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THE PROPOSED UNION CATALOG OF THE PHILADELPHIA AREA

By Dr. C. W. David

Suppose you need to consult an important book and it is in accordance with your custom and convenience to use the Library of the University of Pennsylvania. You turn to the catalog, but fate is against you: the book is not in the University Library. Some hours or some days later, when you can manage it, you go hopefully to the Free Library, the Franklin Institute, the Academy of Natural Sciences, the Library Company of Philadelphia, perhaps also to the College of Physicians, but all to no avail. Fate is still against you. There are still some sixty important libraries in the metropolitan area of Philadelphia to which you have not gone, and it is highly probable that the book which you are seeking is available somewhere among them; but your time and patience are exhausted, you cannot go on. You return to the University and appeal to the kind and efficient person who is charged with the handling of inter-library loans, and a fresh search of a more far-reaching character is inaugurated. Perhaps the Union Catalog of the Library of Congress is appealed to. At any rate, the book is finally located for you, perhaps in some distant repository half-way across the continent, and in due course, though not improbably after a considerable delay, it is delivered to your hands. Your desire has at last been satisfied—but you still have to pay the carrying charges, and an uneasy feeling lingers in your mind that the book should somehow have been obtained with less trouble and expense much nearer home.

In this age of scientific progress—of modern conveniences—such things ought not to be. Philadelphia is an old community, long distinguished for her men of science and her men of letters, for her numerous institutions of learning, and for the extraordinary variety and richness of her culture. Inevitably she has become possessed of a great and precious
store of books and manuscripts. Among her many libraries, a surprising number are old and several are of unique, or all but unique, importance. All told they may contain four or five million volumes. Yet there is no single really great repository of books among them—comparable, let us say, with the Public Library of New York, Boston, or Chicago—where all but the more specialized needs of readers and researchers can be satisfied; and there is no ready means of determining promptly where, among these numerous institutions, any desired book can be obtained. It is probably no exaggeration to say that there is no other community in this country with library resources remotely approaching those of Philadelphia, where such serious difficulties and delays are encountered in the simple process of locating books.

Mindful of the unnecessary and intolerable difficulties of this situation, a group of scholars, librarians, and public-spirited citizens drew together more than two years ago and began to consider measures of amelioration. They promptly reached the conclusion that the first and most necessary step in the solution of these difficulties would be the compilation of a great union card catalog which would show at a glance the location, or locations, of any desired book which the community possessed. But so far as was known no such complete regional catalog had ever before been attempted anywhere in the world. No one knew how much it would cost or how long it would take to complete it—indeed, no one knew whether such a project would be practical or even possible, and the methods by which it might be attempted had all to be determined. The Union Library Catalog Committee of the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area spent more than a year in the investigation of methods. The experience of the Library of Congress in the compilation of a national select union catalog was studied, as was also that of other institutions in the making of more limited union catalogs or in the mechanical reproduction of existing catalogs. Much attention was also paid to the latest mechanisms which have been developed in connection with modern photography. Finally, by
the middle of last winter, the committee believed that they had devised methods which for the purpose they had in view, namely, the compilation of a complete regional catalog of many libraries, would be superior to anything hitherto developed elsewhere.\(^1\) But they desired to make a test—a test not only of their methods, but a test which would demonstrate whether the proposed catalog would be possible and practical, and which might also provide a basis for at least an approximate estimate of the cost of such a catalog and of the time which would be required to compile it. Thanks to the generosity of a forward-looking Philadelphian, the cooperation of Dr. Ernest Kletsch, director of the Union Catalog of the Library of Congress, and the untiring industry of Mr. Paul Vanderbilt, librarian of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, it has been possible to compile an experimental catalog of twenty representative Philadelphia libraries (ten being general and ten special) for the short section of the alphabet ALBERT TO ALGEM.\(^2\) The experiment has now been completed and the resulting section of a union catalog may now be inspected by anyone so desiring in the Library of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, Memorial Hall, Fairmount Park. A detailed report on the experiment has also been prepared and will gladly be furnished, so long as the supply holds out, to any one who may be interested.\(^3\)

From the beginning of their efforts the Committee have been greatly heartened by the character of the endorsements

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\(^1\) The most important features of these methods were the use of a file of Library of Congress depository catalog cards as a foundation; the use of the Recordak camera and 16 mm. cinema film to record the holdings of local libraries at a low cost with the least possible inconvenience; the use of Recordak projectors to read and compare the film records in a central workshop; and a device for making single photographic enlargements from film, on cards of standard size for filing in catalog drawers.

\(^2\) The twenty libraries selected for the experiment are as follows: General: University of Pennsylvania, Free Library of Philadelphia, Library Company of Philadelphia and its Ridgway Branch, American Philosophical Society, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Bryn Mawr College, Haverford College, Swarthmore College, Temple University. Special: College of Physicians, Academy of Natural Sciences, Biddle Law Library (University of Pennsylvania), Dropsie College of Hebrew and Cognate Learning, Divinity School of the Protestant Episcopal Church, Philadelphia Commercial Museum, Franklin Institute, Pennsylvania Museum of Art, Lippincott Library of the Wharton School of Finance (University of Pennsylvania), Pedagogical Library of the Board of Education. Especial thanks are due to the librarians of all these institutions, who gave most cordial cooperation in carrying through the experiment.

\(^3\) Requests for this report should be addressed to C. W. David, Bryn Mawr College, or to Paul Vanderbilt, Pennsylvania Museum of Art.
which they have received. Locally they have had most encouraging letters from librarians very generally throughout the community, from the heads of a good number of institutions of learning, and from many individuals whose opinions they value. And from beyond Philadelphia they have received the endorsement not only of important individuals but of several national organizations which occupy positions of leadership in the intellectual life of the country. They have long been aware that the library problem of Philadelphia was not unique—except possibly in its extreme difficulty—that other urban centers were faced with a similar situation; but the requests which have come from almost every part of the country for the report above mentioned since it was first issued have caused them increasingly to realize that other communities are beginning to grapple with this problem, and that there is forming what may perhaps even now be regarded as a national movement, for the better integration of regional library resources. In such a movement it would seem that Philadelphia has an admirable opportunity to take the lead.

The Committee are of the opinion that the experimental catalog has demonstrated that their methods are sound, and that a complete union catalog of the libraries of the Philadelphia metropolitan area is both possible and practical. To make estimates of time and cost from experience with so small a part of so great an undertaking is perhaps hazardous, but it is believed to be very much better than a guess that the whole catalog could be compiled by four competent workers in four or five years (or by a larger force in a correspondingly shorter period) and that the total cost would be about $87,000—to which, of course, there would have to be added an annual charge of from $5,000 to $7,500 (depending upon circumstances) to provide for the service of the catalog and to keep it up to date after it had been completed in the first instance. To many, especially in these difficult times, such sums will perhaps seem discouragingly large. But it has to be realized that libraries and library service are really very
expensive necessities of the modern world, and that books are really of very little value except as they are made conveniently available to those who need to use them. Eighty-seven thousand dollars would be enough to add perhaps 20,000 or 25,000 ordinary volumes to existing collections in Philadelphia libraries, or it would be enough to acquire a very few important collector's items. As it comes increasingly to be realized how greatly the proposed catalog would enhance the usefulness of Philadelphia's existing rich collections; as it comes to be understood that the proposed union catalog would place under the worker's hand perhaps four to five million volumes, whereas at present the largest local libraries contain substantially less than a million volumes, it seems to the Committee inevitable that funds will be forthcoming for the achievement of this great undertaking.

In one respect, of course, the resources made available through a union catalog would fall substantially short of what might be provided by a single library of four to five million volumes: there is much duplication of the commoner books among the holdings of Philadelphia libraries. But that such duplication is far less extensive than is commonly supposed would seem to be one of the most striking results of the recent experiment. In the short section of the alphabet with which the Committee were concerned they dealt in all with 2,282 different books; and of this number, 1,844, or almost 81 per cent, were to be found in one library only, among the twenty with which they experimented. In the light of such a revelation as this, can anyone fail to agree that a union catalog of the rich and scattered library resources of this great community is not only highly desirable, but a necessity?