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The 1905 ALA Conference in Portland: “A Triumph of Audacity”

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Imagine an American Library Association (ALA) annual meeting in Portland, with just a few hundred attendees, a program featuring the most prominent library leaders in the United States, plenty of seating for every session, and lots of opportunities for sightseeing and socializing. This ALA meeting, one of the most remarkable episodes in Oregon library history, occurred in 1905, during the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition. Portland's selection as a meeting site was controversial and risky. It occupied a very remote corner of the United States, thousands of

miles from the cities and towns where most ALA members lived and worked. The ALA annual meeting had been held west of the Rocky Mountains only twice in the history of the organization, in San Francisco in 1891 and in Denver-Colorado Springs in 1895. Some ALA members opposed the decision to hold another meeting on the Pacific coast. The scale of the meeting a hundred years ago was much, much smaller than in the present day, with hundreds of attendees rather than tens of thousands, but at the time it was a large event, and the fact that Portland was selected as the conference location was a major accomplishment for Pacific Northwest libraries and librarians.

In the early 20th century, as in the early 21st, the biggest event in American librarianship each year was the ALA annual meeting. Beginning with the first gathering in Philadelphia in 1876, ALA was the primary organization for the emerging profession, and the annual meeting promoted professional development and strengthened the professional community. Attendance at ALA annual meetings required a substantial investment of time and money, and travel across great distances was much more time consuming when the primary mode of transport was the passenger train. Transcontinental trips took several days each way. But the benefits were great as well. Librarians, library trustees, library educators and others were defining and shaping American libraries, and the opportunity to exchange information with colleagues was an essential part of the process; the selection of a distant location and special, exclusive sightseeing excursions added an appealing leisure element for attendees.

In 1905 the state of Oregon was just beginning to engage actively in the development of libraries and library services. The Oregon Library Commission, predecessor of today's State Library and an essential

1805

NORTHERN PACIFIC
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TO PORTLAND**
— in 1905 —

LEWIS & CLARK Pioneered the trail in 1805, the Northern Pacific maintains it in 1905.

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NORTHERN PACIFIC
YELLOWSTONE PARK

1905

Excursion Train to Portland, 1905. Advertisement for excursion train to Portland, Oregon, for the Lewis and Clark Exposition and the American Libraries Association annual conference was published in *Public Libraries*. (*Public Libraries*, v. 10, page 157.)



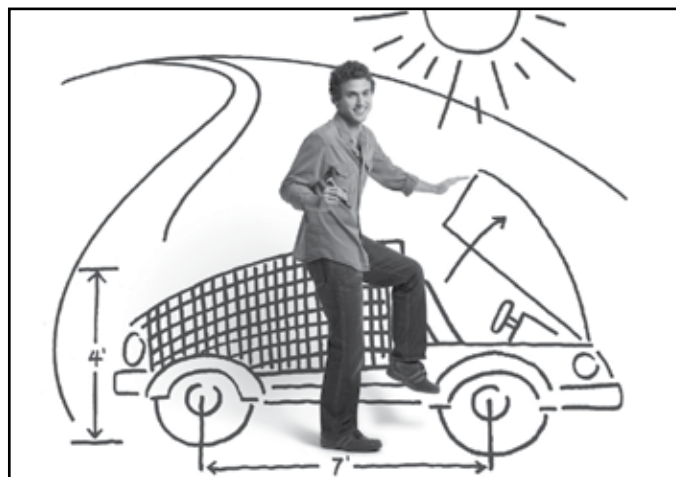
agency for organizing and supporting public libraries, was being established in Salem that summer. The state's first tax-supported public library had opened in Portland in 1902, and there were only four libraries in Oregon at the time of the conference, according to Charles Wesley Smith of the Seattle Public Library in his paper, "Library Conditions in the Northwest" (Smith 1905, 10). What the state lacked in library tradition it made up in leadership, a confident view of future prospects, and pride in what the "missionary spirit" of its library supporters had been able to accomplish in a short time. Oregon and the rest of the Pacific Northwest were rapidly building on the experience of regions with longer histories in library matters to select models and best practices for establishing new, full-fledged modern libraries, especially free public ones.

The choice of Portland as the 1905 conference location began with a formal invitation at the 1904 meeting at St. Louis, during the world's fair. Mary Frances Isom, head librarian at the Library Association of Portland, and Thomas Lamb Eliot, a member of the library board and a prominent retired Portland minister, attended the meeting and extended the invitation in person. It was an audacious and improbable act. Isom and Eliot, and their fellow library supporters in Oregon, hoped to persuade the ALA executive board that holding the 1905 meeting in Portland would raise national awareness of library conditions in the Pacific Northwest, and would increase momentum for library development in the region. They were aware that ALA had a history of meeting during world's fairs, beginning with the first meeting at the Philadelphia International Centennial Exhibition in 1876, followed by the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. Many Americans, including mem-

bers of professional associations, enjoyed the entertainment and educational opportunities provided by these extravaganzas. But even with the attractions and infrastructure of the Lewis and Clark fair to enhance attendance and enrich the program, ALA took a risk in accepting the invitation to meet so far from the profession's geographical center.

The attendance for the conference was somewhat low compared with other early 20th century conferences, but considering the distance most attendees had to travel the participation was strong, and far exceeded some very pessimistic predictions. There were 359 registered attendees at Portland, 267 women and 92 men, out of a total membership of 1228. The Atlantic seaboard was well represented, with 113 individuals making the transcontinental trip. The attendance compared fairly well with the prior year in St. Louis, 577, and the following year in Rhode Island, 891 (ALA 1905, 224; ALA 2008, 167).

Some Portland conference attendees were active members of the first professional generation of librarians, many of them founding members and former presidents of ALA. All were well known within a community that was still fairly small, and some of them



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ALA conference attendees in Portland, 1905. Clement W. Andrews and Frederick M. Crunden and colleagues enjoy the Portland sunshine during a break in the annual conference. Photograph by F.W. Faxon. (Courtesy of the University of Illinois, American Library Association Archives, Conference Photographs, 1876-1976, Record Series 99/1/14, Box 5, Faxon Collection, 1894-1932.)

were genuine celebrities. Melvil Dewey was the best known of these, and many others were distinguished pioneers and leaders whose reputations and achievements made them welcome, honored guests. The attendees represented the full spectrum of professional practice: reference service, classification, cataloging, indexing, training for librarianship, library equipment and buildings, publishing, and other specialties. These pioneers mingled with front-line library workers and other colleagues as they strolled the streets of Portland, attended conference sessions downtown at the

Unitarian Church and the Portland public library, shared lodgings, and enjoyed the fair. ALA President Ernest C. Richardson of Princeton University pronounced the meeting “a triumph of audacity” and “a triumph of success” (ALA 1905, 137).

The organizers and planners of the meeting showed skill and creativity in their efforts to attract, entertain, and inform their guests. They promoted the meeting, and especially the related excursions, in *Library Journal* and *Public Libraries* for several months in advance. They arranged for librarians from the eastern parts of the country to travel together by special train, allowing several days of mixing business with leisure, with plenty of time for informal pre- and post-conference discussions and appealing excursions including side trips to Yellowstone, the Canadian Rockies, California, and a steamship cruise to Alaska that attracted 115 people. One charming preliminary notice on “The Question of Clothes” appeared in *Library Journal* in March. Portland librarian Mary Frances Isom joked that the city’s dry season was scheduled to begin on July 1, but she urged attendees to pack umbrellas and light raincoats, and offered detailed suggestions for clothing, mostly for women, for the meeting in Portland and for the excursions to Alaska, Yellowstone, and even for mountain climbing (ascents of Mt. Hood and Mt. Rainier). For Portland, she suggested thin shirtwaists and, for Yellowstone, short skirts, heavy boots, a sweater or golf jacket and a mosquito veil (Portland Local Committee 1905, 156).

The conference began on July 4 and continued for four days, with a fairly standard program including business meetings, six general sessions, several section and associated organization meetings, and social events. Pacific Northwest librarians and library supporters occupied prominent slots in the schedule. They took advantage of the



opportunity to showcase regional achievements and challenges for an audience that included individuals at every level of power and influence in American librarianship, from library “apprentices” and assistants to the Librarian of Congress. The scale of the meeting was almost incomprehensibly small compared with ALA today: general sessions were small enough to be held in the sanctuary of the Unitarian Church; there were only four sections (Catalog, College and Reference, State Library Commissions, and Children’s Librarians); and it was possible to hold receptions and host excursions that included all attendees. But even with this comfortable, intimate scale, some participants were tempted to skip elements of the program to pursue their own personal interests. A post-conference reviewer identified as “A Missionary Spirit” reported almost exclusively on social and recreational matters in Portland, and observed that the Lewis and Clark fair “drew many enthusiastic members of the Anti-Sessions Section” (ALA 1905, 204).

The program for the meeting was substantial and well-organized, and gathered mostly positive reviews. In an editorial in the professional journal *Public Libraries*, Mary Eileen Ahern observed that “the tone of the sessions was new, there was a loosening up of old precedents along conventional grounds.” She further noted that it was a landmark meeting, that it would be remembered as marking what was before and what came after it (Ahern 1905a, 404). It raised national interest in library conditions in the Pacific Northwest, and after the meeting more librarians from the East and Midwest relocated to the region to accept professional positions. Cornelia Marvin, an expert on library development newly hired from Wisconsin to head the new Oregon Library Commission, observed in her 1907 report to the legislature that the meeting awakened an interest in libraries in the state,

**Some sessions from the 1905
Portland ALA program:**

- “Library Conditions in the Northwest,”
Charles W. Smith,
Seattle Public Library
- “The Library of Congress Catalog Cards,”
J.C.M. Hanson,
Library of Congress
- “The Library of Congress
as a National Library,”
Herbert Putnam,
Librarian of Congress
- “The Uses of Government Documents,”
Lodilla Ambrose,
Northwestern University
- “Unity and Co-operation in Library Work,”
Melvil Dewey
- “The Question of Trained Library Service,”
Lutie Stearns,
Wisconsin Free Library Commission
- “Library Administration on an Income
of from \$1000 to \$5000 a Year:
Economies in Plans and Methods,”
Marilla Waite Freeman,
Louisville Free Public Library
- “Traveling Libraries as a
First Step in Library Development,”
Gratia Countryman,
Minneapolis Public Library
- “The Training of the Student
in the Use of Books,”
H. Ralph Mead,
University of California
- “Carnegie Libraries,”
a stereopticon presentation,
Theodore Koch,
University of Michigan



Portland, Oregon, is the site of the first public library west of the Mississippi River. The Library Association of Portland existed as a private subscription library with its own building, staff, and 37,000-volume collection when it opened to the public in 1902.


—*Oregon Encyclopedia:*
<http://www.oregonencyclopedia.org>

and emphasized their importance as social and educational agencies. But she also criticized the program, and was quoted in a gossip note in *Public Libraries* stating that there were too many mediocre elements, and suggesting that ALA conference papers should be screened in advance. She did not name any individual speakers, but anyone who presented a local case study might have worried that he or she was “the individual who never understands that what he is doing at Podunk may possibly not be of paramount interest and usually has no connection with the subject in hand” (Ahern 1905b, 417).

In a strange postscript to the Portland meeting, Melvil Dewey was accused of improper conduct with some of the ALA women who traveled on the post-conference cruise to Alaska. He already had a reputation among female students and colleagues for unwelcome hugging, kissing, and other improper behavior. On the cruise, he sexually harassed some of the female travelers, and other ALA colleagues witnessed this conduct. During the following year there was widespread gossip about his behavior and increasing pressure for him to withdraw from any active role in ALA. The Portland conference was Dewey’s last as an active participant in ALA business and leadership (Wiegand 1996, 301-10).

The 1905 meeting was especially important for the professional development of Pacific Northwest librarians, strengthening their local community and offering a rare formal opportunity to meet and exchange ideas. The region had few libraries and fewer professional librarians, but some of these were graduates of America’s first library training schools, or apprenticeship programs in large libraries, who resisted professional isolation. They maintained connections with their former classmates and instructors, participated whenever

possible in formal conferences, and sought opportunities for cooperation with their colleagues in the region. They were just beginning to organize state and regional professional associations. The short-lived predecessor to today’s Oregon Library Association was established in December 1904 by the Oregon librarians who helped promote and organize the 1905 ALA meeting. The Washington Library Association was also brand-new, formed in the spring of 1905. The Oregon, Washington, and California library associations met jointly during the ALA conference and co-hosted a reception with the directors of the Portland public library for all attendees. The regional organization that would absorb the Oregon and Washington groups, the Pacific Northwest Library Association, did not yet exist. It would be formed in 1909, on the occasion of the region’s next world’s fair, the Yukon Pacific Exposition in Seattle.

The Portland meeting is beautifully documented. The conference papers and proceedings were published as a stand-alone volume, and the event was thoroughly covered in professional journals. The printed program for the conference has survived, along with a pamphlet describing the special train for attendees, originating in New York, with itineraries for sightseeing excursions and the outbound and return trips. The organizers even planned and published an elaborate souvenir book, *The Far Northwest*, documenting the special excursions by rail and sea, complementing the proceedings and other reports of the formal program. All of these documents offer a sense of the pioneer phase of Pacific Northwest libraries, the strong professional bonds among librarians and library supporters, and the audacity of a few Oregon individuals who invited their colleagues to visit when their work was only just getting started. 



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Clackamas County Library Book Truck, circa 1940. Students at the Rock Creek School are lined up to enter the county book truck funded by the Works Project Administration. (Courtesy Oregon State Archives, Oregon State Library, OSL0014.)

