



Library in the Park

For nearly a half-century, Memorial Library has valiantly tried to meet the needs of a changing community

By Carol Easton

Photographs by Gary Krueger

A night school class from Los Angeles High School is visiting the library across the street from the school. The class is "English as a Second Language"; the students are adults, most of them recent Oriental immigrants. The librarian welcomes them, gives a brief orientation and shows them around, urging them to ask questions and inviting them to apply for library cards. As the students explore the books, magazines and records, an elderly Korean woman approaches the librarian, book in hand. In uncertain English, she asks how much it costs. "Nothing," she is told. "There is no charge." But, the woman explains, she is not a citizen. "It doesn't matter. If you live or work in the area, everything here is free." The woman looks disbelieving. "But how you are able to do that," she asks, indicating the twenty other students in the room, "for all these people?"

MEMORIAL was the forty-ninth branch library to be built in the city of Los Angeles. The dignified old Tudor building squats stolidly in the center of its city block of pleasant park, inconspicuous—until the sun goes down. At night, the huge stained-glass window that gave it its name—it memorializes alumnae of L.A. High who died in World War I—glows like a jewel in a pool of darkness. If the sight is romantic, the effect is not. Evening use of the library has dropped off because the park is so poorly lighted.

Today, Los Angeles has sixty-one branch libraries, each with its own gestalt, from Watts to Woodland Hills. Their distinctive identities are defined by the people who run them and the people they serve. Memorial's neighborhood has undergone dramatic changes since the building was formally dedicated in 1930. That was an occasion! L.A. High's glee club and orchestra performed, city dignitaries delivered speeches, Taps were played in honor of the men memorialized in the window, and the crowd joined in singing "The Star-Spangled Banner." The neighborhood children were served refreshments and treated to a

talk by Hugh Lofting, author of the popular Dr. Dolittle books.

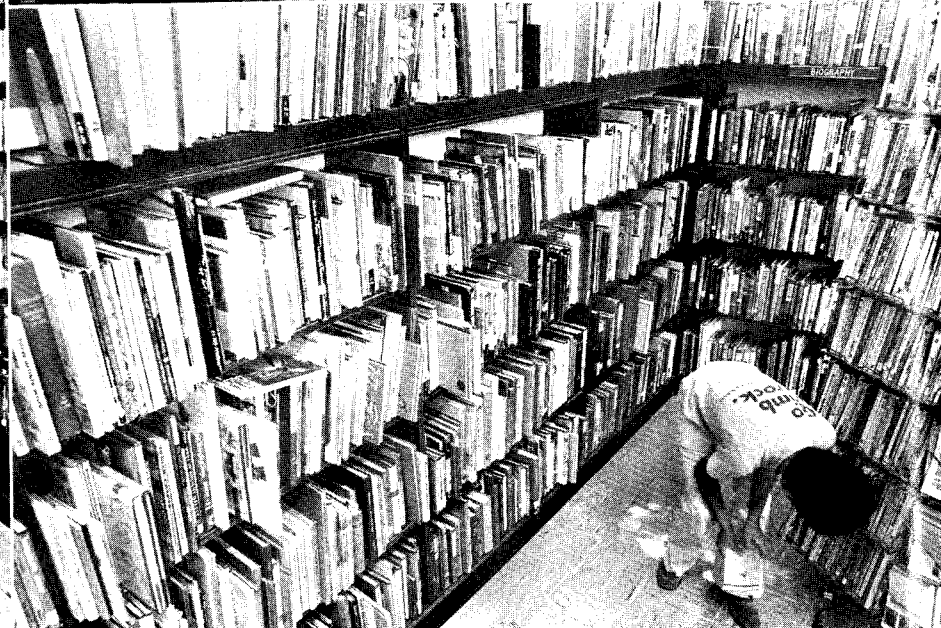
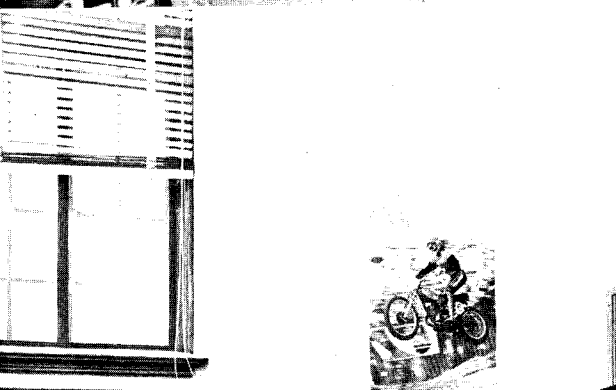
It was very much a book-oriented community then, populated primarily by middle-class Jews. I was one of them. When I was four years old (just three years younger than the building), my grandmother escorted me through the underpass beneath Olympic Boulevard, through the park and into the "liberry," where I solemnly printed my name on an application for a card that would allow me to take home as many books as I could carry. Amazing!

During the library's early years, books about World War I were the specialty of the collection. During the next great war, shelves marked "War-time Information" displayed *Mein Kampf* beside *While England Slept*, *Infantry Drill Regulations*, *The Coast Artillery Field Manual* and *Army Wife*. These and lighter materials, with emphasis on escape fiction, circulated steadily. The building always seemed to be crowded: mornings, with young mothers who brought their preschoolers for story hour; afternoons, with students working on assignments; evenings and Saturdays with working people. But in 1960, when the television generation came of age (and branches had opened in two adjacent communities), the circulation of materials peaked, then went into an irreversible decline. Students continued to use the library as a place to study and a source of reference information, but the number of card holders decreased

from a onetime 100,000 to the present 20,000, and those who remained checked out fewer materials, and less frequently.

The neighborhood has been in transition ever since the late Forties, when those middle-class Jews, including me, began moving out to the suburbs. FOR SALE signs became common, and single dwellings were converted into apartments for working-class blacks, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino and Spanish-speaking newcomers. The blacks predominated numerically until 1969, when, with a steady influx of Indonesians, Koreans, Vietnamese and Thai, the area became the richest ethnic potpourri in the city. Small businesses up and down Fourth and Fifth streets display signs printed in a variety of exotic languages. Most of the Caucasians who remain are either senior citizens or wealthy residents of exclusive Hancock Park.

Within the limits of tight financial constraints, the library's staff makes a mighty effort to serve the diverse needs of this community. The collection now contains materials in Spanish, Korean, Hebrew, Japanese, Chinese, French, German and Russian. *The Jewish Press* and *The Wall Street Journal*. *The Los Angeles Sentinel* and *The Korea Times* (published daily, in English, in Seoul). Recorded African folk tales and songs of the Philippines. As many books on black history as the budget will bear. Yet the librarians are the first to acknowledge the collection's inadequacies. They answer from



100 to 400 questions for information daily, but the occasional request that they can't supply is a concern.

Librarians are not, contrary to the generally accepted stereotype, a breed of withering, uptight old maids who do nothing but sit at a desk hoping nobody will intrude on their privacy with a question. Memorial's professional staff consists of three warm, dedicated, people-oriented women. Hermia Justice, branch librarian, takes her job's built-in frustrations with grace and a grain of salt. At 9 A.M. every workday, four hours before the building opens to the public, she is busy. Evaluating new materials, from best-sellers to films that might bring people into the building. Meeting with administrators and with other branch librarians to discuss problems and procedures and new resources as they are acquired: a newly compiled list of all 16,000 periodicals available to Memorial's patrons through interlibrary loans; a new "ethnic grant" that allows branches to show commercial movies such as *To Sir, With Love* with Sidney Poitier, which would normally cost \$200 for one screening, at no charge. Meeting with her staff, to pass along the information issued by higher-ups. Attending workshops led by specialists in every topic pertinent to Memorial Library, from computerized reference sources to Oriental magazines. Records must be kept; order sheets filled out; requests made for supplies. The collection must be constantly weeded, with outdated or unused books withdrawn to make room for relevant ones. "If you find a 1930 Sears bill in a book on your shelf, and there's dust all over it," Ms. Justice explains, "you know it's time to withdraw that book." Books that wear out from heavy use must be replaced. Every ten years, the entire collection changes.

What would Ms. Justice do if her budget were miraculously doubled? "I would buy more ethnic books—Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and black history—and I'd discard some old histories that are sitting there gathering dust. I'd put in another shelf area for foreign books. I would double

the number of books about how to prepare for civil service exams—we never have enough of those. I would upgrade our adult record collection—it's the remains of 2,000 records we were given in 1969, when RCA discontinued monaural records and donated its inventory to all the branches. I would buy more nonmusical records—poetry, drama, lectures. People would use them if we had them. And I'd be able to keep up with requests that we can't fill. Such as, last week, we were asked for books on CB radio. We only have two, and they're both out of date. Two people, probably students with assignments, wanted books on the Ku Klux Klan. We got requests for a law dictionary, and *Robert's Rules of Order*. For books on nursing skills, on Poland, on mixed marriages. We couldn't supply any of those. Of course, we can borrow materials from other branches, but that can take a couple of days. And some people need the information right away."

Most of Memorial's patrons are of high school age—in library language, "young adults." Their needs are the special responsibility of Elizabeth Morgan, young adult librarian. The question of just what constitutes a young adult book has no simple answer. Books that are calculatingly written for that age group tend to be condescending and boring. Young adult librarians from all branches meet regularly to share their reactions to new books. When I met with Ms. Morgan, she was reading *Ordinary People*, a best-seller. "We have it in our adult collection," she told me, "but I think it's just too thick—250 pages—for Y.A.s. Although the subject would, I'm sure, interest them. A kid will say, 'I want a good book to read.' I'll say, 'I think you'll enjoy this, it's about a young boy who comes out of a mental institution and how hard it is for him to return to school.' They'll say, 'Yeah, that sounds good!' But when I show them the book, they'll say, 'Don't you have something smaller?'"

"This new book about Muhammad Ali, *The Greatest*, is 415 pages, and the type isn't the easiest to read. I just

don't think our kids would read it. We have some very popular books on Ali, but they have a lot more pictures. Basically, except for school assignments, the kids want books to browse through, not to read, with lots of illustrations. They're interested in cars, airplanes, astrology, rock stars—and anything that's on TV. A lot of them have reading problems, so we look for books with an elementary vocabulary, but on subjects of interest to young adults. They're hard to find."

Getting the kids into the library, where they can be exposed to the resources there, is where Ms. Morgan's job begins. When she arranged a screening of a Bruce Lee movie, the place was jammed. A recent program for teenagers about sex, presented by a representative of Planned Parenthood, was a huge success.

Last fall, the library held an open house for teachers from the surrounding junior high schools, as well as from L.A. High. Ms. Morgan told them she was available for class visits and book reviews. "So now I'm waiting to go to the schools, to take armfuls of books, lists, information. I'm waiting for them to call me."

The children's librarian, Yeiko Nakashima, doesn't have to wait for schools to call her; she's been making the rounds of six elementary schools ever since she came to Memorial.

One-third of Memorial's collection is for children. Their materials are critiqued as carefully as adult books and are frequently reevaluated, with books that are out of date or not being read offered for sale at twenty-five cents (ten cents for paperbacks) a copy. "Children's books are changing," says Ms. Nakashima. "There's a new awareness of sexism and racism, and when we review books, we keep those things in mind. There was a time when sex instruction books were locked up. Now they're on the open shelf. We have children's books in seven languages. A Korean children's magazine. With so many new immigrant children, there's a real language problem."

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A sign of the times: recorded condensations of the Newbery Medal books. The books themselves, along with other "distinguished" award winners, sit on the shelves. "I try to introduce them," Ms. Nakashima says ruefully, "and the teachers do, too. But the children know what they want to read. Mystery-adventure. Science-fiction, fantasy. *Charlotte's Web* is still a favorite. They like books about martial arts, magic, riddles and monsters. Anything about Bigfoot. Sports. And all races like to read about their own people."

The traditional story hour most of us remember, either from our own preschool days or those of our children, phased itself out as most mothers in the neighborhood went to work, and their children to day-care centers. Summer activities—films, instruction in crafts, reading programs—continue to attract a sizable number of school-age children, but participation is down. Library-minded parents are now a minority, and the idea of reading a book for pleasure is becoming a little . . . peculiar. (There are exceptions: last spring, Memorial had an inch-high stack of requests for *Roots*—even though the staff had anticipated the demand by ordering seventeen copies, some of which are already worn out.)


Books, however, are just one facet of what libraries are all about—which is *information*, in the form of films, records, cassettes, filmstrips, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets. One Arkansas library lets children check out white rats and guinea pigs, with food and instructions for care! Memorial could take equally imaginative steps to supply whatever its public requested—but that public is curiously unwilling to take advantage of a resource paid for by its taxes and eager to respond to its needs.

Time was when Memorial's community room buzzed with evening meetings of Hi-Y Clubs, Great Books Seminars, The League of Women Voters, study groups of all kinds. Now it is mainly a storage room, because residents of the area are afraid to go

out at night; and the inadequate lighting in Memorial Park, which persists despite repeated promises from Councilman John Ferraro's office to improve it, compounds the problem.

When city officials allocate budgets, libraries are near the bottom of the list—far below more visible services such as fire, police and even sewers. That's historic; but in an era of inflation, it could be disastrous. Memorial's initial collection of 5,000 books cost \$10,000. The average cost of a hard-cover book today is \$10, with many reference and art books costing several times that amount. *Roots* is \$12.95. The subscription to that Korean children's magazine is \$24 a year; to *Shofunotomu*, a popular Japanese women's magazine, \$48. Since 1970, one-third of Memorial's nonprofessional staff has been cut, leaving a meager crew of one full-time and two part-time clerks. Federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act funds provide a community representative who coordinates and publicizes all sorts of special events—film showings and lectures inside the building and fairs, art festivals, carnivals and plant shows in the park. The community representative also works with the shut-in service and the Friends of the Library, a volunteer group. But CETA funds have been known to run out.

These are critical times for libraries. Within the very near future they must either develop closer, more symbiotic relationships with their communities, or they will no longer justify their cost. Whether your library is the biggest bargain you'll ever get for your property tax dollar or a total waste is up to you. Libraries have no money with which to advertise themselves to an apathetic public. When the librarians at Memorial learned that I was writing this article, they were ecstatic. "Do you think it will bring people into the library?" they asked hopefully. "Will you tell them we have information here on any interest they may have, from gourmet cooking to skiing to auto mechanics? Will you tell them that if they can't find what they need, we want them to *tell* us, so that we can do everything we can to get it for them? Will you tell them we want them to *use* us, and *use* the library?"

I promised that I would. 



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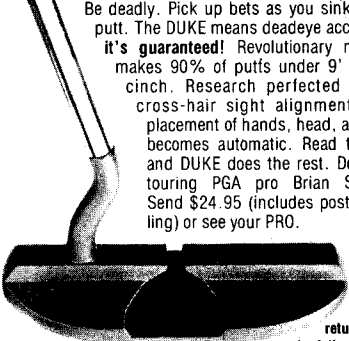
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