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Looking Back: A History of the Manchester Street Center
By Jonathan Jeffrey

(The June 1944 issue of *Bulletin of the Kentucky Library Association* contained a story by Amelia King Buckley entitled "The Manchester Library" in which she discussed the genesis of the Manchester Street Library. This operation evolved into the multi-functional Manchester Center which still provides social services to Lexington residents in the Irishtown neighborhood. The Center does not currently have a library component, but it places a strong emphasis on literacy training. Below is the complete article from 1944; I have prepared a postlude describing the Center's development from that date.)

"In the fall of 1939 two provisional members of the Lexington Junior League listened intently to the description of services needed that season in the city. One called for library assistance at the Abraham Lincoln School, a white school in the very poorest section of town. The Board of Education was unable to supply a regular librarian and as a result the pupils were being stinted in the use and benefit and enjoyment of a library. This particular type of work appealed to the prospective members and they volunteered, little dreaming how far that choice, made in the snug security of attractive surroundings, would take them. With concentrated instruction in book mending and simple cataloging, they began their first service.

At first, the one morning a week was spent setting the library in working order, accessioning and cataloging new books, and mending and returning to their places on the shelves the books borrowed the preceding week. "Borrowing" books in that library merely meant that a child could select a book and read it in the library or his school room, for except the "Red Line Books," no books ever left the school building. Each of these "Red Line Books" was a "casualty" and had been discarded because of lost pages, lost

sections and generally "run down" condition, books by ordinary standards not worth saving. This meager shelf of books circulated; those hungry, uncritical readers didn't mind gaps in the story. The books were carried home to be pored over, more likely by coal oil lamp than not, were brought back and exchanged for another, sometimes with a critical comment scribbled on the fly leaf, sometimes with enthusiasm for another like it. Thus the library functioned -- the new irresistible books stayed at school and the old worn out ones went home.

This lasted until the end of the school year when the building, and library, were closed for the summer.

A new and valuable experience, the children of that poor section were learning to enjoy had to be cut short just at a time when it might benefit them most; summer vacation with too little constructive activity to fill the long days, too much time that could be spent in the broadening horizons, and building a sense of personal and civic responsibility. The two volunteers became convinced that a summer library for children, to open when the school one closed, was a “must.”

In the spring of 1940 a group of fifteen women, who had been interested in the establishment of such a library, were called together to discuss possibilities. The sole requirement for membership in this group was the genuinely active participation in some phase of the project. The group immediately went into action, so that by June 1st, 500 books, mended, classified, and cataloged, were on the shelves of an old store room near the school, and $105 was in the bank, contributed by the group and interested friends. The committee decided then to name the library for its location on Manchester street. The

school library had not been closed a week when the first borrowers were using the new library.

In those first weeks each volunteer had her turn at keeping the library which meant helping approximately 25 children select books, holding story hour, keeping peace, and always remembering that the library must not acquire a schoolroom atmosphere. From the first the committee worked to build up a feeling among the children that it could be fun to come to the library and borrow a book, and that all of the books belonged to all of them and they must care for them accordingly. The results were gratifying. In the first three months only one book was lost, and only a few were damaged, much to the chagrin of the borrowers.

As the time drew nearer for school to open and the library to close, the children begged that it be kept open during the winter. The appeal was irresistible, for every woman who had worked that summer was more than ever convinced of the need for the library. But the time had come for a real decision, for with winter activities, added expenses loomed. The sale of old paper during the summer months had been a boon, but this uncertain income would not take care of kindling and coal for the stove, extra electricity for the short winter afternoons, besides the barest necessary operating expenses. At this most crucial moment the Lion's Club chose the library to be the recipient of he proceeds of several days' showing of the Colleen Moore Dollhouse. These old paper-dealer-librarians immediately and willingly transformed themselves into cashiers, clerks, and ushers, in order to go on being librarians as long as the funds should last.

The related activities of the library that first summer began to blossom in the winter. There had been book making, visits to a printing shop, a dairy and a farm, simple plays had been produced besides regular story hours and book circulation. There were never enough volunteers to keep the library open more than a few hours a week during the first winter. It wasn't easy to leave a well-heated house to go to the old storeroom and make a fire to warm it up enough to set about being a circulating library. As one newspaper writer put it, "it can not be called gallivanting in any sense." But for compensation there would be a knot of shivering children waiting eagerly on the library steps. They might be shivering partly from cold and partly in anticipation of the surprise play they were going to give the librarian that day. The Christmas spirit reached its peak when announcement was made by one little boy that he was giving his entire library of six books "so that other kids could read the stories he liked and had read so many times."

Not only were the children enjoying what the library offered, but occasionally a mother would visit it. As the number of adult visitors increased, books of interest to them were added, so that what had started as a children's library gradually changed into one for all ages.

Lexingtonians were by this time looking on the Manchester Street Library as a clearing-house for old books and magazines, toys, and all sorts of odds and ends that were no longer useful at home. It was only natural in time, that leftover clothes from rummage sales should be made over by a group of mothers for themselves and their families. In this way a sewing club for women developed. A course of instruction was offered, at the completion of which the women received a certificate and was granted the use of the sewing machine. A sympathetic drycleaner did his bit by cleaning the clothes

before the women started their alterations. This club disbands in the late winter and early spring months for the women get jobs in the neighboring tobacco factories. But once that seasonal work is done they come together again for their Thursday morning sewing bee.

The Daughters of Colonial Wars in Kentucky decided to make a periodic contribution toward buying attractive patriotic books for the collection, the first new books bought for the library. That collection continues to grow, and each books carries the Society's bookplate.

By the middle of the second summer the realization of the library's importance in meeting a definite need in Lexington had spread, but there was always a pressing need for funds. Members of the Manchester Street group appeared before the Public Library Board asking its help and later before the city commissioners. But the petitions were not granted and the committee had to find other means for carrying out its program. This included a trained worker, longer hours for the library to be opened and better equipment. There were still rummage sales to be resorted to an occasional gift from friends who knew the going was hard. But an increasing circulation was ample indication that the library had to keep its head above water, and somehow it did manage to open its doors on schedule throughout its second winter and its third summer.

The unrelenting hand of the war was beginning to be felt by the library, and its women volunteers found the going still more strenuous for war service took more and more time and more people. The remaining nucleus of the committee believed more firmly than ever that the library was an investment in democracy too valuable to be discontinued for the duration.

In January, 1942, Charlotte Courts, one of Lexington's low cost colored housing projects asked the library committee to establish a lending branch in its recreation center, and in the following June it held its formal opening. Two hundred and fifty books and instruction for maintenance were supplied and the project undertook to carry on its circulation through its own library board. The collection of books at the Manchester Street Library had grown to 3,000 by this time, not including duplicates which found their way to the shelves of the new library. The original aim to provide reading material to those who had none was being furthered in the establishment of the colored library.

Up to this time the library committee had not made an organization drive for funds, but now it seemed to be the only alternative left if the library was to continue to function. The need had not grown less, but greater, for a trained librarian and better equipment. Almost at the moment the drive was to be launched, the committee was approached by the officials of the first Community War Chest and was invited to be included in the 1942-1943 campaign. This meant having a budget which would include some of the things that were essential to continued growth. Simultaneously the library moved into a one hundred year old house of four rooms just down the street from the storeroom and was able to employ a full-time librarian.

The Girl Reserve organized a group and held meetings in the new building. With more than one room available various activities could be carried on at the same time. The loan of a piano, and a volunteer who could teach music, meant lessons for six of the more talented borrowers, and group singing at time when it would least interfere with book circulation. A Washington's birthday celebration was much more festive with singing by everyone and music by the six students.

Aspendale, the second colored housing project, formed a library committee and asked for a lending branch in its recreation room and under the same conditions which applied to Charlotte Courts. The original book collection continued to grow and this presented another opportunity for making books available to those who wanted them, so the grant was made, to be enlarged from time to time. Each colored group kept its own library record, making a monthly report to the Manchester Street committee as to its progress.

The interest the Y.M.C.A and Y.W.C.A had shown in the work the library was doing in the neighborhood was the basis for the formation of a men's club and a woman's club in the fall of 1943. The purpose of the two clubs is to further neighborhood improvements. The evening meetings are held in the library building. A good proportion of the members of both clubs is fathers and mothers of the library's young patrons, so that its influence is becoming family-wide.

The Council of Jewish Women carry on a toy lending library one a week which is enthusiastically attended and is helping carry a little farther the idea of responsibility for another's property. In the clubroom several of the fathers built and painted a cupboard for library supplies, but that is fast becoming the toy-lending cupboard as the collection grows.

The most recent distribution of reading material has been to the city's juvenile detention home which has never had a library up to this time. It is being carried out by the older boys and girls of the library as a service to their community. Once again good books and magazines are being put where they would not otherwise be available. So it

goes, the Manchester Street Library's original aim is being furthered as books reach those who have not known the enjoyment a good book can bring.'

Postlude

From 1940 until 1951, the Manchester Library remained a popular location for finding reading material. When the Lexington Public Library initiated its bookmobile service in 1951, the need for library services at the little old house at 1026 Manchester Street dwindled. A year later, the name of the institution was changed from the Manchester Street Library to the Manchester Center. The name change indicated the evolution in the facility's activities. The librarian had already begun "offering personal and mental hygiene guidance…offering assistance with government and job application forms…providing scholarships and urging school attendance, teaching piano lessons, lending ear to boy-girl problems, advising on clothes buying, and numerous other activities for which there was no other neighborhood clearing-house, and with which the neighborhood family units were unable to cope." ("From Tiny" 29) The Center also offered field trips for children in the Lexington area, facilitated children's theater and musical activities, and encouraged youth to participate in other leadership development programs including Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, the YMCA and the YWCA.

Besides working with children, the Center encouraged adults "to accept wider civic responsibility" by participating in issues "affecting the welfare of the neighborhood." In other words, the Manchester Center was fulfilling the paradigm of a settlement house, offering a wide array of services from meeting room space to guidance counseling for adults. The chief difference was that no one lived at the Center and any financial assistance provided to patrons required "sweat equity." The Center's success

was measured in people served, and this number increased dramatically in the late-1950s. It became apparent that the facility would need to be expanded. A fundraising effort—led by Julian Walker and Frances Van Meter—began in 1960 and resulted in razing the 144-year-old house that had housed the facility.[1] Another consequence was a hefty mortgage, but Walker asserted: "It's better to be short of cash than to be short of character." ("New Manchester" 1)

The new concrete block Manchester Center was dedicated on June 7, 1961. Madge Worsham, a seventeen-year-old Henry Clay High School graduate, accepted the building "on behalf of the youth of the neighborhood and said the labor, money and equipment would be repaid by loving care from the recipients who would 'hold it in trust for the youth to come.'" The evening's entertainment also included a "soft shoe number by the Small Fry Review, an exhibition of baton twirling by Marge Doyle, music by the Lincoln School Chorus, and square dancing by the Buckskin Belles and Beaus of the Central Christian Church." ("New Manchester" 1) Many of the materials and fixtures and most of the labor for the structure had been donated by suppliers, organizations and individuals in the community. The lot and the new building had cost $29,500. ("Manchester Center" 2) Within one year, the Center was being used by 400 people weekly. ("Fund Drive" 1)

By the mid-1970s, the Manchester Center had evolved from its library roots into a true social services agency, providing health, education, social and recreational activities. Its financial standing had also improved with support coming from local government, United Way, private gifts, and grants. In 1976 it was announced that the Center would again expand. With the assistance of the Lexington Jaycees, the Center's advocates raised

$115,000 to pay for a new building. The new facility was dubbed the Education Building, because it housed the Center's day care and kindergarten programs and provided classroom space for continuing education classes and literacy programming. ("Tears" 1) Today, the Manchester Center maintains a strong emphasis on children and youth activities, but it provides programming for all ages and it continues to emphasize one its chief missions, literacy training.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Frances Van Meter was one of the original volunteers that started the Manchester Street Library. A native of Bardwell, Kentucky, Van Meter became the Library's director in 1943 and saw the Manchester Center evolve under her directorship. She left the Center in 1966 to work for the Lexington Public Library for four years. When she retired, she moved to southwest England. Van Meter died in 1994 at the age of 85. "Kentucky Native Lives Out Childhood Dream in England," *Herald-Leader* [Lexington] 17 March 1985: 1G; "Trio Goes to England to See Manchester Center Founder," *Herald-Leader* [Lexington] 3 August 1994: 2B; "Manchester Center Pays Tribute to Woman Who Helped Build It.," *Herald-Leader* [Lexington] 23 April 1995: 1B.