

# Reference Inquiries Received by Mail

BY MARY R. KINNEY

THE SURVEY of reference services in American public libraries published in 1961 reveals that 15 per cent of the medium-sized public libraries—those serving populations of 25,000 to 99,999—and 27.8 per cent of the small libraries—10,000 to 24,999 population—do not handle reference questions received through the mail.<sup>1</sup> Not included in the survey are the libraries in towns of less than 10,000 population—an estimated 72.8 per cent of the public libraries in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Many of these libraries probably receive few requests for reference information by mail and, for the most part, are poorly equipped to offer adequate reference service. John G. Lorenz, director of the Library Services Branch, United States Office of Education, states that in 1961 “71.2 per cent of the United States population had inadequate public library service or no local service.”<sup>3</sup> These statistics are alarming, but it is encouraging to note in the survey that “large [public] libraries answer reference questions whether they are received in the library, over the phone, or through the mail.”<sup>4</sup>

No comparable statistics have been gathered for university and college library reference service. However, statistics from 1,666 college and university institutions reported by the Library Services Branch in 1960–61 show that 1,200 of these academic libraries failed to meet the minimum requirements for adequate library collections; 52 per cent of the four-year institutions have less than 50,

*Miss Kinney is Associate Professor of Library Science in Simmons College.*

000 volumes in their libraries, and 86 per cent of the two-year institutions have less than 20,000 volumes.<sup>5</sup> These facts indicate that many academic libraries with weak book collections are as unable to provide adequate reference library service as are many public libraries.

To whom do the people who have inadequate public or college library service take their reference inquiries? What reference guidance to sources of information is provided for grade school students, for high school students, for college students, and for adults in areas of the country where there is inadequate library service or where there are no local libraries? Have reference librarians failed to communicate with the public; failed to make people aware of local resources? Have residents within a state been informed of the library services offered by their own state library or state library extension agency? Do patrons write to other libraries for their answers to reference questions and for materials on a subject? Is the present generation so accustomed to ordering what is desired by mail that writing for information or requesting free material seems more effective than going to a library? A great need for reference service by mail exists, but are reference librarians fulfilling their obligations in this regard? Are reference librarians who receive requests for information or for materials by mail aware that there is a code for the Handling of Reference Inquiries by Mail?

<sup>1</sup> *Reference Service in American Public Libraries Serving Populations of 10,000 or More*, University of Illinois Library School Occasional Papers, No. 61 (March 1961), p.6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from John G. Lorenz, director, Library Services Branch, Office of Education, August 3, 1962.

<sup>4</sup> *Reference Service . . .*, p.6.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Office of Education, Library Services Branch, “Library Services.” Reprint from December 1962 *Health, Education and Welfare Indicators*. Washington, 1962. p.xii.

A tentative code was submitted in 1951 by the Committee on the Referral of Reference Inquiries, Reference Librarians Section, ACRL, headed by Burton W. Adkinson. During the following year a new committee, Lucile M. Morsch, chairman, drew up a code incorporating practices in general use at that time based upon replies to a questionnaire which had been sent to more than one hundred libraries and selected individuals.<sup>6</sup> The code was designed as a guide to libraries receiving reference inquiries by mail when the library receiving the inquiry did not have the necessary resources (either materials or personnel), when the correspondent might better be served in libraries in his home town or regional area, or when the correspondent was a type that the receiving library did not attempt to serve.

The general directions which precede the six clauses of the code are an integral part of it:

The code is not intended to discourage any library from giving any reference service that it can give. At its discretion, of course, a library may suggest sources to the inquirer instead of referring the inquiry directly. The code provides, however, for the direct referral of inquiries that cannot be satisfied by the receiving library to a logical source of the information requested.

The first clause in the code states that:

A library may refer to another library:

- a. Requests from correspondents who apparently have not used their own library resources when there is reason to believe that such resources are adequate to answer the inquiry.
- b. Requests from its own patrons (*i.e.*, the people it is designed to serve) when its own facilities are inadequate and it is known that another library has special facilities or competence in the field.

The above directions in clause one have

<sup>6</sup>The report of the Committee on the Referral of Reference Inquiries, Reference Librarians Section, Association of College and Reference Libraries, was given at the American Library Association conference in New York, July 2, 1952. The text of the code, its purpose, and benefits was published in *CRL*, XIII (October 1952), 364-65.

been construed to mean that the original inquiry is always referred directly, but it is important to keep the general directions in mind in dealing with individual letters. To clarify part (a) of this clause: when the correspondent asks for general information or for materials on a subject and has apparently not used his local public library, his school, college or university library, and when there is reason to believe that such resources are adequate to answer his inquiry, he may be referred to a library in or near where he resides.<sup>7</sup> The onus then is placed on the correspondent to pursue his search and to make his own selection of materials along the lines directed in the reply.

The second clause in the code suggests that when the correspondent lives in a rural area<sup>8</sup> and when no specific library appears to be accessible to him he may be referred to his own state library or state library extension agency.<sup>9</sup> Another aspect of clause two is that the state library or state library extension division is also suggested to the correspondent "when there is reason to believe that unique resources within the state are needed, and the referring library does not know which specific library is equipped to handle it." A Survey of State Library Functions of the States, made under the direction of Phillip Monypenny, professor of political science, University of Illinois, was one of the special projects of ALA in 1962. The report on this study will provide pertinent information on reference responsibilities of state libraries and state library extension agencies.

The third clause in the code pertains to referring a correspondent to a government agency or other organization,

<sup>7</sup>The *American Library Directory* designates libraries which by contract are authorized to serve certain areas and gives data on number of volumes and finances which are useful in judging holdings.

<sup>8</sup>Rural areas are defined in the Library Services Act as areas under 10,000 population.

<sup>9</sup>Annually in the *ALA Membership Directory*, the section, "State, Territorial, and Provincial Library Service" gives official names and designates the specific body giving "general library loan and reference" service.

society, professional association, foundation, or institution when he requests information or data in a particular field that might best be supplied by that group. The name of the organization and its address should be given to the correspondent so that he can write directly for material available on the subject of his inquiry.

Several points are emphasized in the fourth clause of the code which pertains to requests for material that a library does *not* refer to another library. Briefly these might be summarized as (1) requests from people the library is designed to serve (unless holdings are inadequate); (2) requests that the library receiving the inquiries are uniquely able to answer, provided there are no restrictions in its own policies (although not named in the code, genealogical searching by the library staff is frequently restricted); (3) requests from libraries, unless another library is known to have superior resources; (4) requests for services in fields such as medicine and law, which are generally not given; (5) requests so vague that they cannot be determined; and (6) requests from students for information and material that can be used in student papers, theses, book reviews, etc.

Point six needs to be discussed in more detail. Although the code specifies that one should not refer this type of request to another library, it does advise that the correspondent should be made aware of the services and the resources of his own local libraries. The student needs guidance in searching for material for his school projects—guidance to sources of information. He must be reminded that the reference assistant in his school or college library or in his home town public library is able to counsel him. In some areas of the country where library service is limited, the student should also be advised that his state library or state library extension agency may be able to give suggestions or make materials avail-

able to him. Reference librarians are aware of the problems that students and the general public, residing in rural as well as in some urban areas, have in using libraries and in finding material on a subject. Calling attention to a particular entry for a subject heading likely to be found in a card catalog, naming a periodical index, or suggesting a specific work that appears to be pertinent, will often be a sufficient lead for the correspondent to begin his own search. Much of reference work is teaching the use of the library—teaching the use of periodical and book indexes, introducing students as well as adults to bibliographical sources, indicating how to find information in a card catalog, suggesting appropriate subject headings under which information may be found, and directing them to various kinds of materials.

The fifth clause in the code pertains to referrals to individuals, to an outside research worker, to a library employee working on his own time at a fee, or to a commercial agency. For questions of a serious nature involving highly specialized knowledge in a field, or when some one individual is likely to be either the best or the only source for the information needed, his name and address may be sent to the correspondent. For questions involving extensive or excessive work in searching newspapers and genealogical records or in preparing bibliographies, for requests for translations, and for appraisals of book or art values, the code provides that an individual be suggested as a source, "without referring the original inquiry."

This point of *referring the original inquiry* is discussed in the last or sixth section in the code. It specifies: "when a library refers an inquiry, it notifies the correspondent of the disposition of his request and sends the original inquiry with an explanatory statement to the library or other organization in which the inquiry is being referred." This means

that two letters must be written, one to the correspondent and the other to the library or organization to whom the referral is made with enclosure of the original letter of inquiry. For the files in the library making the referral, a photostat of the letter of inquiry is needed, although this is not specified in the code.

Letters of inquiry should be screened carefully before following the procedure of "direct referral"—perhaps the most debatable feature of the code. When an institution or organization is known to have unique resources this recommendation may be highly desirable. It should not be adopted either to add persuasive weight to the request or to shift responsibility to another library or institution. Since the code does not discourage a library from "giving any reference service that it can give," the reference librarian must keep in mind the two general provisions of the code in the screening process: "a library may suggest sources [within and without the library] to the inquirer instead of referring the inquiry directly," or it may make "direct referral of inquiries that cannot be satisfied by the receiving library to a logical source of the information requested."

Form letters for explanations of restrictions in services and for general referral purposes are used in some libraries. They are factual and impersonal. Requests for books, theses, dissertations, microform copies, bibliographical lists, and library holdings are a recurring type of mail request, and the replies necessitate a library setting forth its practices, explaining interlibrary loan procedures, giving information on photocopying policies, conveying data on the schedule of rates or charges, and naming limitations in the compilation of bibliographical lists. Since each inquiry presents a slightly different problem, many librarians prefer writing personal letters and adding various suggestions to the correspondent to aid him in his search for

information. The reply should be thought of as a terminal letter which gives sufficient information to the inquirer so that there is no need for further correspondence.

Answering letters of inquiry requires a keen sense of judgment and perspective, for the librarian is working solely from information that is in the letter—all that is known about the question and all that is known about the questioner—in contrast to procedures in the personal interview when attention is focused on the human element in the reference situation. Background knowledge of the reference librarian is most important—knowledge of bibliographical sources, knowledge of search techniques in using reference materials and in consulting the card catalog, knowledge of all types of people and their difficulties in looking for information on a subject, knowledge of the problems involved in defining and interpreting the reference inquiry, and especially a knowledge of one's own institution, its policies, organizational pattern, and resources—an understanding of the total picture.

Ten years ago the Committee on the Referral of Reference Inquiries reported to the Reference Librarians Section, ACRL, that the use of the code should result in three benefits: "the patron will be better served, the library that has failed to make its services known to all the people it is designed to serve will gain new patrons, and the responsibility of the referring library will be met by the proper routing of the inquiry." Today these same three points should be emphasized. The reference librarian must not overlook the fact that municipal, county, and regional libraries are supported by taxes and are established for the service of all residents in a given area. State libraries or state library extension agencies usually have as one of their major functions reference service by mail to residents in the state, espe-

cially to those who reside in rural areas or in places where the library is small. Although universities and colleges which are primarily tuition-supported institutions have obligations chiefly to their own faculties and student bodies, they should guide the individual correspondent to sources of information or materials in his own local, regional, or academic library. Three factors may determine or alter the reference service given in answering mail requests: (1) restrictions on services as defined in library policy, (2) the materials called for may not be in the collection, (3) the library may not have the necessary staff to give extensive aid. In no case should they deter the librarian from making an *appropriate* referral as provided in the Code for Handling of Reference Inquiries Received by Mail.

To fulfill the objectives of the code the reference librarian must, within the framework of his own institution's policies, extend the scope of his services to encompass reference questions by mail, as well as those inquiries made in person

or by telephone. Communication to the individual is important regardless of whether he comes in person to the library or writes for information. A correspondent seeking reference information or materials on a subject should receive a direct answer to his question or be given one or more constructive suggestions leading to a source or sources of information. Many libraries in the United States may lack the holdings, the staff, and the facilities to give this service, but the reference librarians in these institutions should know the sources of information and should have sufficient knowledge of regional and institutional resources to make the types of referrals recommended in the code. Reference library service by mail is one form of cooperative reference library work. It should be considered in the surveys of regional area studies of libraries, in studies of systems of library cooperation to meet reference and research needs, and in the identification of responsibility of service in systems of libraries which cross political and institutional boundaries. ■■

## Belles-Lettres . . .

(Continued from page 302)

cluded in the "background" as recorded in bibliographies of literature.

A few further comments (some of which have been anticipated) are offered for whatever they may be worth:

1. Despite the obvious but superficial convenience of having literature and related works accessible on open shelves, the future would seem to lie rather with filing than with shelving—chiefly for the simple (and often cited) reason that whereas a book may stand at but one

point, entries for it may appear at many, but also because of the fact that whereas a display of an actual collection is seldom complete (books may be in use, may be segregated because of size or value, etc.) even a simple shelf list provides an authoritative, if superficial, statement of the contents of a collection.

2. The weaknesses of one scheme may be matched by corresponding strengths in another. Despite the obvious inefficiency of duplication of indexing and

filing efforts, and despite the confusion experienced by persons contemplating first one and then another scheme, a variety of classification and filing schemes is of value in so far as it insures that various needs will be met.

3. Classified, *i.e.*, nonalphabetic arrangements are chiefly of value in that they bring out intrinsic relationships. They are of obvious help to those wishing to contemplate groups, and they are also of help to those searching for particular works but ignorant of particular authors, titles, and subject headings. The needs of those searching for known authors, known titles, and known subject headings are, on the other hand, probably better met not by classification but by alphabetizing—which also has the virtue, when used as a supplement to or as an index to classification, of compensating for some of the deficiencies of particular classification schemes *as classifications, i.e.*, as gatherers rather than as sorters.

4. One's choice of scheme will (or should) depend upon his audience—its age, its educational level, its purpose in utilizing the scheme. All other things being equal, the easiest scheme is the one to choose. But the question of what degree of familiarity with particular schemes must be required of those who use them is not quite so simple a question as it may seem. My feeling is that there is a point beyond which recognition of the predispositions of one's audience need not go; one need not condemn a scheme just because it yields results only to those who have studied its histology as well as its gross anatomy (it may even be, to change the figure, that the characteristics of a particular rule which mystify the laity and pain the novitiate make possible whatever rewards it offers the professed).

5. Decisions as to how "deeply" to index must be based, in part, upon time, money, and competence—and upon to what extent the work is being done or

has been done by others. But the fundamental question is how much help literary scholars demand. In general, it may be said that the more particularized a bibliography the more useful it is to advanced students and the less important become its defects so far as classification and choice of entry are concerned—and that indexing in depth as it is known, *e.g.*, to chemists, is virtually unknown to literary investigators. Apparently critics and literary historians have been more content to grope than have scientists.

We have noted some basic problems in arranging works or citations; specific issues which arise in connection with the placement of various approaches; and some over-all problems perhaps more nearly basic than those with which we began—concluding with the vexing question of multiplicity of entry. On this last point, a postscript: it may be that the project referred to at the outset offers some hope. Existing bibliographies entail considerable duplication and are conspicuous for the disparity between the effort that goes into their production and the sensitivity of the products achieved. Typically, ten people conclude that each of the same ten items is about a particular subject, whereas if but one person worked on but one of the ten items he could ascertain—in the same amount of time he now devotes to ten items—various aspects of the one item's content, various relationships worth bringing out, and so on (and he might even write an abstract). If Professors Sawin and Nilon's "integrated bibliography"—or something like it, or something even more ambitious—comes into existence and develops to a point that it replaces existing services, some of the energy now dissipated into superficial (and to some extent competitive) efforts might be channeled toward the production of a tool more analytical and hence more responsive than any now available.

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