

VANPORT PUBLIC LIBRARY

Annual Report, August 1944 through June 1945

With the closing of the fiscal year, a most interesting and probably unique experience, comes to an end for this librarian. (The two years spent at Vanport working with people from all walks of life and from every State in the Union, have been richly rewarding in human terms, even though the modest statistics would tend to reveal that from a professional point of view, the Vanport Library has not been a tremendously successful venture. This, we feel is due, not to a financial lack, for we have had an adequate book fund, and have built a well rounded collection, nor to building and equipment, for they have been highly satisfactory, nor to inadequacies in the staff for all the members have been more than anxious to serve at all times and with unfailing courtesy, but in the main to the transient nature of the community and the disinterest of those living here in all community enterprises.

When the Vanport School District was forced to withdraw its financial support in August and the future of the library seemed precarious, a spark of community spirit was kindled in our regular borrowers. People were indignant at the thought that they might lose their library privileges because of a legal technicality. A petition was circulated, and hundreds of names were signed. Forthcoming comments were very consoling and varied all the way from, "I would be glad to make a cash contribution to keep the library open," to, "I'd like to break the necks of the people in Washington who do things like this!". Many people told us that, without a library, life in Vanport would be unendurable! Even non-readers who heard about our difficulties came in to sign the petition! We were very happy to be able to inform our friends that by the first of September, our future was secure, and that the Housing Authority would pay salaries and maintenance, while the

Portland Library provided our books and supplies.

In August we opened a small Branch in the Community building at East Vanport with a volunteer assistant from the community in charge. The room was a pleasant if noisy one, located directly across the hall from the gymnasium. At first, thanks to frequent items in the East Vanport Neighborhood Bulletin, it was a fairly busy place and the circulation of books was fair. However, when the Bulletin was discontinued, we no longer had an advertising medium and fewer people came in. From January on we paid the assistant for working, but lack of supervision made it an unsatisfactory venture. For awhile it looked as though we might be given space in the store building which would have been readily accessible to all and we hoped that we might then really fill a community need, but this plan fell through. For almost a month we closed the room after sounding out the Neighborhood Council and learning that they were most apathetic about library service, but at the urging of Project Services, we re-opened it the end of May with a colored high-school girl in charge, four nights a week. She resigned the last week in June, and the room is once more closed to library users, although we are told that it is needed constantly for other building activities. We recommend, that until adequate space and reliable help can be found, it be kept closed.

In February our part-time typist who had been in charge of school cataloging resigned, and we suggested that the schools take over their own processing of books. This was done, and it made our work-room a more comfortable place in which to work, but it left us short-handed. Fortunately we were able to procure the services of Miss Tordis Heyerdahl, coordinator of school libraries, two nights a week, so we were able to maintain our same schedule and at the same time give more professional service to the public. Through her, too we have had the opportunity to keep in touch with school activities.

Publicity is perhaps the most vexing problem to all the agencies at Vanport and the library, it seems to us has been one of the chief sufferers, even though we have had an annotated list of new titles in each issue of the Neighborhood Bulletin, and items of interest published whenever we have wished. Mrs. Hedges, who writes the publicity for the Housing Authority has been very kind in including us frequently in her column (now discontinued) in the Shipbuilder. For several months the librarian sent a weekly column to the Vancouver Sun, which was making a concerted effort to become "the" paper of Vanport, and one to the Shipbuilder. The Sun used it faithfully, but there was no library response. The Shipbuilder only used it intermittently but each time it appeared, requests for the books mentioned were forthcoming immediately. Since it seemed to take more time to write them than the venture merited, we discontinued these columns.

The most satisfactory publicity medium we feel is our outdoor electrically lighted exhibit case which was built for us early in the year. There is a bus stop in front of our building, so while they are waiting, people frequently come down our walk to see what we have to exhibit each week. We change the displays often enough to sustain interest, and we have many requests for the books in the case. The most popular exhibits have been those in which we showed photographs or paintings of the Northwest and books dealing with this locality, although an exhibit of local crafts also aroused interest. Other groups have also used it to advertise their activities and it has proved quite effective.

Since there are no organized adult groups on the project, we have not been able to go out and use word of mouth advertising to attract borrowers, and this, we have felt for two years, is a great pity. Our regular weekly visit to the hospital with our book truck has won us so many grate-

ful friends that we know how valuable it is to get out into the community directly. If possible, this hospital service should be continued for it will be sorely missed if it is abandoned as we have circulated an average of 25 books per week since it was begun. Even when we have made our rounds of the project picking up delinquent books we have received a royal welcome almost every place we have gone. Few of these unreliable borrowers, however, have tried to get back into the good graces of the library by paying their fines after we have carried their overdue books back to the library for them, but we feel happier without their patronage. We tried to enlist the help of both the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts in picking up these delinquent books but nothing came of our request.

In January the librarian was asked to become a Board Member of the Vanport Recreation Association. Knowing how badly Vanport was in need of an organized community program she eagerly complied, and since that time has served as secretary and treasurer of the Board. Some progress in this direction has been made, but it is felt that the situation is still far from satisfactory. One benefit which has accrued to the library is that staff members of the various community buildings seem to feel freer now to come into the library to ask for help in planning their programs.

Two additional sections to our front desk were added in September, and they arrived just in the nick of time for our registration which has always been heavy and inordinately out of proportion with our circulation, was getting out of hand. Because of the transient population, many library cards are inactive almost as soon as made, and though we constantly go through the daily check out lists to keep our active file separate, we hesitate to throw away any library cards for so many of our borrowers reappear after going back to their home state and finding nothing there for them.


We have become increasingly conscious of the race question, for we have numerous Negro borrowers and many of our white borrowers are also interested in the problem. We have tried to buy all available, reliable material on the subject and it is in constant demand. Some of our Negro borrowers are among our best readers, and we have had interesting conversations with them which have clarified many of our ideas. Upon several occasions these people have bemoaned the fact that many of the Negroes coming to Portland and vicinity are illiterate. Since we never have had any illiterates in the library to our knowledge, we were not aware of this until recently when we knocked on the door of an apartment in quest of an overdue book. No one answered our knock, but a colored man who was standing nearby asked, "Who're you lookin' for, ma'am?" We said that we were looking for one Willie Jones. He eyed us suspiciously, and then said, "What you want him for?" We explained that he had a library book, and we would like to get it back if possible. He replied, "well I know a Willie Jones but he ain't the one you're lookin' for, 'cause the one I know cain't read a word!" Among those who can read and do there must be many at Vanport who are planning to move to South America after the war, for our Negro patrons constantly keep all our Spanish and Portuguese books in circulation!

Before leaving Vanport we feel that it is our responsibility to stress the fact that we believe it was a serious mistake on the part of the original planners not to build a library large enough for a collection of children's books. The school libraries have not had sufficient book stock at any time to fill the children's leisure reading needs, and from the day we opened until now we have been besieged daily by children who are resentful that we have no books for them. "Our library at home had books for us!" We sincerely hope that the desire to read for enjoyment has not been seriously undermined by the fact that in the schools some of the children are

only scheduled in the library once a week for one period. We feel that had we been able to operate a library which would serve the whole family, we could have circulated at least twice as many books as we have, and we would have been of far greater value to the community. Perhaps our experience may serve as an example of the desirability of complete separation in operation of school and public libraries, at least in temporary housing projects.

In closing we can't resist quoting from a letter we received this spring from a lady in Houston, Texas who was one of our most faithful borrowers when she lived here. We are happy to say that many people have told us the same thing, but somehow it sounds more convincing on paper. She writes, "A few lines in appreciation of the use of your well supplied and up-to-date library and its facilities. But mainly in appreciation of the courtesy of your librarians and the hospitality which you have shown me, also the ease with which you can obtain a good book and that really means a great deal. I hope that some day I may return your courtesy and hospitality." Sentiments such as these, no matter how awkwardly expressed somehow help to minimize the feeling that the results of all the time, money, and effort expended here are not as considerable as they might have been under more favorable circumstances. Two things are certain: We have had books here for nearly every conceivable taste free for the asking and with the minimum of effort and red tape required to procure them. Also, we have made friends in Vanport not only for ourselves but for libraries in general far beyond our wildest imaginings.

Respectfully submitted


Eleanor Touhey, Librarian
Vanport Public Library