

## **Introduction: The Continuing Depression.**

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**Abstract:** Margaret Herdman's study of the impact of the Depression on public libraries is unflinching and unemotional, whereas R. L. Duffus's study of libraries in ten metropolises gives more of the color of the era, even if it is more anecdotal than statistical.<sup>2</sup> Along with Edward Stanford's unparalleled if somewhat dry study of library extension under the WPA, these works comprise the principal contemporary studies, although several other texts not devoted to the Great Depression per se are usually cited in a review of the period.<sup>3</sup> First is Louis Round Wilson and Edward A. Wight's review of the eleven Rosenwald Fund countywide library demonstrations in the South, the result of a gift of \$500,000 from the renowned Sears, Roebuck and Co. benefactor, Julius Rosenwald. [...] they survived the decade and became thriving concerns only a short time after Wilson and Wight completed their study.  
James V. Carmichael's summary of the work of the ALA's regional field agent for the South, Tommie Dora Barker, and Mary Mallory's digest of Mary Utopia Rothrock's TVA experiment both deal with profoundly influential professional women whose careers reached their apogee during the period.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the era is colorful with strong characters and the extraordinary if somewhat quaint lengths to which librarians in the 1930s went to extend and promote their services, among them horse-pack delivery and houseboat libraries, bayou mobiles and store-front libraries.

**Keywords:** library history | great depression | chicago public library | academic libraries | librarianship | american library association

### **Article:**

The "Libraries in the Depression" theme for this issue was proposed on the Library History Round Table (LHRT) listserv prior to the 2009 American Library Association (ALA) meeting, and the motion to pursue a special issue on this theme was formalized at the July 12, 2009, Executive Board meeting of the LHRT by member Bill Olbrich. The editor of *Libraries & the Cultural Record*, Dr. David B. Gracy II, gave every form of support and encouragement to the idea, and I agreed to serve as guest editor. A call for papers was sent out on the LHRT listserv

and the library education listserv, JESSE, in August 2009, and Lee Shiflett and Cheryl Knott Malone were indispensable in helping to vet submissions. A total of twelve abstract submissions were received, from which six were selected for development. Of these, four reached completion and make up this issue.

The themes and treatments in this issue are perhaps more seasoned than what has been written by library historians of the Great Depression heretofore. Eileen McGrath and Linda Jacobson provide a thoroughgoing analysis of the first years of the then-new Louis Round Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina (UNC) in Chapel Hill, which was dedicated in conjunction with meetings of the Southeastern Library Association and the Southern Educational Association barely a week before Black Friday. Their account runs somewhat contrary to the popular wisdom about libraries as ultimate benefactors of the Great Depression and leaves little doubt that whatever collections and programs may have been initiated during the period, the Depression commensurably stalled growth at the South's largest university library. Of course, some places were hit harder: the University of Mississippi did not have a book budget during the first half of the 1930s, and Whitman Davis, the librarian, wisely used his time securing a BS degree in library science from the University of Illinois.<sup>1</sup> For relatively well-developed university libraries like UNC's, however, the effects of retrenchment may have been more apparent than in Mississippi, which had little to begin with. Like the apocryphal southern tenant farmer, interviewed by a newspaper reporter about how he was faring in the Great Depression, poorer universities and, indeed, entire states could respond without irony, "Depression? I didn't know there was one going on."

Both Eric Novotny and Joyce Latham examine aspects of the effects of the Depression on an urban library - in this case, the Chicago Public Library (CPL). As Novotny's study suggests, the Great Depression provided hubris enough for idealists such as Carl B. Roden, who treasured the ethnic richness of Chicago and its neighborhoods and was anxious to elevate the libraries' mission and impact. Roden was caught off-guard by the perpetual need to restate the benefits of a public library to city officials and citizens who thought the purpose of a library was purely recreational, particularly during the economic crisis and subsequent budget restrictions. It was a challenging decade for which many librarians were unprepared, but Roden tried to adapt. Latham examines the labor response to the Memorial Day Massacre of 1937, a response that resulted in the formation of a new CPL branch in South Chicago. Her account emphasizes the resilience of the library system and the South Chicago Branch services in spite of whatever economic shortfalls occurred. The construction of the branch and the planning that lay behind it are a testament to coalitions and compromises almost unimaginable in 2011. Together, these articles suggest some of the complexity involved in describing a wide-ranging catastrophe like the Great Depression, even when the subject is narrowed to its effects on libraries.

Tanya Ducker Finchum and Allen Finchum's chronicle of statewide library development in Oklahoma, one of the states hardest hit by both depression and drought, demonstrates the power of individuals and outside organizations to benefit libraries throughout the country in this era. Many of Oklahoma's libraries experienced growth or augmentation as a result of statewide library efforts, considerable citizen involvement, the relief and impetus provided by the myriad of agencies created by the federal government to confront the Depression, and the emergence or articulation of a state agency responsible for library development. The articles in this issue, then, provide varied perspectives on the Great Depression's effect on academic, metropolitan, and town and rural libraries and suggest succinctly how libraries were affected by economic disaster.

The literature of library history devoted to the Great Depression is surprisingly sparse. Even during the Depression, lasting approximately from October 29, 1929, to the closing of the last New Deal agency (the Works Progress Administration, or WPA, in 1943), little of an analytical nature was written about libraries. Some high-quality works did emerge: Margaret Herdman's study of the impact of the Depression on public libraries is unflinching and unemotional, whereas R. L. Duffus's study of libraries in ten metropolises gives more of the color of the era, even if it is more anecdotal than statistical.<sup>2</sup> Along with Edward Stanford's unparalleled if somewhat dry study of library extension under the WPA, these works comprise the principal contemporary studies, although several other texts not devoted to the Great Depression per se are usually cited in a review of the period.<sup>3</sup>

First is Louis Round Wilson and Edward A. Wight's review of the eleven Rosenwald Fund countywide library demonstrations in the South, the result of a gift of \$500,000 from the renowned Sears, Roebuck and Co. benefactor, Julius Rosenwald. This is an interesting document in itself, not only because of the fund's initial difficulty in identifying southern states both with existing county library laws and the willingness to extend services "equally" (as the term was then understood) to blacks and whites, but also because the demonstrations were failures in terms of garnering the contractual amounts of matching funds by the end of the five-year demonstration period. Even so, they survived the decade and became thriving concerns only a short time after Wilson and Wight completed their study. Also noteworthy was Wilson's survey of American library development, composed while he was dean of the University of Chicago's Graduate Library School. The Geography of Reading shows the hand of his UNC friend and associate, sociologist Howard W. Odum, though Wilson's prose is considerably more approachable than Odum's most famous work of the period, *Southern Regions of the United States*.<sup>4</sup> Tommie Dora Barker's report on southern library developments is illuminating because the South was one of the two areas of the United States (the Northwest being the other) adopted

by ALA's Library Extension Division (LED) for rural library development well before Franklin Roosevelt declared the South the "nation's number one economic problem" in 1938.<sup>5</sup> A great deal of the southern work was facilitated by the three foundations (the Carnegie Corporation, General Education Board, and Rosenwald Fund) whose interests had almost as much to do with insisting on the "equal" part of the phrase "separate but equal" as they did with making regional library disparities less glaring. The foundations' annual reports are likewise indispensable in assessing library programs of the period. The astute observations of a foreign visitor, Wilhelm Munthe, not only upon American life but also upon librarianship in particular rankled some contemporaries.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Lucile Foster Fargo, head of LED for the Northwest, composed a foundational text on school libraries that went through three editions in the 1930s.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond these by no means inconsequential studies, the contemporary periodical literature, especially that contained in the *Library Journal*, best documents the development and struggles of libraries during the Depression. These include the ALA's creation of a National Library Plan by 1935 as well as library progress as a result of aid from the many federal agencies of the time, the fate of individual library systems, the birth of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and the development of county and regional library service in parts of the country where such cooperative governmental arrangements were initially suspect. There is, incidentally, quite a bit of promotional literature from the era, too, such as the ALA's compilation of articles about library service across multiple political jurisdictions and the reports of the American Association for Adult Education on rural library service.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, this is not a great deal of literature for a period so fraught with social turmoil, bubbling with new ideas, and carried forward by brilliant popular culture and a popular front that provided a serious political and ideological challenge.

Reassessments have been less frequent than one might expect. The Gilded Age naturally attracts more researchers because of its floridness of quaint manners, richness of expression, and elaborate dignity. On the other hand, the 1930s have their richness, too. Correspondence of the period, both in the ALA archives and local repositories, was also direct, frank, and discreet but not cynical (the words "personal" and "confidential" still commanded respect when typed in caps at the top of a letter or when written and underlined on a copy), and people still said what they meant. It is perhaps daunting to some researchers that such a large volume of typed documents exists, most of which survives in triplicate carbon copy on onion skin or yellow paper of poor quality that is extremely high in acidity. Further, because so many levels of bureaucracy were involved in implementing a national program (for the first time in U.S. history, one could argue), there seems to be a superfluity of information. It is small wonder, then, that so few library historians have chosen to unravel the threads of library programs among New Deal agencies or attempted to navigate the many professional particulars of the period, not least the absence of

Social Security benefits for workers and the changing credentials for librarians in the period immediately preceding the Great Depression.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly there have been a few solid narrative precedents set. Kathleen Molz's examination of national planning for library service is essential to an understanding of what library and government leaders were trying to accomplish in the 1930s. Daniel Ring's collection of essays about government-sponsored library programs in the era provides more detailed information about specific agencies. Peggy Sullivan's biography of the ALA's longtime executive director, Carl A. Milam (1920-48), whose tenure overlapped not only the Great Depression but also the "salad days" of foundation library philanthropy, gives the clearest and most accurate summary of the professional developments of the period from a national and organizational perspective. Robert S. Martin's study of Louis Round Wilson's early career at the University of North Carolina is likewise essential; the late Edward G. Holley often remarked that Wilson's influence on the national level until 1943 was unmatched by anyone except William Warner Bishop in Michigan. James V. Carmichael's summary of the work of the ALA's regional field agent for the South, Tommie Dora Barker, and Mary Mallory's digest of Mary Utopia Rothrock's TVA experiment both deal with profoundly influential professional women whose careers reached their apogee during the period.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the era is colorful with strong characters and the extraordinary if somewhat quaint lengths to which librarians in the 1930s went to extend and promote their services, among them horse-pack delivery and houseboat libraries, bayou mobiles and store-front libraries. In addition, the turf battles in state and academic libraries between professional archivists and librarians and federal library workers make lively reading.<sup>11</sup> Behind the best of these accounts, there is always some anecdotal nugget opening on to a greater truth. For instance, Martha Swain's fine study of the library programs of New Deal agencies includes the story of a battle of bookbinders versus WPA workers, illustrated by a photograph showing female African Americans hard at work making dilapidated stock ready for recirculation. The story provides a perfect example of how capitalism conflicted with the needs of the underserved during the period.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of a typical Great Depression tale, U.S. preparations for World War II solve the economic crisis, and southern towns that never heard of minimum wage are suddenly flush with the spoils of the defense industry. Patriotic posters line store-front libraries, and Americans are united in their resolve to pursue their ideals. Schadenfreude only occasionally haunts such Great Depression accounts, and authors are rarely tempted to risk comparison between the 1930s and more current economic travails.<sup>18</sup> For the people who suffered through it, the Great Depression was an immense struggle, even if popular culture flourished, as Arthur Schwarz's song and a

recent monograph using the same image has it, by "Dancing in the Dark."<sup>14</sup> In general accounts of the Great Depression, libraries are mentioned only in passing, if at all, perhaps because the service they provided to people looking for re-education - or even for a newspaper's employment listings - lacks a drama equal to the political and economic turmoil of the decade leading up to World War II. Library history is comparatively quiet even in the worst of times, and no doubt it is the lack of drama that has contributed to its obscurity and the draconian cutbacks in library service when economic crises occur.

The articles in this issue are typical of their predecessors, therefore, in measuring the impact of the Great Depression on libraries more emphatically than they measure the contribution of libraries to American culture during these years. At the same time, in describing this era from the vantage point of our current economic collapse, these studies illustrate that lack of support for libraries in a period of economic decline has an impact far outlasting the crisis (Novotny as well as McGrath and Jacobson) and that investments in libraries during these times bear rewards that far outweigh their cost (Finchum and Finchum as well as Latham).

#### Notes:

1. Davis wrote to the program's director, Phineas L. Windsor, that "for the past two years I have been laboring under many handicaps and disappointments but I still have confidence in the future outlook. It has been rather dark at times. We have not received any salary for fifteen months but we are still carrying on." Whitman Davis to Phineas L. Windsor, June 6, 1932, Davis File, Student Files, Library School of the University of Illinois, University of Illinois Archives, Urbana-Champaign.
2. Margaret M. Herdman, "The Public Library in Depression," *Library Quarterly* 13 (October 1943): 310-44; R. L. Duffus, *Our Starving Libraries: Studies in Ten American Communities during the Depression Years* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1933).
3. Edward B. Stanford, *Library Extension under the WPA: An Appraisal of an Experiment in Federal Aid* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944).
4. Louis Round Wilson and Edward A. Wight, *County Library Services in the South: A Report on the Rosenwald Demonstrations in Library Service* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935) ; Louis Round Wilson, *The Geography of Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

1938) ; Howard W. Odum, Southern Regions of the United States (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936).

5. National Emergency Council, Report on Economic Conditions of the South (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 1.

6. Tommie Dora Barker, Libraries of the South: A Report on Developments, 1930-1935 (Chicago: American Library Association, 1936). See annual reports of the foundations; useful summaries are also found in Robert M. Lester's Forty Years of Carnegie Giving: A Summary of the Benefactions of Andrew Carnegie and of the Work of the Philanthropic Trusts which He Created (New York: Scribner's, 1941) and Peter M. Ascoli's very fine biography Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), which contains very illuminating discussions about the evolution of the philanthropic philosophy that Rosenwald developed. See also Wilhelm Muntile, American Librarianship from a European Angle: An Attempt at Evaluation of Policies and Activities (Chicago: American Library Association, 1939).

7. Lucile F. Fargo, The Program for Elementary Library School Service (Chicago: American Library Association, 1930); for more on the relationship of Southern Educational Association standards for school libraries and southern library development, see Robert S. Martin, "Louis Round Wilson and the Library Standards of the Southern Association, 1926-1929," Journal of Library History 19 (Spring 1984): 259-81.

8. Ethel M. Fair, ed., Countrywide Library Service: A Compilation of Articles on Service Organized by Counties and Other Large Units (Chicago: American Library Association, 1934); Marion Humble, Rural America Reads: A Study of Rural Library Service (New York: American Association for Adult Education, 1938) .

9. A library certificate was the recognized professional credential for librarians until 1928, when a BS in library science or its equivalent became the accepted degree. Women who left library work for marriage were particularly hard hit if they attempted to return to work only to learn their credentials were inadequate.

10. Kathleen MoIz, *National Planning for Library Service, 1935-1975* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1984); Daniel F. Ring, ed., *Studies in Creative Partnership: Federal Aid to Public Libraries during the New Deal* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1980); Peggy Sullivan, *Carl H Milam and the American Library Association* (New York: H. W. Wilson & Company, 1976); Robert S. Martin, "Louis Round Wilson at the University of North Carolina, 1901-1932," PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 1988; James V. Carmichael, Jr., "Tommie Dora Barker and Southern Librarianship," PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1988; Mary Mallory, "The Rare Vision of Mary Utopia Rothrock: Organizing Regional Library Services in the Tennessee Valley," *Libraries & Culture* 65 (January 1995): 62-88.

11. Robert M. Willingham, "Bookish Bureaucracy: The Work of the American Imprints Inventory in Georgia, 1937-1941," *Georgia Librarian* 19 (August 1982): 3-6.

12. Martha H. Swain, "A New Deal in Libraries: Federal Relief Work and Library Service, 1933-1943," *Libraries & Culture* 30 (Summer 1995): 273.

13. Wayne A. Wiegand, review of *Public Schools in Hard Times: The Great Depression and Recent Years* by David Tyeck, Robert Lowe, and Elizabeth Hansot, *Journal of Library History* 21 (Fall 1986): 786-87.

14. Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2009).