

Library Promoting

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"The one best thing in camp" is the way many men and officers in our far-flung line of camps speak. They mean it, for if an American military or naval camp is anything it is democratic and plain-spoken.

The success of the American Library Association Library War Service is the result of library promoting. Perhaps many of the participants have not been conscious of their part in this job of library promoting. Because of this, and because at the beginning of a thing that had never been done before perhaps no-one could see the end, there have been mistakes. No-one in the Library War Service claims perfection for it. That is part of its genius: it has been done in the best way possible at the moment, with the materials at hand, by a changing personnel, and with changing methods -- just frank human service. It really had no preconceived plan except to give the boys what they wanted and needed in the world of print.

The story of camp library promoting has many lessons for library promotion in peace times. Following is a story of things that happened in a camp or two, typical of all.

The military camp where the departing commanding general went to the camp librarian in person to say that he had been wrong in his initial belief that the camp library was unnecessary and that on the contrary it was one of the most valuable things in camp, -- that is a story of highly successful library promotion.

Then there was the grizzled old naval commandant, who barked at the newly arrived librarian, "And are there many other young men like you, introducing libraries instead of shouldering a gun?" Three months later this naval veteran held the hand of the departing librarian, thanking him for his great personal and educational contribution, not merely to the recreation of the sailors, though that was recognized, but to the training of the sailors, and begging the librarian to come back and complete his educational training program based upon library service.

At the beginning the camp librarian got sixty or ninety days leave from his regular job. He rode into camp and perhaps put up for a night or two at the "Y" headquarters. Likely as not the "Y" camp secretary told him there was nothing for him to do in camp. In most camps, however, in all fairness, the librarian was greeted eagerly by the Y man, even as a long-lost brother. Next day, perhaps the camp

librarian was told by the commanding general that the boys would be so busy drilling there wouldn't be time for books, -- "but come on with your books, anyhow; we'll help you, and we're glad to see you."

Probably a store-room full of miscellaneous boxes and piles of books and old magazines was the next thing to greet the camp librarian, who was now armed with a military pass, a gray shirt, a pair of khaki trousers, a pair of leggins, some old tan shoes, -- and a sinking sensation. This was in the days before even "Headquarters" at Washington had opened.

In another camp, the librarian hunted up his books in a Q.M. warehouse, got an army tent and a truck from the Q.M., and set to work in his tent, sorting his books, -- again with a sinking sensation, particularly on opening certain boxes.

In those early days, the camp librarian got his bearings from such questions as these: "Can't you send us some algebras and trigonometries? The men here have got to learn how to figure gun ranges." -- "Haven't you some modern poetry, Kipling or Riley or Omar Khayyam?" -- "The major has set a bunch of us to surveying the electrical transmission in camp: got anything on that?" -- "Say, we've got seventy men in our regiment who can't read: have you got any primers?" -- "I'd like to read Harold Bell Wright's latest book." -- "Say, we'd like a dictionary in our building, like you gave to Number Five." -- "The Chief of Staff would like an atlas and a World Almanac in his office, if you have them." -- "Say, has this here library got any of them Tarzan books?" -- Most of these requests were filled in the course of the sorting, and the sinking sensation of the camp librarian changed to a heart-thumping, the original thrill: "Why these men want everything under the sun in books, not just fiction. And they want it for their business, their drilling and fighting, not just for fun. And if I can just get the books, and some help to sort these magazines, and a truck, and enough room to work in, and a stove to keep warm with, I can get this whole camp to use books!"

In those days the camp librarian sent out collections to the Y.M.C.A. and K. of C. huts, without cards, without pockets, without lists. The Y and K of C men wrote the cards and put in the pockets, and promised to list the books. The books may not be listed yet -- in most cases they are -- but they've been worn out by a year's use. The camp librarian made it easy to get books. With a modicum of record and red tape he reached the whole camp.

As the days and weeks passed, the Ford was bought, the purchased books began to arrive, the library building was completed and formally opened, and the men began to pour in to their home of books.

Then one day the camp librarian had an idea. That School for Intelligence Officers ought to use the library books on map reading. Did he write an article for Trench and Camp, saying, "All good officers should know and use our books on map reading"? Or did he print a card, saying "Have you read so and so?" On other occasions he used these and other advertising methods, but not this time. No, he went to see the Assistant Chief of Staff, in charge of intelligence, and said, "I've come to see whether the camp library may not help in the work of your School for Intelligence Officers. We have a staff of experts at Washington, in charge of our book selection, and I imagine we have about all the good things on scouting and map reading. Would you like to look over this list?" The major cast his eye over the list, at first with hesitance. Then he hitched up his chair, grabbed that list, turned up the other military subjects, and then ejaculated, "Great Scot, I didn't suppose you had all these books. M., m..m, there's a corker! Say, is that book in now? Have you got a car? No? Will you ride down now in my car and send back that book by my orderly?" The major got his book, and with it a great respect for that library. And the School for Intelligence Officers got its deposit of books for their special work, and with the books a great respect for that library, -- because the library sized them up, divined their need, and brought itself to them.

The camp library approached the other official and service organizations in camp as a cooperating social agency. It said to them: "We are necessary in your work, not for our own sake, not for our own credit, not for your sake or credit, but for the sake of the boys." It said to them, "We'll arrange our service to fit your needs. If you want a truck load of magazines in half an hour for the boys on that troop train, you shall have them. If your boys want the evening paper in the evening, we'll put on an extra delivery. If it's wireless you want, and novels you want, we can accommodate both of you." It said to the Y.M.C.A., "Sorry to hear your truck is out of commission; don't you want to use ours?" It went to the Y.W. hostess house, on the edge of camp, and said, "Don't you want some entertaining books for your transients?" It went to the commandant of engineers and said, "Here's a bunch of books your office staff will find useful. Use them. When you are through with them, we'll be glad to have them back, but first get the good of them." It said to the Y.M.C.A. educational secretaries, "Wouldn't you like to have us digest the magazines and newspapers for you, and make suggestions for bulletin boards, news talks, and interesting lectures for your boys?" It said to everybody within and around camp, "Our business is books, magazines, maps, anything printed. We've got a monopoly of this service, but our monopoly is solely for you and your men. Come in and use us." And all the organizations and all the men in camp, to use camp parlance, "hand it" to "those A.L.A. fellows who are so free with their books which help us do our work."

Further illustrating this social cooperation of related camp activities, there is this story: In one of the southern camps, the Knights of Columbus automobile makes a trip twice each week, to convey Y.W.C.A. girls from the neighboring city, to the camp library, to prepare books for the Y.M.C.A. huts. After the war, shall we not see more of this cooperative promoting of each others' interests by social agencies?

The camp library has discovered that the American people is much more interested in reading than was generally supposed. It has discovered that the average man reads better things than he was given credit for. It has discovered also that more men than anybody thought cannot or do not read at all. These statements are borne out by the continued strong demand for poetry, for biography, for philosophy, for everything technical and military, and for primers and spellers.

The camp library has discovered that more things than books and magazines are the reading material of libraries. Bulletin boards, maps, pamphlets, trade catalogs, -- all these can be read, and men read them eagerly. For we are learning that reading is not merely putting a book in a man's hand.

The camp library has promoted reading somewhat after this fashion: First it makes an intelligent survey of its field, the number, the general composition, and the army or navy specialty of each unit. Then it bases its service on knowing and having and sharing what is needed. Then it creates a certain intangible but active atmosphere of cordial interest in the man and in his need or desire. It talks informally and spontaneously and enthusiastically about its books. It goes to the shelves and shows books to men. It takes down a man's name and sends for what it doesn't have. It goes to the "Y" and talks about books and what can be gotten out of books. It puts up maps and pictures of the moment, and it connects these displays with its shelves rather by word of mouth than by printed lists. It catches the man on the run, and stops him, because here is something for his very own self. Then having caught the man's interest, it makes it absolutely easy for him to get the book. It lets him alone till he is through with it. Only his signature and company address are necessary. -- Yes, the camp library loses books, for war is war, but it gets books read.

As an additional means of making it easy to use books, some camp libraries have made it possible to return a book to any library branch in camp. Once a day the library truck calls at each branch and collects the books for delivery at the points of origin. This universal interchangeability is a real service, and an element in library promoting.

The development of this informal democratic educative attitude is perhaps the greatest contribution, thus far, by the camp library to librarianship. This attitude must have a large influence in library promoting of the future.

Its informality is in its directness, its elimination of non-essential records, its hand-to-hand methods. Its democracy is its appeal to every man, its cordial personal interest in his problems, its educative value is its active sense of where a man's interest lies and the adaptation of library method to fit a book to that interest. The camp library is a success in promoting the use of books because it is informal, and democratic, and educational.

Eventually, the supreme contribution of the camp library will be the training of four or five million men, the future leaders of the country, to know what a library is, to know what it does for men, and to respect it, whether they use it or not. Many of the most influential of these men will have become users of libraries, and will demand more or less the same facilities and attitude from the home-town library as they got in camp and over-there. In other words, when our boys come home, the soil will have been plowed and the seed sown in good ground, and it will be for the village and city libraries to reap the harvest of appreciative library users and of their support.

The practical question arises: How shall we obtain the support necessary for library service of the sort here suggested? The real test of the value of any public service is how much the people will pay for. A year ago the American Library Association went before the people and said: "Organized library war service has never been done before, but for a million dollars we can put a million books into the hands of a million men." The people gave us a million and three-quarters, and we have put three million books into the hands of two million men. In future library promoting can we not be equally definite and scientific? First, find what our public specially cares for and will pay for. Then say to our public, "For so much money the library can render this much service: how much service does the public want?" We shall have to be more daring in our library promoting. For example, many more libraries should have a Ford and should use it. If the village grocer delivers, why not the library?

In peace as in war, library promoting is simply librarianship. An important element of librarianship is to put as little as possible between the man and the book. This is informal democratic service. It is essentially educational in attitude. It is based upon a continuous intelligent survey of the field served. It joins hands with every other social force. Above all, it takes itself seriously and is active in its promotion of all good things, especially good and useful books.

Reconstruction after the war will bring changes to libraries as certainly as to other social and economic and political organizations. This paper has attempted to point out some of the methods of library promoting used successfully in the emergency of war. In peace, not all these methods will be taken over. It is rather the promoting spirit of the A.L.A. Library War Service that may be most worthily emulated in the piping times of peace.