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# Looking Back: WPA Library Work in Kentucky

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**Looking Back: WPA Library Work in Kentucky**  
**By Jonathan Jeffrey**

President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935 to provide useful public work for needy unemployed persons. It was renamed the Work Projects Administration in 1939, when it was placed under the Federal Works Agency. It should not be confused with the Public Works Administration, which was created to construct public facilities with skilled labor. In its eight years of existence WPA employed about 8,500,000 individuals at a total cost of nearly \$11 billion. WPA sponsored a myriad of different projects, including the Library project. The WPA suffered some undue criticism, particularly as it related to waste. In the following article published in the December 1941 issue of the *Bulletin of the Kentucky Library Association*, May V. Kunz, director of statewide library projects for the WPA, addresses the WPA library work in Kentucky and some of the criticism it suffered. I have added some annotations for clarification.

“The purpose of the WPA Library project is to demonstrate the advantages of public library service insofar as is possible with untrained personnel. WPA also assists established public libraries to extend their services to surrounding territory which is without such service or to assist established public libraries to remain open longer hours to give better service in the immediate vicinity of the library.

There are many difficulties which must be surmounted both in the development and in the operation of this purpose. To use untrained relief workers which is the prime objective of the WPA program generally, much time and effort must be expended in the training of these workers. Some people feel that these libraries are for relief people only

and are not for the general public. This idea is partly the fault of the WPA because when the program was first started, WPA had to be in the headlines. Libraries established were therefore called WPA libraries. We are now spending much time and effort educating people to the fact that these libraries belong to the communities. We encourage libraries to be called “----- County Library” and in very small type- “assisted by WPA”. We want the community to feel possessive and proud of this cultural addition to the life of this group.

Because of the necessity for strict accounting of all government property, WPA forms were emphasized. You might like to know that we do know where every bone folder or pound of glue was used and why. Workers responsible for this federal property spent most of their energies preparing these reports. Such accounting is an absolute necessity but is not of first consideration in our libraries at present. We now stress the knowledge of books. It is no good to have a salesman who is unfamiliar with his wares. A grocer must know the contents of the cans on his shelves if he is to promise sales. A library clerk must know what is between the covers of the books besides paper pages. We require each worker to read at least two books a month. By knowing the book stock, the worker is better able to assist the borrowers. Any librarian who does not know her book stock fails in her prime duty of connecting books and people. This knowledge of books on the part of the worker increases her own knowledge, her usefulness to the borrowers and incidentally the library circulation.

The 1940 population was 2,845,627. Almost one-half of this population was served by libraries operated by WPA, i. e., 1,135,441 as of October 1, 1941. Because of personnel reductions we will serve only 1,033,316 effective Nov. 1, 1941. This does not

mean that the state quota of workers has been reduced. Our project must employ only those workers with the best education available in the community. All the cultural projects such as education and recreation must do the same and these workers are referred to as skilled workers. In a survey of WPA workers employed in the Community service Division, more skilled workers of those certified for relief were employed than unskilled workers certified. The director felt that this was unnecessary discrimination against the unskilled workers. As a result, all cultural projects have been cut. The library project received the same personnel reduction received by education and recreation. Unskilled workers were then added to other projects such as school lunch and housekeeping aide. This has meant that [the] library project has been forced to close libraries in seven counties. Those closed were the weakest units. By that we mean those units having the lowest sponsor contributions, the poorest book stock and those most difficult to supervise. However, all these units were in the district which has never had the advantage of a trained librarian as district supervisor. It might be that with the supervision which the new trained librarian is qualified to give, these units might be improved. As Dr. Crabb said in his address, "Plum Springs had no cultural advantages, no stimulus toward beauty".<sup>1</sup> The communities where the libraries had to close have no other cultural advantages either. For this reason, our project feels most keenly the necessity imposed by reduced personnel of closing these seven county libraries. None of these counties are financially able to support county library service independent of

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Leland Crabb must have spoken at the same Kentucky Library Association meeting. Crabb was born on 22 January 1884 in Plum Springs, Kentucky, about six miles from Bowling Green. He received a Life [Teaching] Certificate from Western State Normal School (now Western Kentucky University), a Bachelor's degree from Peabody College, and a Master's degree from Columbia University. He taught briefly at Western, but was lured away by a professor of education position at Peabody. He taught and served as a dean at Peabody from 1927 to 1950. He is also known for his eleven historical

outside aid either from federal or state sources. Obviously, we did not feel it would be reasonable to close any units which had already received appropriations for new book purchases or those which might become regional centers or those having any possibility of becoming permanent libraries. With a 20 percent personnel reduction, service had to be curtailed. We tried to effect this change with as little long range damage to the project as possible.

Of the 1,145,438 people served in 1940, one in 28 was an active library borrower. Eighty thousand and sixteen borrowers were registered. This is very far from the standard as determined by A.L.A., but considering the quality of our book stock, the newness of the reading habit, the few books of interest to the readers, the difficulty of convincing the people that this was and is a free service available to everyone and the geographic inaccessibility of much of the population, we feel that a reasonable beginning has been made but that there is a long road ahead.

According to the law as passed by the U. S. Congress, only 5 percent of the total persons employed by the project can be supervisors. That means that for every 95 relief workers employed, we can have only five trained librarians to supervise the work. Compare this with any large library with which you are familiar, bearing in mind that that library is under one roof, while with fewer trained librarians, there are many miles between. We have explained before the reason for the present quota reduction. It is difficult to plan and to operate an efficient program when the employment varies in nine months from 708 to about 200. What the future holds, we know no more than you. We hope that it will not be necessary to curtail our services further.

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novels and his non-fiction writing concerning Nashville's history. He died on 2 October 1979 and is buried in Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Nashville.

As mentioned before, our book stock is of very poor quality. Every book owned by both the sponsor and WPA circulated approximately seven times last year. In 1940, 1,307,957 books were circulated. The book stock consisted of 168,494 sponsor-owned books and 18,693 WPA owned books. The quality of this stock is appalling. You cannot imagine, or from your expressions maybe you have seen the junk taking up space on our shelves. To obtain books in the beginning when the money was not available, gifts were gratefully received and solicited. Public libraries sent their discarded books and public spirited citizens cleaned their attics and cellars. Unscrupulous salesmen sold all kinds of junk absolutely unrelated to the needs of the community. If I ever met the salesmen who sold sets upon sets of books to our libraries, I hope it is not on this earth. We have sets upon sets of books on our shelves which are never moved except for dusting. These books have a place in some libraries, but not in our libraries which are in such urgent need of books to READ. Our gifts include Sate Agricultural Yearbooks of the 1900 vintage, 1890 census reports, Kentucky Geological Surveys, old Sunday School magazines, sets of Scott's novels in such fine print that a magnifying glass must be used to see them. Sets of classics have been donated and are never moved from the shelves. People who are unaccustomed to reading will not pick up a classic to read even if they know it is a classic, in such editions. Books with several missing pages have been regular donations. Personally, I feel cheated if part of any book I am reading is missing, and certainly you will all agree that such a book has no place in any library, ours included. One sponsor paid \$18.00 freight on books donated from a library in the east and not one volume was useable! The shipment even included *True Story Magazine*! These examples could be expanded indefinitely but I am sure that you understand what we

mean when we say our book stock is of very poor quality, and that we have developed beyond the discard and rummage stage.

Our current stress to the sponsor is the urgent need for him to buy new books. To assist him with his purchases (please note we do not dictate what to buy), we have a book expert on our state staff. Such assistance and advice is given with due consideration to the interests and needs of the community and the library as well as to the various age groups. Juvenile books are most needed everywhere. The sponsor can follow our advice or invest in the current best seller which he wants to read as he chooses.

Federally owned books loaned as demonstrations are being changed gradually for the first time since the project has been in operation. One county had 1295 books and another had 8. Obviously, this was not a fair distribution. Furthermore the readable books had been read and re-read by the people interested in them. These books were not selected by trained librarians and were not all suitable for county library service or suited to the needs of the reading public. Less than 15,000 of the 22,000 now owned are fit for use. We are therefore calling into the State Office county by county all federally owned books to be cleaned, bound if necessary, classified and catalogued by trained cataloguers and processed. They are then sent to other counties which have not had these titles in groups of 150 books of which 50 are juvenile, 50 adult fiction and 50 adult non-fiction. If this system is ever in complete working order, we should be able to change these collections every 4 or 5 months. These fresh collections of federally owned books have had two results. One is to stimulate reading and increase circulation and the number of borrowers, which proved my point previously implied that we would have more borrowers and a higher circulation if we had more reasonable books. The other result is

that the new collections seem to touch the sponsor's pocketbook and convince him of the necessity of buying new books for the community. In other words, he sees the value of making this investment in books for the people. The more we can convince the sponsor and the citizens that the new books are to a library as food is to a man's stomach, the lifeline without which life is impossible, the sooner will we have libraries which will be an integral part of the community life and service.

WPA is growing in the quality of its supervision. For the first time, we are in a position to introduce to you four trained librarians who are district supervisors, and we hope to have another trained librarian available in the fifth district as soon as a suitable person can be found. Three experienced trained librarians are on the state staff in addition to the catalogers mentioned before. As you know, we try first of all to find qualified librarians in Kentucky for any vacancy which occurs. However, rather than take unqualified people, our state administration approves of our hiring the best qualified personnel for efficient operation. This business-like outlook by the administration is most encouraging and profitable for our project. Fortunately, we have been able to find practically all our personnel in the state.

You can see from this attitude on the part of the administration that we are in a position to stress the professional angle of libraries. We emphasize the fact that we are training the relief workers as library clerks, not librarians and we insist that the workers be referred to as "library clerks" and not "librarians".

Surveying the map of Kentucky which shows library services in the state, special libraries, college and university libraries, and public libraries, are shown in different colors. Libraries assisted by WPA, libraries and branches operated by WPA, are shown



in a similar manner. You can readily see that most of the libraries assisted by WPA are in Western Kentucky, most of the libraries operated by WPA are in eastern and southern Kentucky and in those counties having the least ability to operate or to support library service independently. Several libraries listed in the biennial report of the Library Extension Division as established public libraries are shown on our map as operated by WPA because our definition as sent from Washington lists “assistance units” as those which we assist with personnel and not operated entirely with WPA personnel, but are operated under the direction of sponsor employees. These discrepancies in the two reports are therefore due to differences in definition.

For constant advice and assistance, encouragement and general planning, much credit is due Miss Nofcier and Mr. Brigham.<sup>2</sup> Both are ports in a storm, broad shoulders during discouragement and friends who rejoice with us in times of progress. We do appreciate all they do for us.

However, we do feel that unless the librarians in this meeting and in the Citizens Library League are convinced of the sincere efforts of this project to further library development in Kentucky, all this work has been in vain.<sup>3</sup> Only as the communities are sold on the service are we demonstrating library service or extending library service to localities which never had this privilege before. If you are content to sit and listen to speeches about what work we are trying to do and yet DO nothing about your convictions, the library development in Kentucky is lost and we might as well give up

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<sup>2</sup> Lena B. Nofcier was long-time head of the Kentucky Library Commission and Harold Frederick Brigham was the director of the Louisville Free Public Library from 1931 to mid-1942.

<sup>3</sup> The Citizens Library League began in 1936 and was formally organized in 1937. It was first called the “Kentucky Citizen’s Library Committee.” The purpose of the group was to “work for the improvement and extension of library services both local and Statewide; to preserve State and local archives, to co-operate with existing library groups and to see that proper impetus is given to legislation

right now. If you are really convinced of the worth of your own work, is it unreasonable to expect you to pass on to others less fortunate the privileges you enjoy and know about? The future is in your hands to develop or retreat. Will you use this temporary form of federal aid while it is available? We have painted a very sketchy picture of our work. Your interest translated into action on behalf of these new libraries will bring the program into bold relief and leave Kentucky a better place in which to live because of the efforts you have made.

What will you do – listen or act?”