

MALABAR BRANCH

HISTORY *** 1949 - 1959

A. Calendar of events.

- 1949-1950: This year showed a painful loss in juvenile circulation, apparently due to an unprecedented turnover in children's librarians - five within one year! Adult gains partially made up for this. There was much active neighborhood participation in a successful attempt to influence the City Council when it appeared that due to loss of financial support, Malabar might have to close.
- 1950-1951: The implementation of the regional plan came in this period, and Mrs. Watkins, Branch Librarian, was already forced to point out that Arroyo Seco was at too great a distance from Malabar to make it practical for Malabar patrons to go there in person. Intensive work with children made up the losses of the previous year. There are complaints about the clubroom, and some question as to the utility of such an adjunct to a branch.
- 1951-1952: Again, this was a most busy year as far as children's work was concerned. Mrs. Watkins noted the increasingly rapid change in the neighborhood, with many of the Jewish families moving out, and an increase in the Mexican population. She foresaw increased use of easy and vocational material at Malabar. A very adverse effect was expected due the ruling against county resident use of the library.
- 1952-1953: A buying program concentrating on the purchase of more popular adult, as opposed to student material, was begun. Complaints were registered about students "taking over" the library. The drop in county borrower was sharply felt, and so was the gradual decline of a once large Yiddish collection.
- 1953-1954: For the first time in some years, Mrs. Watkins felt it necessary to complain about serious disciplinary problems. Gang outbreaks sometimes directly affected the branch. More serious was the indirect result - this kind of thing hastened the exodus of better readers, particularly younger Jewish families, from the district. Neighborhood decline was seen as definitely accelerated. The installation of fluorescent lighting, with the acquisition of a Recordak the previous year, made a great improvement in the physical plant of the branch.
- 1954-1955: Mrs. Eulice Watkins retired during the year, her place as Branch Librarian being taken by Miss Beulah Fitz. Miss Fitz reported a painfully large loss in adult library use, continuing gang activity, and a neighborhood changing, apparently, from the bad to the notorious. Lack of interest in reading on the part of young Mexican-Americans was seen as a serious problem.
- 1955-1956: Miss Fitz transferred to Eagle Rock, and Mrs. Josephine Metzger became Branch Librarian. Another sharp drop in circulation was noted. For the first time, a note of hope is sounded as the influx of Japanese-Americans is noted.

1956-1957: Mrs. Lillian Nicholas, Regional Librarian, in the absence of the Branch Librarian, made a thorough study of Malabar's neighborhood. The almost complete transition from a largely Jewish to an overwhelmingly Mexican district was reported, with an increasing Japanese and Negro population. Disciplinary problems, particularly in connection with the next-door playground, were noted. A change in the nature of the collection, with more emphasis on popular material for adults, and on XZ books for children, was recommended.

Circulation had dropped to a low point, and there seemed no prospect of raising it once more to a reasonable community-branch level. As a result, the relegation of Malabar to sub-branch status was recommended.

1957-1958: Malabar went on sub-branch status in July of 1957. The expected further drop in circulation soon materialized. In October, John Bruckman was appointed Librarian-in-Charge. Book buying was definitely switched to an emphasis on popular material. Loss of a children's librarian almost halved children's use of the library, but in spite of this and other unfortunate effects, it is apparent that the reduction of Malabar to a sub-branch makes for a more rational distribution of library resources.

1958-1959: John Bruckman transferred to Central Library at the end of this period, his place being taken by Mrs. Ruth Van Kersen. The year saw some increase in circulation, especially a gain in children's use. Active work with children, however, particularly suffered at the branch, because school and class visits were almost precluded by the small size of the staff - a new staff, moreover, every member of which needed training in the operation of a branch.

Disciplinary problems were eased, after a somewhat trying initial period which necessitated contact with Juvenile authorities and some very firm action by the Librarian. The problems were and are with younger children, not with older gangs.

In spite of low circulation, request was made for a somewhat increased book budget, especially for juvenile books. The special problem at Malabar is that the fine older collection is no longer suited to the present type of patron, and there is not nearly enough of the type of material now popular.

by John Bruckman

B. Summary.

At the end of the year 1949, Malabar reported a circulation of almost 100,000. At the end of the year 1956/1957, the last year of community branch operation, circulation had fallen to 60,000. This loss is far more serious when contrasted with the general rise in library circulation, which elsewhere went up sharply. A further loss of about 10,000 was recorded in the first year as a sub-branch, though a rise toward the end of that period can be shown. While no one can regard circulation figures as the sole standard of library service, these do succinctly tell the story of Malabar - a declining branch in a declining area.

The change in the neighborhood has been extensive. From an area populated largely by Jewish people of solid working class background it has changed to a largely Mexican district. Many of these people unfortunately find themselves in almost continual serious financial plight, many of them being unskilled laborers - last to be hired, first to be fired. This comes out very clearly in checking new registration at the branch, where, during the recession of 1958, as many as 50% of the applicants would describe themselves as unemployed. Coupled with language difficulties, and the lack of interest in book use as leisure time activity, this resulted in a great decline of the reading public, and a great increase in undesirable activities. This Librarian has personally accompanied the director of Wabash Playground in his routine search for "reefers" on playground property - and we found them, too. The reaction of the police apparently was monumental boredom, since this was such a regular occurrence.

The coming of Japanese people in large numbers, with their devotion to education, is a hopeful sign, however. And it is with utmost respect that we should view that small but increasing number of Mexican-Americans who have seized on education, and on the public library, as a means to betterment for themselves and their people. They are the true hope of their community, and of the library.

C. Thoughts on the future.

It is tempting, under the circumstances, to contemplate the "easy way out", namely, closing Malabar branch entirely. But even aside from the obvious political difficulties, such an abandonment would deprive a segment of our people, practically speaking, of any library service. If large numbers of people no longer use the branch, those that do need it all the more.

Children's work is particularly difficult on a sub-branch basis, particularly where children must be introduced to the very concept of book use. Most serious consideration should be given to the possibility of bookmobile service to schools in this area, with a lightening of the children's service responsibility of the sub-branches.

The collection at Malabar should continue to emphasize popular reading, do-it-yourself, and journeyman level technical books on the adult side, and Easy books as well as popular classes of non-fiction on the children's side. Catholic material on a popular level should be heavily purchased, particularly as parochial school students now are a large portion of Malabar's users. The practical subjects should be emphasized in the reference collection as well.

Close ties should be maintained between Malabar and Benjamin Franklin branch; Stevenson, Malabar, and Benjamin Franklin should be looked upon as a kind of sub-regional grouping.

An informal atmosphere, and unflinching courtesy on the part of the staff, is necessary to reassure potential new patrons, who, in the Malabar area, tend to view any official institution with some trepidation.

While Malabar can never be more than an effective sub-branch, in the foreseeable future, it can at least be that. Any great changes would depend on a possible re-evaluation of the sub-branch concept as a whole.

*done
by John
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at Mrs.
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request*