
Hard Choices in Hard Times

Lessons from the Great Depression

Eric Novotny,
Guest Columnist

*Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to **Diane Zabel**, Schreyer Business Library, The Pennsylvania State University, 309 Paterno Library, University Park, PA 16802; e-mail: dxz2@psu.edu.*

Eric Novotny is Humanities Librarian, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania.

These are challenging times for libraries. Stories of budget cuts abound while librarians report rising demand for library services.¹ As we slash budgets and defer expenses, we may wonder how libraries coped during the Great Depression. Then, as now, library use increased sharply as millions of unemployed hunted for career information and sought light reading to fill their “enforced leisure” hours.² Librarians were forced to make difficult choices between services, staff, buildings, and books. Libraries responded by forging new partnerships with state and federal agencies and involving community residents in large-scale book drives.

The experiences of the Chicago Public Library provide a fascinating case study of efforts to maintain a public service under trying circumstances. Chicago in the early 1930s was on the brink of collapse. As unemployment soared to an estimated 30 percent, desperate workers took to the streets where they were met by tear gas and baton-wielding police.³ The Chicago Public Library’s financial fortunes declined rapidly. As early as January 1930, the library predicted a budget shortfall of 20 percent. The initial response included reducing library branch hours and laying off about one-fifth of the staff. Prominent progressive reformer Jane Addams evocatively captured the toll of this belt tightening. Writing to the library, she noted the unusually large number of men standing in the cold outside the Hull House library, unable to get in: “They stand looking through the windows into a warm room with a great air of protest which is not always silent.” The library agreed to increase the reading room hours, but made no promises for the future, noting, “The unemployment conditions have increased our own work enormously in every part of the city.”⁴

Facing protests over reduced hours, the library reexamined its priorities. Branch hours were restored and many staff were rehired at reduced salaries. The collections budget would be the target for additional cuts. In May 1931 all book ordering was halted. An institution that normally expended \$200,000 to \$250,000 a year on collections simply stopped acquiring new materials. In a 1932 letter, the library director, Carl Roden, summarized the situation: “We are afflicted by the worst financial hardship we have ever suffered. We have bought no books for eight months, the magazine subscriptions for 1932 were cancelled. . . . No budget for the current year has been attempted and the prospects of funds for even our curtailed activities, are, at this writing, far from encouraging.”⁵ Some subscriptions were reinstated, but regular book purchasing would not resume for another four years.

Despite eliminating new book purchases, the Chicago Public Library was besieged by new users. Branch libraries reported packed reading rooms. The army of unemployed came not just to forget, but also to learn—or, as the *Chicago Tribune* romantically expressed it, “to emerge out of the valley of depression and into the sunlit halls of the kingdom of thought.”⁶ While the service cuts drew immediate protests, the impact of the slashed book budget only gradually made itself felt. Without new books to entice readers, circulation eventually declined, dropping from 15.8 million in 1931 to 10.2 million in 1935. As one young patron put it, “Gosh, we can’t read the same one more than three times.”⁷ While times are different, it’s worth remembering that users attracted to the library during the current recession may drift away if we are unable to provide the resources and services they need.

Although extreme, the circumstances in Chicago were not unusual. Detroit saw its library appropriation decline by 24 percent. Knoxville’s budget was slashed 36 percent in three years. Relatively fortunate cities such as Louisville and Springfield, Massachusetts reported salary cuts and other austerity measures.⁸ How did public libraries cope? A 1932 survey identified two “compensating mechanisms” adopted by libraries: rental collections and calls for book donations.⁹ By 1934 the Chicago Public Library offered rental collections in over half its branch locations. Patrons paid five cents for the first three days and two cents each day after to rent newer books. The proceeds were invested back into the rental collection fund, allowing the library to “offer a fairly representative assortment of the better class of new publications at a very low fee, and this service has been appreciated by many.”¹⁰ Rental collections were adopted despite initial resistance as the deepening crisis changed opinions about what was appropriate. It remains to be seen what challenges to tradition our current economic crisis will foster.

The Chicago Public Library also appealed to the public for support. The library organized a city-wide book drive in 1934, working with civic clubs, schools, and other agencies. The news media trumpeted the call for books and the city responded, donating more than eighty thousand volumes. About half were added to the library’s permanent collection, while others were sold to cover the cost of the campaign or donated to emergency relief shelters, where they “did their part in lightening the desperation of the long days of enforced and hopeless leisure.”¹¹ From the library’s perspective, the primary benefit of the book drive was an increased presence in the community. A lesson worth noting is that the partnerships formed with civic groups and associations continued long after the formal campaigns concluded.

While libraries did their best to tighten their belts, they increasingly turned to federal and state agencies for aid. Hundreds of unemployed workers were assigned to the library through the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. They worked on binding and repairing the many worn-out books and completed a long-delayed inventory of the collection. In addition to aiding the overburdened library staff, the positions helped

sustain the recipients through dark times. Caroline Harris received one of these jobs and wrote expressing her gratitude: “I cannot live any longer on relief money. It is just existing. . . . [I was] very happy while working . . . as a book-repairer. I felt like a different person.”¹² “Relief men” who were not suited for library work were employed as guards, or provided services such as typewriter repair, carpentry, and other mechanical jobs. The library deemed the projects a success and petitioned for more workers than the relief agencies could supply.

State aid also played a critical role. In 1935 the Illinois state legislature approved an increase in the library tax rate and established a library relief fund. The Chicago Public Library received \$168,000 for two years from this fund. The book-starved library began ordering immediately, and circulation showed signs of coming back. This good news prompted Carl Roden to predict in 1936 that the library “is well on the way back to its former position as the Public Library with the largest circulation in the world.”¹³ While this proved optimistic, the tide had turned. The library slowly recovered from the deprivations of the earlier years.

Why rehash this grim historical tale? Actions taken when times are tough can reveal professional and societal values. As Frank P. Graham stated in an address to ALA, “the depression . . . tests what we really believe in. Budgeting in a depression searches through the stuff of our conviction.”¹⁴ Libraries sought to compensate for their reduced budgets through rental collections, donations, and appeals for state and federal aid. As an institution, the Chicago Public Library chose to maintain staff and hours while slashing the collections budget. These decisions were typical. Libraries, regardless of size, were fairly consistent in where they sought savings. Book collections experienced the sharpest reductions in expenditures. Many libraries retained staff, perhaps reluctant to contribute to the unemployment crisis. Library hours were preserved to accommodate people seeking physical and mental refuge.¹⁵ While libraries did their part and made unpleasant choices, it’s important to highlight the role played by state and federal governments. Their support helped cash-strapped libraries weather the storm. In documenting the choices of our predecessors, I am not suggesting we follow the same path, but we might examine what the difficult budget and policy decisions being made today will say to future historians about our priorities.

References and Notes

1. American Library Association, “New National Poll Shows Library Card Registration Reaches Historic High,” press release, Sept. 23, 2008, www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/news/pressreleases2008/September2008/ORSsharris.cfm (accessed Nov. 25, 2009); Jim Carlton, “Folks are Flocking to the Library, a Cozy Place to Look for a Job. Books, Computers, and Wi-Fi are Free, but Staffs are Stressed by Crowds, Cutbacks,” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 15, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123197709459483585.html> (accessed Nov. 25, 2009).
2. A national survey of public libraries showed increases of 25–30 percent in library circulation from 1930 to 1932. See Douglas Waples, Leon Carnovsky, and William M. Randall, “The Public

FOR YOUR ENRICHMENT

- Library in the Depression,” *The Library Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (Oct. 1932): 321–43. A later analysis found that circulation increased 14 percent between 1930 and 1935, with most of the gains occurring in the early years of the Depression. See Margaret M. Herdman, “The Public Library in Depression,” *Library Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (October 1943): 310–34.
3. Dominic A. Pacyga, *Chicago: A Biography* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 2009).
 4. Jane Addams, letter to Carl Roden, Nov. 21, 1930; Carl Roden, letter to Jane Addams, Nov. 28, 1930, Carl Roden Papers, Chicago Public Library Archives.
 5. Carl Roden, letter to Mr. A. G. S. Josephson, Feb. 9, 1932, Carl Roden Papers, Chicago Public Library.
 6. *Chicago Tribune* (Mar. 19, 1933): 14.
 7. Gad’s Hill sub-branch report, 1933, Chicago Public Library Branch Annual Reports, Chicago Public Library Archives.
 8. R. L. Duffus, *Our Starving Libraries: Studies in Ten American Communities during the Depression Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933).
 9. Waples, Carnovsky, and Randall, “The Public Library in the Depression,” 330.
 10. 62nd Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the Chicago Public Library 1933 (Chicago: Chicago Public Library, 1934): 34.
 11. 63rd Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the Chicago Public Library 1934 (Chicago: Chicago Public Library, 1935): 41–44, 56.
 12. Caroline Harris, letter to Carl Roden, Aug. 25, 1935, Carl Roden Papers, Chicago Public Library Archives.
 13. “The Chicago Public Library in the Depression,” Carl Roden Topical Papers, Chicago Public Library Archives.
 14. Frank P. Graham, address to the American Library Association, n.d., quoted in “Voices from the Past: Librarians on Libraries during the 1930s,” *Texas Library Journal* 85, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 30.
 15. Waples, Carnovsky, and Randall, “The Public Library in the Depression.”