The 1960s mark a very special era in the development of public libraries in Georgia. Measured in time, the Sixties were about halfway between the yesterday and the today of the public libraries in our state in the Twentieth Century. Without yesterday there would be no today. To get a proper prospective, let’s turn the calendar back and look to our heritage.

Several important steps were taken earlier in our library history before the thrust that instigated the beginning of the phenomenal public library development in Georgia. Although the original municipal library law was enacted in 1901, it was not until the Thirties that a permissive tax law was written into the revised Georgia Constitution. The law later was amended to permit towns and counties to contract across governmental lines to establish and support public libraries and services. The certification of libraries came in the late Thirties.

Under WPA in the Thirties, Federal funds were allotted, under guidelines, for the support of public library services. In the main the library was located in a city hall, a store front, or in a small building abandoned for other purposes. There were a few libraries built as such — fine for the time — some utilizing grants from the Andrew Carnegie Foundation. There were very, very few professional librarians. Institutes were carried out every third year during the WPA era, whereby the acting librarians had the opportunity to learn pertinent facts and procedures.

In the early Forties, with WPA phased out, most of the little libraries were forced to close. Rural Georgia (little towns and country-sides) felt the pinch. By the mid-Forties, a great outcry led by the Home Demonstration Clubs, Ruritans, and others, was heard. The Georgia Library Association took the leadership in remedying the situation. Wendell Smiley, college librarian and president of the Association during the 1941-43 biennial, called for an ad hoc committee to be formed, the purpose being to come up with some recommendation that would lead to the development of public libraries in Georgia. A brilliant idea evolved. A new concept was promoted and accepted by Georgia governmental officials. The old Georgia Library Commission was dissolved. Public Library Service was put under the aegis of Georgia Department of Education and the authority of the Georgia Board of Education.

Thus the mid-Forties marked the beginning of the modern public library development in Georgia. It was decided that public library systems would be the key to assure equitable and economic public library services. The state was (and is) dotted with small county govern-mental units, a fact that made it impossible for all people to be served on an equal basis if the counties tried it alone. The small units then in service (from WPA days) were in difficulty, having no professional staff, little budget for books, no means to get the books out to the rural areas.

Experimental Regional Library Systems were set up, the work headed up in Athens, Carrollton, Clarkesville, LaFayette, and Young Harris. Only ten counties were involved in the beginning — fiscal 1944-45.

The Fifties brought on astounding developments. The Gerstenslager Company of Wooster, Ohio, had been experimenting in building bookmobiles, though at the time, they were not standardized units. West Georgia Regional Library evinced an interest in having one built for the area. The director, chairman of the library board, and a representative of the company drew up plans. The bookmobile was delivered in 1951. Up to that time, people were used to seeing as the “library on wheels” station wagons, jeeps, old vintage cars, and the like. Soon the picture changed.

Another new development had a great part in the change. The passage of the Library Services Act was a shot in the arm for developing public libraries and systems of libraries all over the country. Georgia immediately began to utilize its allocations.

By the late Fifties there was a pretty good number of expanding regional systems dotting Georgia’s towns and counties, particularly in north and middle parts of the state. Then as the Sixties moved along Georgia public libraries truly reached for the stars, so to speak, as 122 counties were joined into service systems. Bookmobiles moved on a regular schedule to service points across county lines, expanding each year so that no area was left unserved. The extension of the Library Services Act to become Library Services and Construction was the wedge that opened the door to our building program.

How did public library service reach such a pinnacle in the Sixties as history records! Many different factors played a part. First of all, the cooperative spirit and warm association evinced by public schools, and colleges and universities — sections of Georgia Library Association — set up not only a healthy climate for the development of public libraries, but also fostered joint action which enhanced the stature of all. Professional librarians from our finest schools and higher institutions of learning, together with State Department of Education consultants, assisted in holding institutes and workshops, thus bringing enthusiasm as well as know-how to bear on the fledgling public library efforts. As time passed, they also participated in institutes involving the public.

Also a great help in the early going was the Georgia
Citizens Library Council, forerunner of the Trustee Section of the Georgia Library Association. The Council kept an ear to the ground at all times, keeping up with Federal and State government affairs that might have an important effect on public libraries.

On the local level libraries were greatly helped by civic, educational, cultural, and church groups. These organized groups came to know and appreciate the libraries because of the variety of services offered. In the forefront was the method of getting materials to the people where there was no library building. Schools, crossroad stores, homes designated in neighborhoods, courthouses, rolling stores, scout huts all were service points. The practice of getting materials out to answer special needs was appreciated and welcomed. The library staff organized Junior Library Clubs to expedite services to schools on the local levels. The professional and non-professional staff members became resource people to help in local projects and programs. Radio (and later, television) as well as newspapers were used as a means of communication. After headquarters and branch libraries were established, many such service points (and deposits) were maintained in order to take the library service from the library buildings or headquarters out to the far corners of the area.

In the Sixties, with the stepping up of the training of professional librarians, people began to look upon the public library as a building, materials, skillful staff, and services. The library had become a dominant force in total community life. It reflected Georgia life of the times in its many categories, changing its image to meet the challenges of new customs, new people, new purposes. The world had shrunk in size. Rural electrification, better roads, wider methods of communication, changes in the social order all had tied peoples of all walks of life more closely together; yet the Sixties marked only the beginning of progress that lay ahead.

As we stand today on a pinnacle of library services, we should recognize the sacrifice, the sometimes pain, the patience, the dedication, the joining of hands and wills, the vision that changed the original public library dream into healthy reality. Excellent leadership came from State consultants, particularly Lucile Nix and Sarah Jones, two of the finest librarians in our country during those years, as well as from such superb school and college librarians, consultants, educators as Virginia McJenkin, C. S. Hubbard, Mary Edna Anders, Elizabeth Donovan, Sarah Hightower, Porter Kellam, Tommie Dora Barker, John Hall Jacobs, Bill Pullen, Bernice McCullar, Stafford Harris, Ruth White, Dorothy Blake, John Bonner — to name a few.

Georgia state government by this time had come to see that our public libraries were serving the people well, thereby deserving good support. Allocations increased. Equitable formulas for giving financial support were established. This included salaries of professional staff, travel, and materials. (Grants for construction and funds for maintenance and operations would follow.) Georgia Public Libraries were on the road to greatness!

With your pardon, I shall inject a personal note. When I was president of the Georgia Library Association in the early Sixties, inept though I was at times, I observed our Association in action during the biennium — with pride. Always liking a challenge myself, I considered what meaningful gauntlet I could throw down — a concept that might advance the effectiveness of our purpose. It came to me that two big C's had helped to bring about the success not only of our public libraries, bringing them to the golden era of the Sixties, but also of all other libraries of Georgia: Cooperation and Communication. An "idea whose time had come" confronted me: a Georgia Library Journal. Also I felt we needed to expand our membership greatly. I spot-checked with our librarians over the state about my thinking, receiving only a positive response.

So it was that my final official words to the Georgia Library Association dealt with these two ideas. Under guidance of Walter Johnson, president of Georgia Library Association, with Grace Hightower the first editor, The Georgia Librarian became a reality in March, 1964.

Indeed, as we look back over our public library records from the early Forties to the late Sixties, we are viewing the fore-times of a great era in the history of Georgia public libraries. This is our heritage!