

The Benefits of Rural Libraries*Alumni Prize Essay*

read by

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Sometimes it is doubtful whether or not the part which libraries have played, and still play, in the making of civilization is quite appreciated. There are superficial evidences of their importance everywhere. In almost any civilized community, whether large or small, the public library is as conspicuous as the railway station, the post office, the church, or the school. The best known building on a college or university campus usually is its library. But neither the number of libraries nor the grandeur of library buildings can give any intimation of the significant part which libraries play in the all-important work of preserving and transmitting the social heritage.

Perhaps the very familiarity of most people with the modern library makes them less likely to understand its fundamental importance. If this be so, it might be well to consider the function of the library.

Information becomes more serviceable to mankind according as it is made easily available to a larger number of persons. It is printed because printed records, when distributed, may be examined by many readers in many places and at many times. Improvements in ways of handling printed materials have made it possible to distribute documents to readers almost everywhere and at almost any time. Printing presses and means of communication have been greatly improved, thus facilitating the distribution of literature of general interest. It matters little where the reader resides or where the information originated, for the world of all who read is one. The protection of information from the ravages of time is just as important for civilization as its release from limitations of space. Improved library facilities and library methods are the principal means by which the protection and systematic preservation of printed materials have been accomplished. In order that information may be preserved, documents must not only be safeguarded but must be so systematically arranged in libraries that their contents may be easily

discovered by readers. This explains the recent and great development in library methods.

Now that some consideration has been given to the basic significance of a library, the former idea of it has changed a great deal, especially with regard to its two functions of keeping in systematic order the information contained in documents and of protecting the documents themselves.

The change in the attitude of mankind towards libraries has had an interesting development. The earlier types of buildings were insecure, and, as a result, there was a constant danger of destruction of their contents by rain, wind, or fire. This is one reason why a mediaeval library was regarded as a storehouse where documents were kept and guarded. There were also the risks of war. Society was ill-organized and few appreciated the value of library possessions. A barbarian horde could, in a single hour, bring to naught the work of centuries. This constant hazard to which library materials were exposed was not the only reason why they were so carefully protected. The physical character of the documents themselves, along with the great difficulty and expense in replacing them in case of loss, made it necessary for libraries to serve somewhat as places where highly-prized documents were preserved. Prior to the invention of paper the material upon which records were made was very fragile; and, for many of these records, there were no duplicate copies. Thus at that time the loss of a single copy of a document might mean the total loss to mankind of the precious information contained therein. And even if a duplicate copy did exist, it could not be copied without the expenditure of much time and energy. Thus it can easily be seen how priceless were the early library's possessions and how important it was that they be zealously protected from ruthless hands, no less than from other perils. In fact, a tradition developed that a library should make it its business to keep books away from ordinary folk.

To-day conditions are very different. Modern libraries are thief-proof as well as fire-proof, and indeed are veritable stronghouses. Printing has made it possible to publish books in editions of hundreds of thousands. The destruction of a great library to-day would mean, from a material standpoint, a great financial loss. On the intellectual side, however, the loss would be little or nothing for most of the destroyed volumes could be replaced and al-

most all the information recorded in its lost documents could be found elsewhere. The net result of all this is that the function of the library has been completely reversed. No longer is the library regarded primarily as a storehouse. No longer does it collect valuable books, manuscripts, and other documents with a view of keeping them away from the public. It aims rather at becoming a public service. In doing so the modern library undertakes a threefold responsibility of acquiring printed materials containing useful information, of preserving them, and of making them available to the reading public.

These considerations of the function of a modern library make its basic significance much more easily understood. Without libraries few people indeed could afford to read extensively, for books are expensive, and often it is very difficult to obtain desired copies. The rural library overcomes these obstacles and makes it possible for rich and poor alike to obtain any worth-while books they may desire.

Since it is impossible for the majority of people to read extensively without the aid of libraries the rewards of reading are necessarily the benefits of libraries. The most important return made to the reader is information, and on it all other benefits of reading depend. In fact, without information all speculative life and most practical life would be scarcely possible. Since everyday problems are becoming more complex and difficult, one must increasingly have at his disposal more varied and more accurate information in order to live successfully. All our knowledge comes through the senses: *nihil in intellectu quin prius fuerit in sensu*. Some perception is of a direct sort and gives information that is strictly first-hand. But most perception is second-hand. The report of some one who has seen or heard something is accepted. Accounts of observations which have been passed successively through a hundred reporters may be accepted. Often a person cannot make his own observations. He cannot observe, for instance, what happened before he was born, nor what is happening now in a foreign land. Though man must depend upon the observations of others for most of his information, still, even in matters of greatest importance, he need never apply to the original observer. Even if it were possible to inquire of an original observer, the most probable results would be false impressions, misunderstandings, and distorted memories. Difficulties and uncertainties such as

these in getting reliable information cannot altogether be avoided. But they can be greatly reduced merely by taking information from reliable printed sources. All important facts regarding every topic of general human interest are now found in printed records. To every person who can read, reliable information of every variety is available without cost and without delay.

The use of libraries exempts one from the trials of observing and the dangers of being misinformed. It also relieves one from the labour of cramming his mind with detailed facts. The intellectually efficient man of to-day need not necessarily be a walking encyclopaedia. It is sufficient that he know where to find the answers to questions that may arise. He will find them in any good library.

The benefits to be reaped from libraries are none other than the rewards guaranteed by good reading. The first and most obvious of these is information. But there are others too. Enjoyment is most frequently mentioned among its rewards. Modern industrial civilization has given leisure to everybody. But it has also made everyday work more monotonous, thus urging people to fly from the cares and worries of the world of reality and to seek refuge in the world of fancy. There are various ways of releasing the mind from the tediousness of routine life, and of these, reading is the most profitable. No entertainment can distract the mind so completely as reading. There are books suited to one's every taste and mood. In fact one of the striking characteristics of our age is the unprecedented amount and variety of recreational literature. Every reader has access to an all but certain guarantee of entertainment in books. It is not without good reason, then, that reading has been called "the best worked out avenue to the land of pleasure."

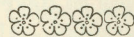
It would not be an exaggeration to state that the task of learning to read would be well worth while even though its only reward was the entertainment derived therefrom. Yet there are other benefits that are equally gratifying. The part played by reading in developing the understanding can scarcely be exaggerated. It is true that people of to-day have more information at their disposal than had their forefathers of earlier generations. So much information is thrust upon the man of to-day that he is bewildered by it. Indeed, left to his own resources, he cannot avoid hopeless confusion regarding the physical, economic, political, social, and religious world in which he lives. It

is true that ultimately the understanding of any problem must be one's own. Explanations by others, however, are most useful, and without them one would be almost helpless. But explanations and solutions to the problems of the world have been given by the great minds of the past and may still be read at leisure.

Whether reading aids the individual more by helping him to understand the world in which he lives or by setting his own thought processes astir is a debatable question. Nevertheless one of the most important services rendered to readers is the opportunity for the stimulation of thought. Thought springs mainly from human contacts and the liveliest thoughts arise from immediate contacts. Rarely does the ordinary person meet men face-to-face who are so brilliant as to set his mind on fire. But the most challenging products of the mental life of the profoundest and most inspiring thinkers have been carefully preserved in books and may be had for the reading.

Closely allied to thought-stimulation is inspiration. Nothing so attracts one to the performance of great deeds and great thoughts as to meet intimately those who have wrought great deeds and thought great thoughts. Such men are few, are much sought after, and do not live forever. The only sure way of knowing them consists in reading what they have written and what has been written about them. Nothing can more certainly arouse noble aspirations than the intimate associations with the great men of the past. These are had only through reading. To read good books is to familiarize oneself with the lives of the greatest personalities of all times and to become a friend to the intellectual giants of past generations.

All these, information, enjoyment, understanding, stimulation, and inspiration are the rewards of reading. But it is rural libraries which bring books within the reach of everyone and which make reading, and the consequent attainments of its priceless rewards, possible.



A bigoted man is one who refuses to accept a reason for anything; a broad-minded man of today is one who will accept anything for a reason—providing it is not a good reason.—*Sheen*.