The Need For Public Libraries

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ONE of the greatest agencies for the education of people of all ages and classes is the public library. A library which provides opportunities for cultural, recreational and vocational reading and which encourages the citizens of the community to take advantage of those opportunities is a most potent force for the upbuilding of that community and for the improvement of the condition of its people. Public libraries take a place along with public schools as institutions for the promotion of the prosperity, well-being and happiness of the citizens, for the improvement of social conditions and for the stabilization of democratic government. A state cannot have a well-rounded and complete educational system if it neglects the development of an adequate system of public libraries.

Recent years have witnessed a remarkable growth in the number of public libraries throughout the country. In some states the services of public libraries have been made available to more than eighty per cent of the citizens and the citizens have not been slow in turning to the use of libraries. As one librarian expressed it, "Everybody is hungry for books."

Although there are some states which have poorer library facilities than Georgia, our State does not occupy an enviable position in this respect. A recent survey indicates that Georgia has 53 public libraries rendering free service to the communities in which they are located. Most of these are in the larger centers of population. Very few rural sections have library service of any sort. Indeed, there are 115 counties in the State without public library service. In terms of population, there are 2,079,793 people—71% of the State's population—without access to publicly supported libraries.

Statistics regarding the operation of public libraries during the year of 1933 indicate the limited scope of the service which they are rendering in Georgia. During that year seven cents per capita was expended for such service. Public libraries contained .19 of a book per capita for the State—less than one book for each five persons. The circulation was .94 of a book per capita—less than one book per person. These figures are in striking contrast with the recommendations of the American Library Association regarding adequate library service—an expenditure of one dollar per capita for service and a circulation of five to ten books per capita.

Georgia needs the quickening and stimulating influence which an adequate library system of libraries would pro-"mter from the establishment of county or regional libraries and library extension agencies. Most educated people who give the matter any thought at all will agree with these statements. Certainly the teachers of our State will do so. Those who know what libraries have done in other states and who know what a tremendously vital force libraries could be in the life of our own people must assume the task of bringing home to the rank and file of our citizens an appreciation of the type of service which libraries may render and of their need for that service: Only in this way can there be created that informed public opinion which must be the basis of any substantial expansion and improvement of library facilities.

There are signs that point to the fact that Georgians are already awakening to the possibilities of a real program of library development. One of these signs is the passage of an Act at the last session of the General Assembly (Acts of 1935, page 409) which provides that "political subdivisions, other than municipal corporations, are hereby authorized to establish and maintain public libraries for purposes of education and to support the same by current revenue or by donations or bequests which they are authorized to receive for that purpose." The Act also authorizes counties to provide for library extension service and to enter into cooperative agreements with municipalities for the establishment and maintenance of libraries. The way is now open for the establishment and support of local projects. Perhaps the day is not far distant when the State itself may see fit to make some contribution to the support of this form of educational agency—the public library.

Another encouraging sign is the state-wide interest which was manifested in a Citizens' Library conference held in Athens in May of this year and sponsored by the Georgia Library Association and the University of Georgia. This Conference was attended by citizens from all walks of life. The morning session of the Conference was devoted to a discussion of the library needs of different groups within the State and the afternoon session was set aside for a discussion of ways and means for meeting those needs. The results of that Conference have been gratifying and it is the hope of many who attended that a second Conference will be held next spring.

The most encouraging fact of all, however, is the success which has attended the efforts of those who have sought to establish libraries to serve communities in several sections of the State. The citizens have given their whole-hearted support to the enterprises and they have eagerly availed themselves of the service which the libraries offered. The Fitzgerald Public library was the first to offer county-wide service. The story of the establishment of that library and of what it has done in Ben Hill county will thrill and inspire everyone who feels even a slight interest in the improvement of conditions in the State.

As to what the movement for better library facilities in Georgia will accomplish depends almost entirely on the extent to which it can enlist the interest and receive the backing of the public at large. Or to express it differently, the success of the movement depends on the creation of the right sort of public opinion. The teachers in the schools of the State have always been a mighty force for the creation of public opinion. The success or failure of the library program, therefore, rests to a considerable extent in the hands of the teachers. It was gratifying to those interested in better library facilities to learn that the Georgia Education Association is going to give its active support to the library movement. The Association is to be commended for the stand which it has taken. The backing of the thousands of teachers who are members of the Association gives an enormous impetus to the drive for more and better public libraries. In this backing—if enthusiastically and whole-heartedly given—lies success.

According to the New Jersey Dental society, escarole, kale and parsley contain more vitamin A than spinach.