The last thing is that you're going to have to go to work and sell libraries to people of this state to get the funds you need for adequate library service.