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Crisis and Growth SLA, 1918-1919

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■ In 1918, nine years after it was founded, Special Libraries Association was in a crisis situation. Membership was down, finances were in arrears, and leadership was lacking. By the end of 1919, these conditions were almost completely reversed and a foundation had been firmly laid that would ably serve the Association in the coming years. The reasons for this crisis and the subsequent revival are examined in detail.

IN November 1918, the war to "make the world safe for democracy" ended, and the United States began a return to—as Warren G. Harding expressed it—"normalcy." In that same month, Special Libraries Association officially began its tenth year. Though the founding gesture had been made in July 1909, complete organization had not taken place until November when a constitution was adopted and a full slate of officers was elected (1). From 1909 to about 1917 the Association maintained a satisfactory and consistent growth in membership and financial power as it set about fulfilling its avowed purpose

A broader historical sketch of the Association's past, co-authored by Williams and Zachert, will appear in the October issue of *Special Libraries*. It will comprise the second in a four-part series of articles celebrating SLA's 75th Anniversary (see page 297 for further details).

of promoting the interests of special libraries in a variety of private and public settings. Its members were enthusiastic and their initial efforts resulted in contributions to the development of the concept of special libraries in American society (2).

The year 1918-1919, however, was to be a crucial one, as unmarked by "normalcy" for the Association as for the country at large. Though it could not be described precisely as moribund, SLA had become a passive organization, unresponsive to the challenges inherent in the growing special libraries movement. Membership decreased, financial strength was at its lowest point in the decade, and activities appeared enfeebled. Yet within a year or so the situation had reversed; for the year of crisis contained the seed for a healthier future.

To understand the conditions within SLA, as well as the society in which it

and special librarians existed, five factors can be identified as having influenced major changes in the Association's life in 1918-1919. Stated generally, these factors were:

1. The syndrome of war economy, with its characteristics of narrow focus, disruptions, and dislocation was followed by a renewed outpouring of money, people, technology, and information into the national economy at the end of 1918.

2. The loss of active leadership in the Association early in 1918 was followed by the infusion of a new, more dynamic leadership on almost every level by the end of the year.

3. The lack of a specific communication pathway to respond quickly to the needs of the SLA membership was remedied by the provision of a forum for this explicit purpose.

4. The deterioration of SLA's ability to attract new members encouraged the Association to initiate an enthusiastic and successful membership drive.

5. The intensification of SLA's estrangement from the American Library Association provided the justification to hold separate annual meetings and to develop autonomous SLA programs.

Whereas the combination of negative factors had resulted in a passive organization during 1918, by midyear 1919 the positive factors were in the ascendancy, enabling the organization to again become dynamic and effective.

The War Syndrome

The best indication of the impact of World War I on SLA can be found within the pages of *Special Libraries* (2). Even before the official entry of the United States into the war, there are scattered references to resignations, transfers, and changes in jobs of SLA members and special librarians in general. In the months following April 1917, these references appear more and more frequently. Eventually, the war would have a positive effect on libraries and on special libraries in particular,

but during the period 1917-1918, the affairs of the new association and its members were disrupted.

A similar effect was taking place within the nation as a whole as it mobilized all its resources for war. Industries and businesses not critical to the war effort were shut down, over two million men were conscripted into service, and hundreds of thousands of women joined the work force. Banks and large investors who formerly had funded the establishment of new businesses now poured their money into the war effort through Liberty Bonds and similar efforts. The War Industries Board was given authority to set economic priorities and allocate resources. All, however, were to be directed towards winning the war (3).

The period from early 1917 to late 1918 was a difficult time for the nation, as well as the struggling SLA. Energies of all types were being redirected, and even those special librarians who were not directly affected by the war in terms of job loss or change were likely to be taking on new responsibilities that were in some way related to the war. These disruptions to the affairs of the Association and its individual members, like those to the nation itself, began slowly after April 1917, but increased at a rapid pace within the next year. These effects were at their height in the nation and within the Association in the first half of 1918.

Once victory in Europe was achieved in late 1918, the Association began its revival. The war brought about fundamental changes in the nature of U.S. industry, business and government, all of which began to grow and prosper at unprecedented rates. With these changes also came new opportunities for special librarians and their Association.

SLA Leadership

The infusion of a new and dynamic leadership following the July 1918 annual meeting proved to be the crucial factor in the revival of SLA. Dr.

Charles C. Williamson had been elected President of SLA sometime before October 1916 to succeed F. N. Morton, who resigned because of illness. (4). Williamson had been a member of SLA for a number of years, and was in 1916 Vice President of SLA and President of an affiliate organization, the New York Special Libraries Association. As municipal reference librarian of New York City and as director of the Economics Division of New York Public Library, he had considerable experience as a special librarian and appeared to be well-qualified for his responsibilities as SLA President (5).

Williamson's term (November 1916–April 1918) was not a distinguished one, however; in fact, little seems to have been accomplished. His presidential address of 1917 was an uninspired account of traditional activities. Even these activities, as reported in *Special Libraries* and *Library Journal*, appeared to have declined as did both membership and financial resources (6). In April 1918, Williamson resigned as President of SLA. The Executive Board did not replace him immediately and, as a consequence, the Association drifted without top leadership for several months (7).

The exact reasons for Williamson's inability to provide aggressive leadership are not known; nor is conjecture made easier for the historian by the absence of official records for this period. Apparently he tried, for, in his presidential address he made a strong plea for certain improvements in the Association. Though these suggestions later proved to be of value, Williamson made no apparent effort to implement them during his own term. He did make a routine attempt to improve the financial status of the Association and to recruit new members (8); however, little action and no success resulted.

It may have been that war conditions did not lend themselves to any great improvement in the status of library associations. Perhaps Williamson did not have the cooperation of his fellow officers and SLA members generally, or

he may have devoted less time and interest to SLA than was needed during this crucial period.

Williamson had been involved for some time with the Carnegie Corporation. In May 1918, shortly after his resignation from his SLA post, he began full-time work as a statistician for the Corporation (9), and in October 1918, he also resumed his position as director of the Economics Division of the New York Public Library (10). Questioned in 1949 on what he considered the highlights of his tenure as SLA President, Williamson could not remember the dates of the administration (11).

Perhaps Williamson was distracted by personal affairs during this important time for the Association. Unfortunately the record makes plain that no other SLA officer picked up the reins. The decline was evident during the 1918 annual meeting at Saratoga Springs (8, 12).



Shortly after July 1918, a special committee of SLA elected Guy E. Marion as President. As one of the Association's founding members, he had remained active in its affairs (13). After serving first as business manager of *Special Libraries* (1909-1910), Marion was elected secretary-treasurer, a post he held until 1915 (14).

Marion was a keen advocate of special libraries and an acknowledged practitioner of the concept. In his study of early industrial libraries, Kruzas describes Marion's library at American Brass Company as one of the first information centers in the United States (15). As librarian of Arthur D. Little, Incorporated, in Boston, and later as a private special library consultant and organizer, Marion continued to build and advance his ideas (13, 16). When he assumed office as President of SLA at the age of 36, he spoke with the driving

enthusiasm of youth. In his first public written notice to the membership after he became President, Marion sounded the note of confidence and belief in the special library idea that was to be characteristic of his administration and of his life—a note that had been lacking in the immediate past.

In times of unending change such as we are witnessing today, this Association has boundless power for accomplishing things, such as it never possessed before. . . . New Special Libraries are springing up everywhere. New opportunities for service are being presented. . . . You must enlist the support, active, not passive, of every Special Librarian with whom you come in contact (17).

Because of his experience as an officer during the earlier administrations, Marion was able to pinpoint one of the major reasons for the decline of the Association:

Your new president is undoubtedly favored with the unusual background which comes from years of service as Secretary-Treasurer . . . but those were days of beginning and construction only. The Association is now coming into its own, and its fortunes can no longer be guided by a select few. We have, without warning (as it were), passed a time when a small gathering around the dinner table could solve the problems of this organization. The Association from now forward must stand or fall upon the loyal support of its members everywhere (17).

Armed with this conviction, Marion pressed for an expansion of the Association's communications structure as a major goal of his administration. He believed that a channel from the membership at large to the Executive Board was essential for Board decisions to reflect accurately the desires of the members.

In the implementation of this goal, Marion was extremely fortunate to have several strong individuals as members of his Executive Board. As Vice-President, Edward D. Redstone, Massachusetts State Librarian; as Secretary-Treasurer, Caroline E. Williams of E. I. Dupont de Nemours; as Board members

Edith Phail of Waterbury, Connecticut, and J. H. Friedel of the National Industrial Conference Board. Friedel also served as editor of *Special Libraries* beginning late in 1918 (18).

These five were able to work together enthusiastically and effectively—a rare phenomenon. It was Marion, Williams, and Friedel, however, who were the prime movers of change. Using his knowledge of the Association's history and its internal workings, Marion was able to organize his energies toward correcting its weaknesses and building its strengths. Williams managed to untangle the financial affairs and helped to move the organization into a solid fiscal position. Marion gave Williams the credit in his presidential address of 1919, and the extant records reflect her careful management.

No small part of the improved financial position accrued from Friedel's change in policies regarding the distribution of free copies of *Special Libraries* to a large mailing list. Friedel, who could probably be dubbed the first "militant" advocate for special libraries, was able to convince the membership of the need for enthusiasm and cooperation. Through editorials in *Special Libraries* and articles and letters to the editor of *Library Journal*, he never let the reader forget that special libraries and SLA represented the wave of the future:

Librarianship is tending more and more toward the special library and the special library methods. . . . We are learning already to think in terms of knowledge and print, rather than in terms of book covers and title pages. The future librarian will be a specialist (19).

Friedel was able in a unique way to make the pages of *Special Libraries* reflect the trends of the new administration in every respect. Enthusiasm for special libraries was on virtually every page. He made the drive for new members into a personal crusade. The change in subscription prices for the journal (an important factor in improving finances) was capably explained.

The need for serving a great variety of members was filled by developing an editorial board representative of various types of special libraries, and by publishing bibliographic issues devoted to their special interests. The deepening conflict with the American Library Association was openly aired to the members, and a vision for the future of the Association was established.

Thus, in the space of less than a year a new and successful leadership took over the SLA helm. It designed a new communication role for members, revived flagging interest, and provided direction for the future. Guy Marion's ability to weld such a team at this particular time was probably his major service to the cause of special librarianship.

The Advisory Council

In his first letter to the Association membership, Marion had pointed out that the time was past when a few members sitting around a dinner table could decide the affairs of the Association. At the first Executive Board meeting at which he presided as President, he placed the matter of Board-membership communications on the agenda (20). Following the discussion, Marion was empowered to "revivify the National Advisory Board" (21).

The National Advisory Board had been created in early 1912 and consisted of the "district heads" of the 14 "responsibility districts" into which the entire United States had been divided. The districts, much like current-day chapters, were to be the local representation of SLA in all its various aspects. The district heads were to organize existing special librarians in their areas, aid and promote the establishment of new special libraries and, in general, serve as advocates for the concept of special libraries and SLA. The district heads, initially appointed by the Executive Board, were to be elected once the districts were sufficiently organized (22). These groups did organize them-

selves during 1912, and reports on their activities appear in *Special Libraries* during the period 1913-1918.

Apparently, however, the plan to have the Board function as an advisory body was not successful because it became necessary to revive it in 1919. How successful Marion was in doing this is difficult to determine because of the sketchy nature of the Executive Board records of the time. Based on these records and the published reports in *Special Libraries*, it appears that the National Advisory Board did report to and advise the Executive Board but that its influence was not particularly strong. And, for at least a few years, its influence would not be as strong as the soon-to-be-formed subject-division based Advisory Board. Nevertheless, the idea of geographically based groups of special librarians having an influence on national association affairs was a firmly established one that would continue to endure and make SLA a distinctive organization.

In partial implementation of his objective to improve the Association's management, Marion appointed Friedel on May 21, 1919, to "suggest a plan for the better management of the affairs of the Association. . . ." Friedel was commissioned to report to the next annual meeting "to call upon the other members of the Executive Board for such advice and information as was necessary (23)." Friedel agreed with Marion that improved management depended on improved communication. In his report during the June 1919 Executive Board meeting, Friedel expressed the philosophy of the Executive Board as follows:

. . . that the Association's work might be improved if the various elements in the Association were given . . . some method of expressing their opinion on various questions or policies involved in the Association. . . ." (23, p. 29).

Friedel recommended a structure that would allow members from similar libraries to function in groups. Each group would be represented by two



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members of its own choosing on an "advisory or conference committee to advise your Executive Board and your offices of your ideas, of your wishes, so that each section will be able to express itself best and everyone will feel the Association is trying to cover the broad field which has been growing during the whole ten years" (23, p. 29).

It should be noted that in this broad-sweeping plan, Friedel proposed not only an advisory council but, through the formation of interest groups, the divisions themselves. In a single recommendation, Friedel devised the structure which has, with increasing formality and complexity, characterized Special Libraries Association for six decades.

When Friedel's plan was put to a motion before the Association, it generated considerable discussion. The idea of representing the various interests in SLA in the forum of an advisory council passed easily; the matter of how these representatives should be chosen and whom they should represent took a longer time and required more discussion. Some members thought the representatives should be chosen at large and should represent a specified number of members without regard for common interest other than that of the total Association. After lengthy debate, however, this method of representation was rejected. The way was opened for the adoption of Friedel's original plan for representation by interest groups.

Though the membership was too large to decide Association matters around the dinner table, it was not too

large to take immediate action to implement an important decision, such as that of the formation of interest groups and the election of representatives. The 75 members present recessed into seven groups: commercial libraries, financial libraries, insurance libraries, legislative/reference libraries, technical and engineering libraries, industrial libraries, and welfare libraries. Each group elected two of its members to represent it on the newly authorized Advisory Council. In ten minutes time the job was done: SLA had subject interest groups and an Advisory Council (24).

The groundwork was well-laid. Within the next two or three administrations the Advisory Council was functioning as a dynamic and valuable part of the Association. In one master stroke the decision-making apparatus had been broadened, members had achieved a greater degree of self-government, and a springlet of fresh ideas flowed directly from all parts of the special library world. The Marion administration could close on a note of assurance.

Renewal of Interest

Two of the most serious problems facing Guy Marion as incoming president of SLA in 1918 were the sharp decline in membership in the Association and a resulting decline in financial resources. Both membership and finances had been on the decline since 1915, Marion's last year as Secretary-Treasurer (25).

In 1915 SLA had 354 members and collected, from all revenue sources, \$839.56; at year's end, with all expenses paid, there was a balance of \$23.79 (26, 27). In 1916 membership had declined to 300, money collected to \$640.50, and the year end balance again was reported to be \$23.79 (28). Figures for 1917 differ in various sources, but in December of that year Williamson, in a special plea to members to pay dues, noted that "fifty or sixty" members had been lost and that a deficit of \$40.47 existed on the official books (8, p. 170-

171). By June, 1918, membership had declined even further, and the Secretary-Treasurer reported a balance of only \$10.00 (29).

The need for emergency measures was clear. At his first Executive Board meeting, Marion asked for ideas and cooperation. The Board responded with a three-part plan to be implemented in a crash period of three months.

The keynote of this plan was publicity. In the first phase of its plan the Board reactivated an idea that had proved useful in the early days of the Association; it initiated a survey of special libraries, emphasizing statistical data on the libraries with which members were affiliated but including, as well, all special libraries about which data could be provided. Tear-out questionnaire forms were included in *Special Libraries* with the idea that they could and would be duplicated and distributed to any special library a reader might know about. Since the survey was designed as a continuing one, it was publicized over a period of time, in order to increase the awareness of members, subscribers and readers alike to the growing number of special libraries recorded.

The Board made extensive plans to have an exhibit on special libraries shown at the imminent joint meeting of SLA and American Library Association. Supplies of membership applications were ordered for use at the exhibit booth to sign up members without delay, and extra copies of *Special Libraries* were printed for free distribution (23, p. 30). Some months earlier, Friedel, as editor of *Special Libraries*, had appointed a group of contributing editors, each representing a variety of special libraries which he wished to emphasize in the journal. During 1918, monthly issues of the journal focused attention on descriptions of collections, facilities and services of each variety of library in turn. Numerous subject bibliographies were published. To the earlier enthusiasm evidenced in *Special Libraries* was now added considerable substance as Friedel's effort to mold the

journal into a stimulating medium for exchange of information about special librarianship took shape.

The third prong of the Board's plan was the specific recruitment of new members. This responsibility was assigned to a committee with R. H. Redstone, SLA Vice-President, as chairman (23, p. 30). The exact methods of the campaign are not known, but the success of the total effort is clear. By the time of the June 1919 annual meeting membership had climbed over the 400 mark. Money collected had risen to \$1273.60, and the year ended with all expenses paid and a balance of \$759.12 (30).

Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of renewed interest is shown in the attendance figures for the 1918 and 1919 meetings. In 1918 the average attendance at sessions of the annual meeting had been under 40; in 1919 several sessions ran over 250 (31).

The growing distribution list of *Special Libraries* also played its part. Thanks to new policies of exchanges and gifts, as well as the increase in membership, the *Special Libraries* distribution list increased from 325 in late 1918 to 430 by June, 1919 (32). Though some of these changes appear modest in actual numbers, they were important percentage gains, and their combined psychological value is incalculable. Once again, SLA was on an upward swing, one that would increase steadily as time passed.

ALA vs. SLA

The founding of Special Libraries Association in 1909 did not create much of a disturbance among the membership of ALA or its leadership. From the beginning, John Cotton Dana had urged the ALA Executive Board "... to interest itself in the growth of special libraries, and to take over, as a part of the ALA, the new movement..." but his advice was "... definitely ignored..." (33). Exactly why this attitude existed and continued for the next few years can only be a matter of speculation. In a letter to the Editor of *Library*

Journal in 1919, Dana stated that it was because of "... the very clumsy form of the ALA organization" (33).

Whatever the reasons for the continuance of this attitude, it became an increasingly sore point to SLA members, many of whom were also members of ALA. The feeling of disenfranchisement reached its height during the war years. At the June 1917 convention, ALA had formed a War Service Committee and charged it with the responsibility of aiding in the war effort in any way it could. The Committee immediately established official relations with the War Department and set up headquarters at the Library of Congress. Its work for the remainder of the war was remarkable: it collected and distributed to soldiers in the United States and overseas several million volumes of books and magazines; well over a million dollars was raised by ALA alone to finance its operations (over 700 people were employed in the effort at one point); and it built libraries and library buildings in hospitals, camps, prisons, and ships (34, 35).

"... assist and advise ... with reference to the choice of books on technical and specialized subjects and class periodicals to be installed in cantonments and in camp libraries;" and 3) "... prepare a descriptive pamphlet ... calling attention ... to the proposed distribution of books on technical and specialized subjects. ..." (36).

ALA, however, chose to ignore SLA's attempt at cooperation. R. H. Johnston reported at the July 4, 1918, meeting of the SLA Executive Board "... that various attempts had been made to cooperate with the ALA but without success as the ALA had taken the view that the war library service undertaken by that association was a general and not a special library problem" (37).

This attitude of deliberate neglect was evidenced by ALA's publication of an "Historical Sketch of the Library War Service" in which no mention was made of SLA or of its attempt to cooperate (34). Throughout the war ALA continued to ignore SLA even though page after page of the 1917-18 issues of *Special Libraries* urged members to

Throughout the war ALA continued to ignore SLA even though page after page of the 1917-18 issues of *Special Libraries* urged members to cooperate in any way possible with the war effort, and SLA was, at one time, officially a part of the ALA War Service Committee.

SLA attempted to join in the effort but was soundly rebuffed by ALA. In August 1917, only two months after ALA had formed its Committee, SLA appointed a committee on war service to work with the ALA committee. The SLA committee outlined the purpose and plan of its work to "... cooperate closely with the American Library Association committee, preferably working as a sub-committee ..." by the following means: 1) "Reach special classes out of the scope of the general [ALA] committee;" 2)

cooperate in any way possible with the war effort, and SLA was, at one time, officially a part of the ALA War Service Committee.

The war experience left many special librarians with a bitter feeling toward ALA. There was talk, at the 1918 meeting, of having SLA hold its annual conference at a time and place separate from ALA's, but nothing came of the proposal. In his presidential address Marion urged that "all library systems" (38) work in harmony, and editorials in *Special Libraries* and *Library Journal*

urged the same viewpoint, commending his attitude to all librarians (39).

At the 1919 conference there were lengthy and spirited debates on the breakdown of relationships between the two organizations. A strongly worded resolution, criticizing ALA's attitude towards special librarians, was drafted to send to the ALA Council. Even though the final resolution was narrowly defeated, a committee was appointed to study the matter of official relations with ALA (40).

Fortunately, a total break with ALA did not occur at this time. The SLA Executive Board decided to hold its 1920 annual meeting at a time and place different from ALA's. This decision was made for the convenience of SLA members and was not the result of bitterness. The ALA meeting was to be held in Colorado Springs, and the SLA Executive Board felt that more special librarians would attend a meeting on the East Coast (41). Consequently, SLA scheduled its meeting in New York, thus beginning the trend to hold separate meetings.

Troubles between the two organizations, however, would continue to divide their efforts to provide the best library service to American society. As Thomison put it so well in describing relationships between the two organizations during the period 1918-1922, ". . . it was thus becoming clear that an accumulation of affronts, neglect, carelessness, and selfishness was straining the once friendly relationship between the two sister organizations" (42).

Summary

Guy Marion stated in his presidential address to the Association on June 24, 1919: "A few years ago we, too, stood 'at the crossroads.' The affairs of this association were at a critical position" (38). It was true: the Association, perhaps even the concept of special libraries, was dormant. The times and the lack of imagination, enthusiasm, and leadership made it so.

By 1919, however, the situation had reversed. Imagination, enthusiasm and positive leadership gave the Association new life and a vision for the future.

During his tenure as president, Marion directed and witnessed new beginnings: membership was increased; finances were stabilized; *Special Libraries* was revived; a definition of "special library" was formulated; the Advisory Council was formed; a survey of special libraries was started; and a public relations campaign promoting the concept of special library was initiated.

Persons of action and vision are rare. Guy E. Marion was such a person as were his fellow workers on the Executive Board of 1918-1919.

Marion also recommended the establishment of certain internal organizational improvements which, when implemented in the future, would prove to be of great benefit to the Association. He strongly urged the employment of a permanent secretary; he advocated a paid editor; he advised the separation of the office of secretary-treasurer; and he urged that research be done on the nature of the special library field (43).

Persons of action and vision are rare. Guy E. Marion was such a person, as were his fellow workers on the Executive Board of 1918-1919. There have been, undoubtedly, others of equal, perhaps greater, stature in the years since 1909. Unfortunately, we know little of these people and the work they did in the critical or the benign years of our Association's history. Their stories, though buried in dusty documents and hazy memories, deserve the telling. Without such backward glances our past is uninterpreted, our continuity incomplete, our perspective on our future diminished.

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