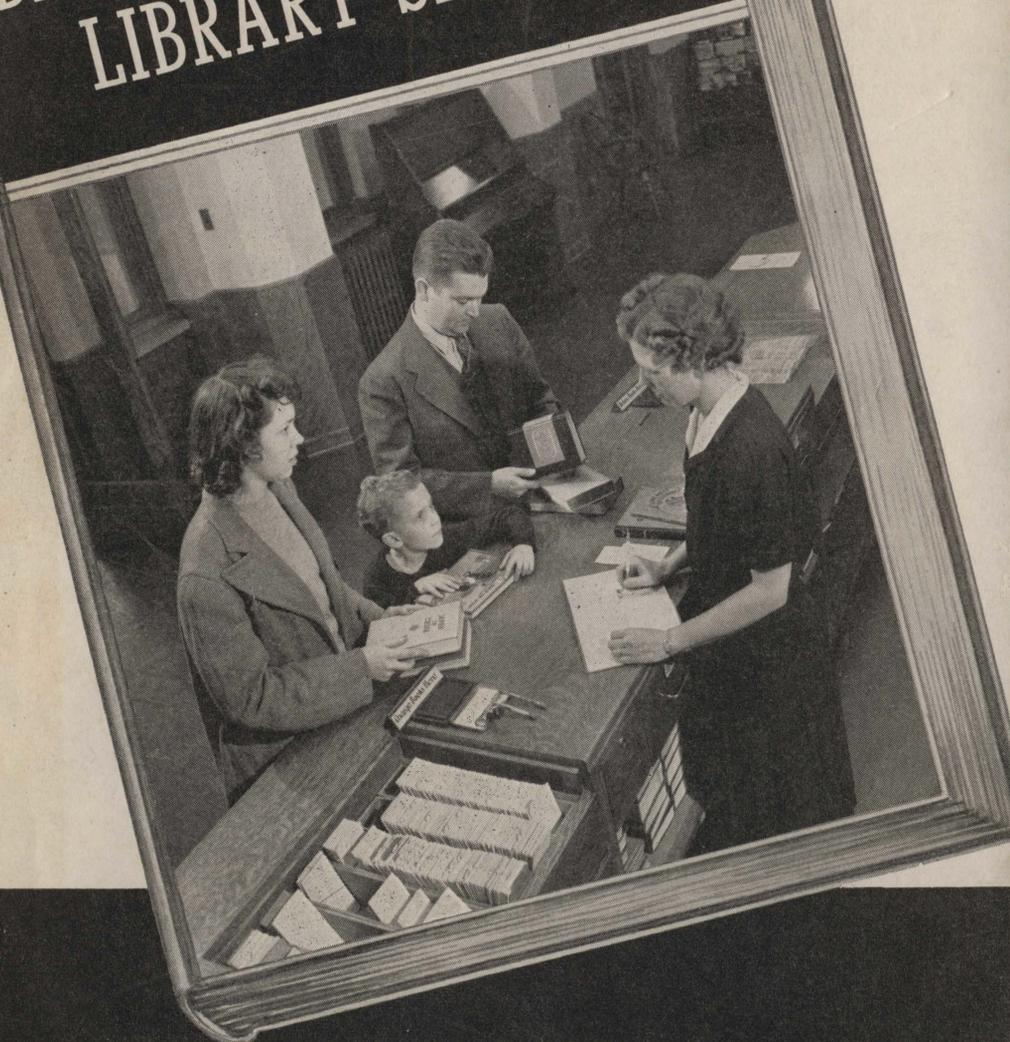


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Can Iowa Have

BETTER PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE?



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PREFACE

The people of Iowa do not possess as good library facilities as do the residents of most of the other states. Iowa farm families are particularly handicapped in this respect. Farmers in other states have more public library service than the farmers of Iowa. Many states with lower standards of living than Iowa's provide better public library service.

These conclusions are based on the facts presented in this bulletin and on additional information. Specialists who have surveyed libraries in many states agree with these statements. Many Iowa citizens and educational leaders believe that good libraries, like good schools, should be available to everyone without payment of special fees.

The Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station was requested to assemble data comparing the public library services of Iowa with those in other states. This bulletin reports these facts to the people of the State.

Can Iowa Have Better Public Library Service?¹

BY C. ARNOLD ANDERSON AND NEAL C. GROSS²

PART I. ADEQUACY OF PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE IN IOWA TODAY

Iowans are proud of the fact that the Hawkeye State leads the nation in the proportion of citizens able to read and write. Iowa boasts several outstanding institutions of higher education. So it only would be logical to assume that Iowans are well served by public libraries. But that is far from the case.

The state's public library services are so limited that nearly all the farm population is without free library service. And among the many persons living in small rural towns and villages the situation is little better.

Let us look at the actual figures. Although Iowa leads the nation in literacy, the state ranks thirty-fifth in the percentage of the total population living in a district where the people can get free public library service (fig. 1). Forty-four out of every 100 Iowans have no free library available. In contrast, every resident of Massachusetts lives in a free library district. Among Iowa's neighbors, South Dakota is the only state offering less library service.

Even more striking than the state-wide statistics are the figures for rural areas alone (fig. 2). Only 23 out of every 100 Iowans living on farms or in small villages are in a free public library district. The family bookshelf is still the only source of reading material for more than three-fourths of the rural folk in this state. Because of the large, publicly supported city libraries and the emphasis on education today, few realize that only ten states have a worse rural library situation. Many financially poorer states—as Tennessee or Georgia, in fact nearly the whole South—furnish more of their rural people with free libraries.

¹Project 804 of the Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station, Ames, Iowa, in cooperation with Iowa State Traveling Library, Iowa Parent Teachers Association, Iowa Library Association, Iowa Farm Bureau Federation (Women's Division).

²The authors, who are members of the Department of Sociology, are indebted to Dr. Charles H. Brown and Miss Frances Warner of the Iowa State College Library and Miss Blanche Smith, Librarian of Iowa Traveling Library. The information relating to the distance library users live from their library was supplied by the Des Moines Public Library. The figures showing the effect on book use of the reorganization of Ohio libraries were obtained from the 1939 and 1942 Directories of Ohio Libraries, furnished by Miss Mildred W. Sandoe, Ohio State Library Organizer.

SOME FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

- Part 1. How adequate is library service in Iowa now?
What percentage of Iowa people are without free library service?
Do Iowa farm families have adequate public library service?
How does public library service in Iowa compare with that in other states?
- Part 2. Could Iowa afford better public library service?
Does Iowa have the taxpaying ability to provide library service equal to that of other states?
Is the quality of public library service in Iowa on a par with the Iowa standard of living?
- Part 3. Would better library service be used if it were provided?
Are Iowans well enough educated to need better libraries?
Do Iowans read when magazines and books are available?

The charts which follow help to supply the answers to these basic questions.*

* The sources of data for the charts are listed in the appendix.

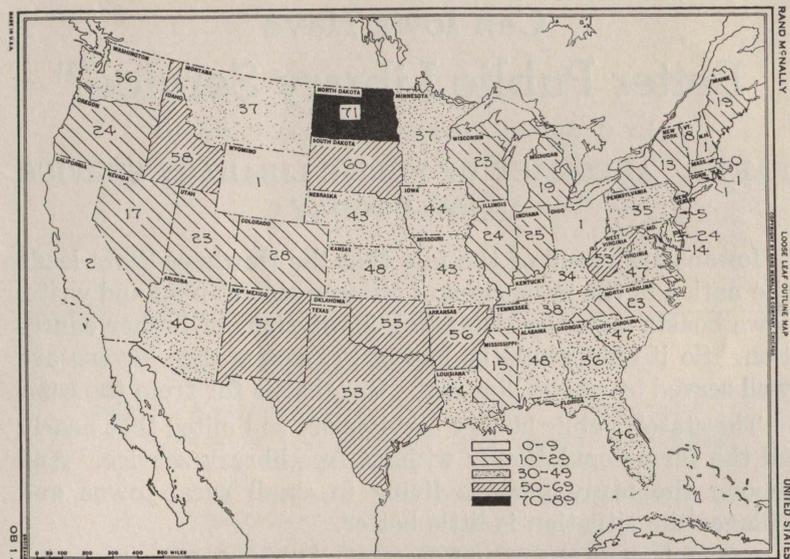


Fig. 1. Percentage of total population in each state without free public library service, 1941.

Iowa farmers are far above those of other states on the income scale, yet Iowa ranks thirty-eighth among the states for rural library service. While almost any Iowan would deny that Georgia's rural residents like to read any more than Iowans, it is a fact that twice as large a proportion of Georgia's rural public have free library service.

Compared with other midwestern states of similar economic and social background, Iowa offers the poorest library service to its whole population (fig. 3), far behind Michigan, Ohio, or Wisconsin. Only 1 percent of Ohioans and less than one-fourth of the population of either Illinois or Wisconsin are without libraries. When the percentage of rural population without public library service is computed, Iowa still ranks near the bottom (fig. 4). Five of the midwestern states give more of their rural families a chance to enjoy free libraries.

Within Iowa the differences in extent of library service are almost as great as they are among all the states. We have already seen (figs. 1 and 2) that 44 percent of all Iowans and 77 percent of rural Iowans live outside a public library district. The contrasts are even greater than these figures show, for all of the city dwellers can check out library books but only a few farmers have this privilege.

Those who live in Iowa cities may find it difficult to realize

the disadvantages of the majority of the farm families. City dwellers may overlook the fact that they enjoy the privilege of free access to a library (fig. 5).³ Can it be said that city people enjoy reading more than farmers to the extent indicated by 100 percent library coverage in cities and only 23 percent in rural areas? Of course more farm families could use libraries, but they would have to pay a fee much larger than the tax levy needed to provide adequate library service.

The differences between counties are as marked as those between types of communities. Figure 6 shows that 22 of Iowa's 99 counties have only one public library. (There are a few association libraries supported by endowments, but these are small and serve only a few people.) The number of libraries in the county does not mean much so far as the farmers are concerned, for in most instances farmers must pay special fees to use those libraries that are called public. In 84 counties no farm family has access to a free library, and in the other 15 counties there is, for the most part, only partial service. On the other hand, one county has a "book-mobile" to carry books into rural districts, and in one other

³It should be remembered that rural includes small villages, some of which have libraries, as well as the farm population.

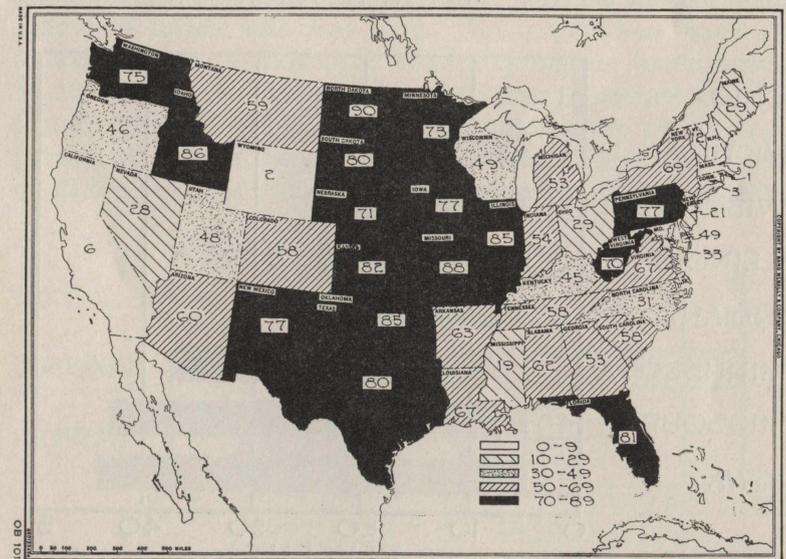


Fig. 2. Percentage of rural population in each state without free public library service, 1941.

county, service has been contracted for by every township. In 13 counties a few townships have made special arrangements for free library service to their residents.

Iowa counties range in library service from one county having 83 percent of its people with no library service to one county with only 1 percent without libraries (fig. 7). Of the 99 counties 54 have 60 percent or more of their people living outside public library districts. If we begin counting at the other end of the line, only 27 counties have free public library service for as many as half their residents.

Is library service in the state improving? The answer is a hesitant "yes." Figure 8 shows more Iowans receiving public library service today than 10 or 20 years ago; 56 percent in 1941 compared to 38 percent in 1920. But even this improvement is not as impressive as it looks. Six out of the 18 percent gain is due to an increase in the percentage of the state's population that is urban. Many other states with less income than Iowa have made more striking gains in this same period of time.

No one can say that Iowa is paying an excessive price for its present library system. Iowans are receiving what they pay for in library service, but they are not paying enough to buy good service. Iowa ranks well below the national

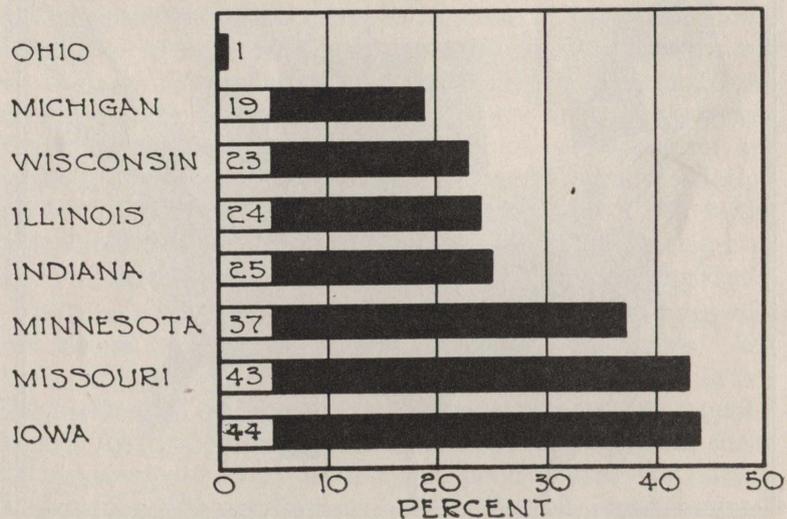


Fig. 3. Percentage of total population without public library service in eight midwestern states, 1941.

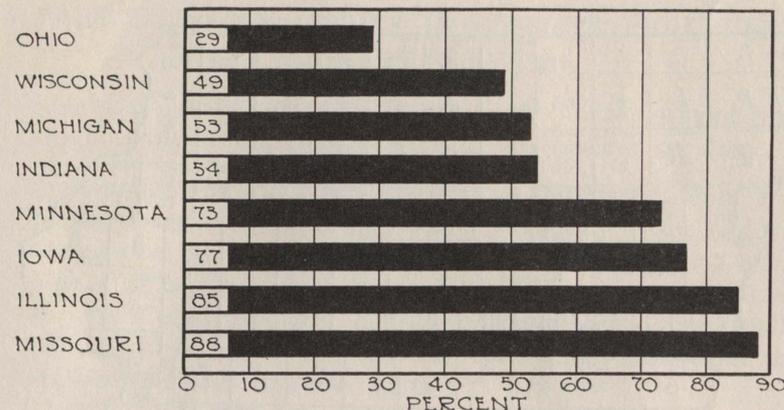


Fig. 4. Percentage of rural population without public library service in eight midwestern states, 1941.

average of 42 cents in library expenditures per person; Iowa pays only 37 cents (fig. 9).

Every other midwestern state but Missouri pays more than Iowa. Ohio spends 78 cents per capita, which is more than twice Iowa's 37 cents; only 1 percent of the people of Ohio are without free library service as compared to 44 percent in Iowa.

Paying so little money for library service has had another result in Iowa. Two-thirds of the libraries in the state (those in towns with less than 2,500 population) have an average income of less than \$500. Librarians would agree that at least \$2,500 is necessary each year to operate a satisfactory library. Rural Iowa's few libraries are poorly supported, as further demonstrated by the fact that two-thirds of all the libraries in the state have an average of only 3,600

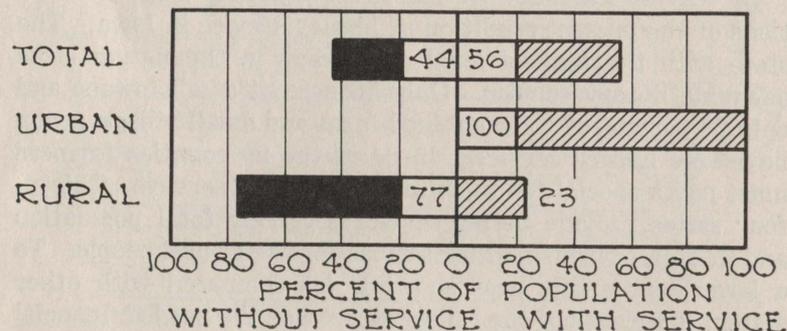


Fig. 5. Percentage of total, urban, and rural population with and without free public library service in Iowa, 1941.

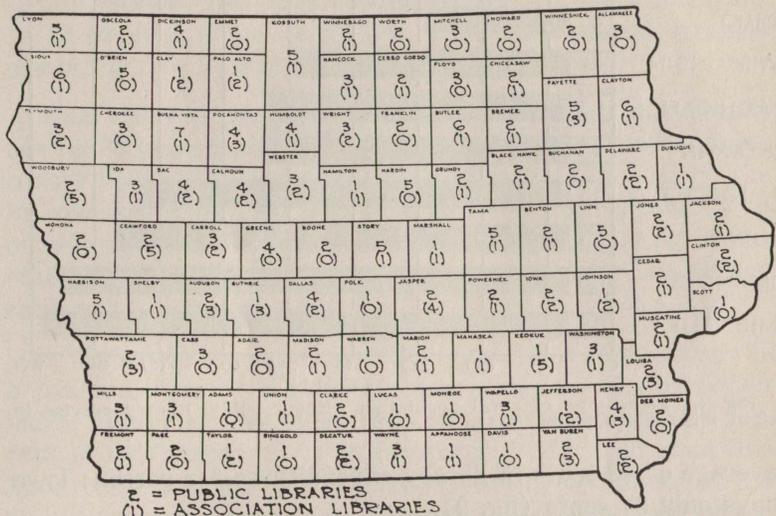


Fig. 6. Number of public and association libraries in each Iowa county, 1940.

volumes in their collections. Residents of small towns paid 45 cents a year per person, and those in large cities paid 74 cents, but the large libraries averaged 125,000 volumes (fig. 10).

Now to the fact that only 56 percent of Iowa people have free library service available, we can add the fact that two-thirds of the libraries serving these 56 percent of the people are too small and too poorly supported to offer satisfactory service.

By way of summary we can bring together these descriptions of the present condition of library service in Iowa. The state with the highest level of literacy in the nation lacks adequate library service. Only 56 percent of all Iowans and only 23 percent of the combined farm and small village group have free library service. In 84 of the 99 counties farmers must pay a special fee to obtain any library service. Thirty-four states provide better service for their total population and 37 states furnish better service for their rural people. To a large degree this poor showing (as compared with other states) is because of the failure to provide the needed financial support for library service.

PART 2. IOWA'S ABILITY TO SUPPORT GOOD PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE

Iowa can afford more and better public library service than she now has if her citizens wish to have better service.

Although this state is thirty-fifth in the proportion of people receiving free library service, it is exactly at the national average on the U. S. Census Bureau's economic index—much higher in ability to provide service than in quality of library service offered (fig. 11). Iowa's economic position is actually more favorable since this economic index does not include the state's wealth of Grade-A land.

Particularly important is Iowa's position as a superior farming state. While Iowa ranks last among the midwestern states in providing library service (fig. 3), it ranks first, not merely in the region but in the nation, in cash farm income (fig. 12). Iowa farmers should be able to afford as good libraries as the farmers of other states.

Retail sales are another economic index and these sales in Iowa are greater than in Indiana or Missouri (fig. 13). Figures 14 and 15 show that Iowa stands high also in two important items in the standard of living: ownership of new automobiles and farm telephones.

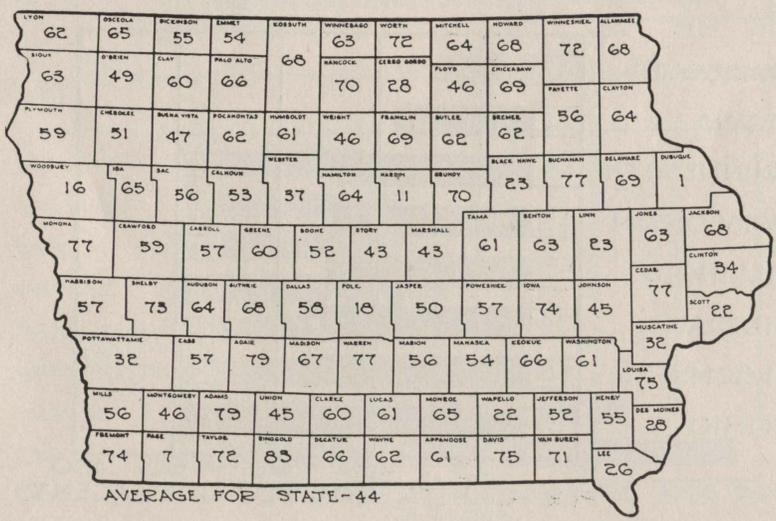


Fig. 7. Percentage of population in each Iowa county without free public library service, 1940.

It is revealing to compare tax expenditures on library service with family or individual purchases of various conveniences and luxuries (fig. 16). So long as the people of Iowa can spend twice as much per person in a year on cigars or candy or flowers as they allocate to libraries, it is certain that Iowa communities could afford to provide superior library service.

It is true that Iowa cannot finance public services such as

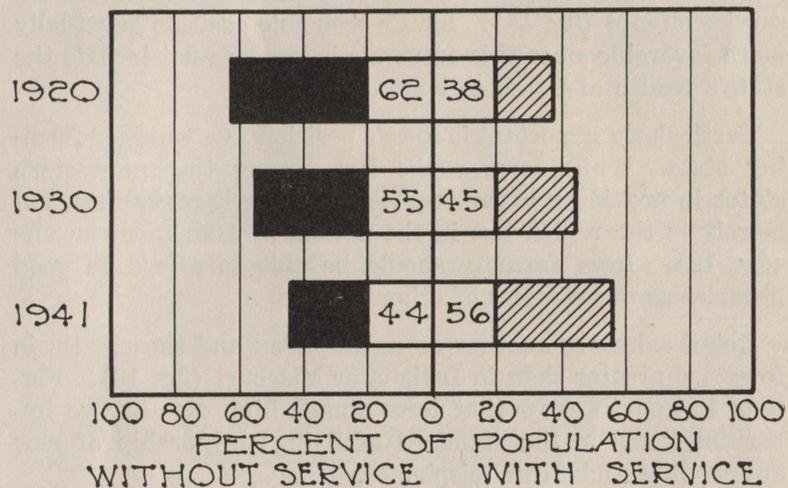


Fig. 8. Percentage of Iowa people with and without free public library service in 1920, 1930, and 1941.

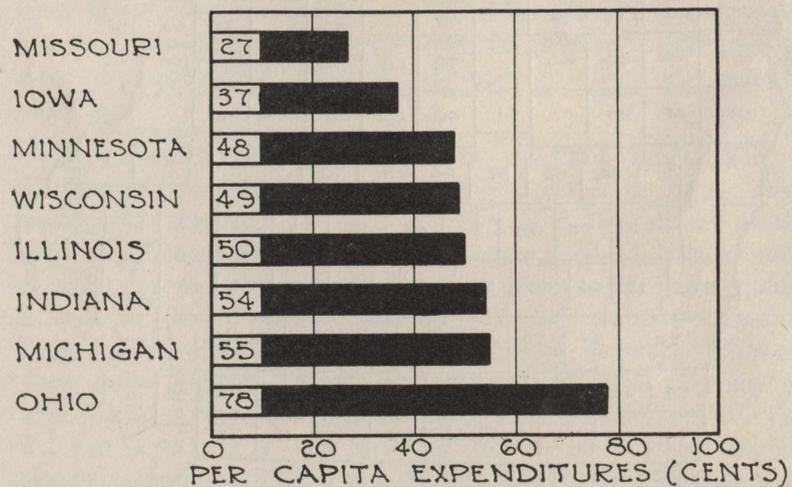


Fig. 9. Per capita expenditures for public library service in eight midwestern states, 1941.

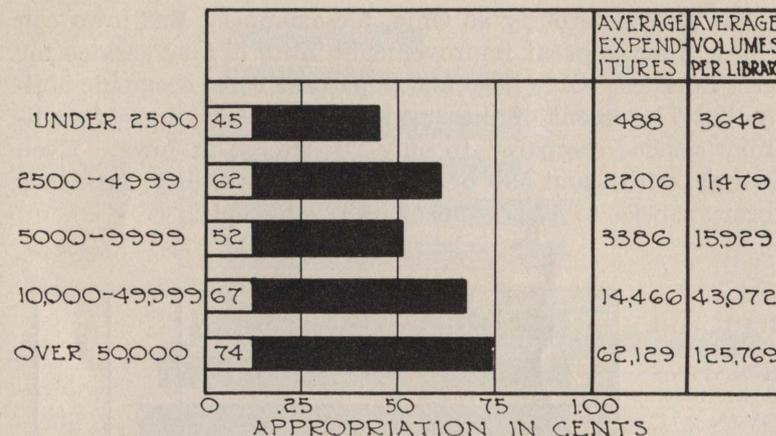


Fig. 10. Library finances and service in Iowa communities of different size, 1941.

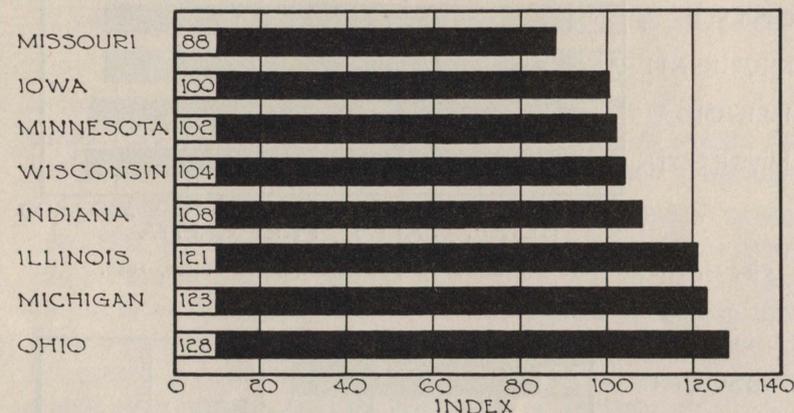


Fig. 11. Relative index of economic ability of eight midwestern states, 1941.

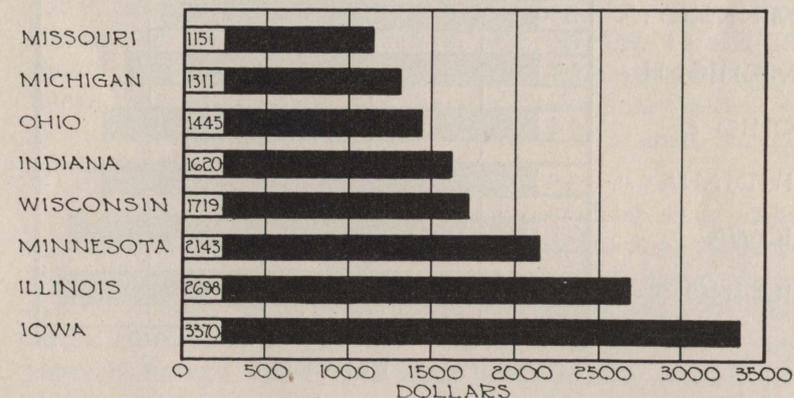


Fig. 12. Cash farm income per farm in eight midwestern states, 1940.

libraries so generously as Ohio, for example. But Iowa can afford to make great improvements in its library service for farm families. Ohio has only 28 percent more economic ability, but 71 percent of the rural people in Ohio have free library service compared to only 23 percent in Iowa. Even Georgia, with about half of Iowa's economic ability, furnishes library service to 47 percent of its rural people.

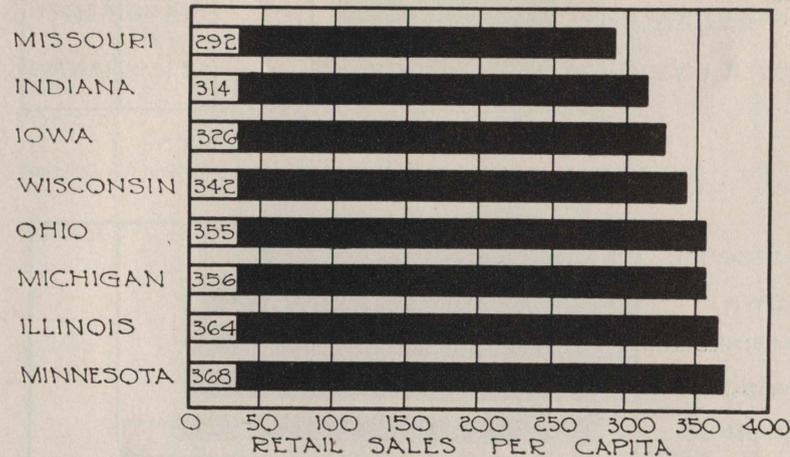


Fig. 13. Retail sales per capita in eight midwestern states, 1939.

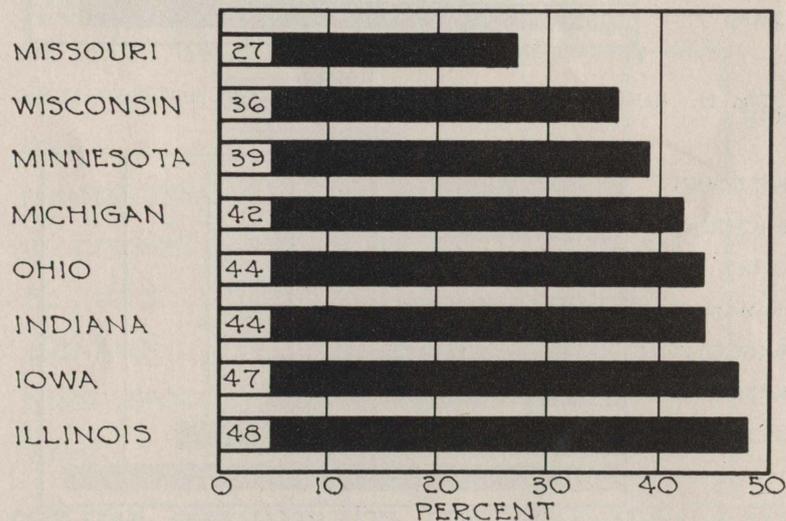


Fig. 14. Percentage of automobiles that are late models on farms in eight midwestern states, 1940.

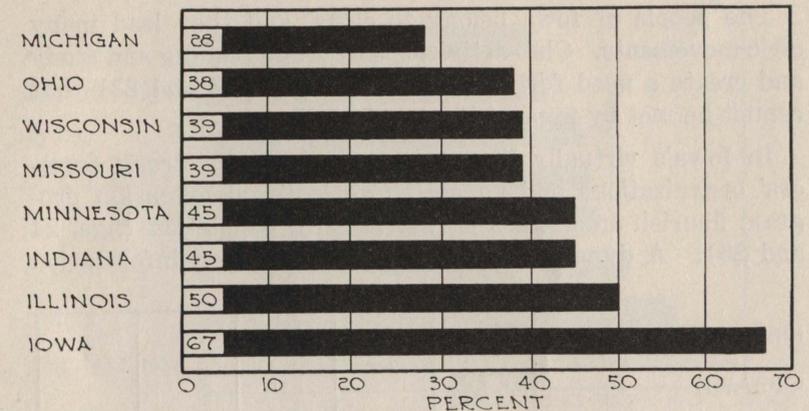


Fig. 15. Percentage of farms having telephones in eight midwestern states, 1940.

PART 3. THE POTENTIAL DEMAND FOR BETTER LIBRARY SERVICE IN IOWA

Iowans would use more and better libraries if they had them. They are alert and active citizens who need outlets for their interests and sources of information for their programs.

In 1939 the average Iowa resident read 3.8 library books, (fig. 17), which was more than the number read by the average person in Illinois, Michigan, or Missouri—all states providing more library service. It is only logical to assume that Iowa's reading average would gain considerably if more of the state's population had access to free libraries; perhaps it would even surpass that of Wisconsin or Indiana.

There are other sources for books than the public library, but it costs more money to get books from the Book-of-the-Month-Club or from a bookstore, and (as figs. 18 and 19 show) not many people in Iowa use these more costly services. Books have to be handy and cheap if the ordinary person is to find them useful. The only solution is a good library service.

Newspapers and magazines are more available than books because they are cheaper and they come to the family's doorstep. So it is not surprising that Iowa's high income level expresses itself more definitely in newspaper (fig. 20) and magazine circulation (fig. 21) than in book purchases. Apparently Iowans would read more books if they were available.

The people of Iowa belong to clubs, and they lead many civic movements. Club activities encourage reading and study and create a need for library service (figs. 22 and 23) that cannot be met by present library facilities.

In Iowa's virtually library-less rural areas, strong farmers' organizations and an active agricultural extension program flourish among a progressive farm population (figs. 24 and 25). A dynamic agriculture depends upon information

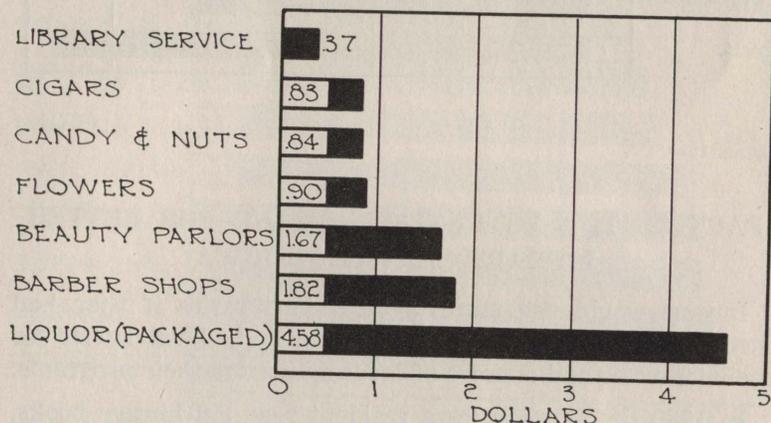


Fig. 16. Per capita expenditure for public library service and for certain other commodities and services in Iowa, 1939.

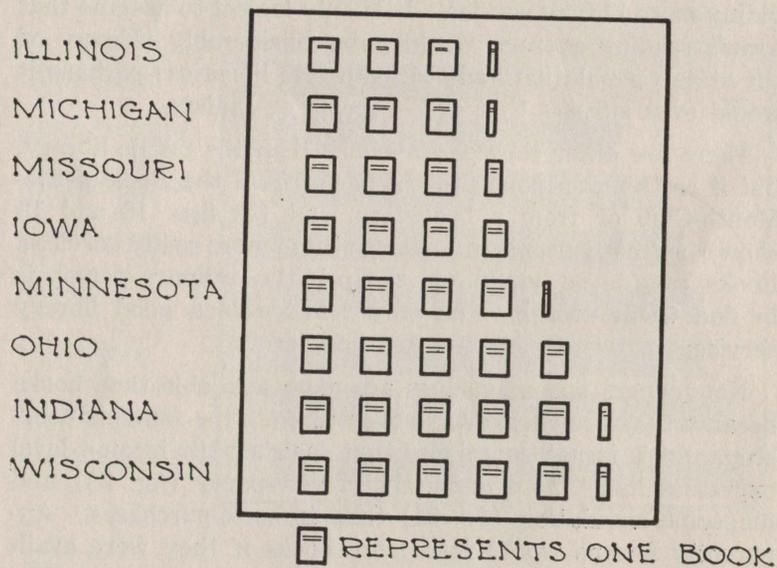


Fig. 17. Per capita circulation of public library books in eight midwestern states, 1939.

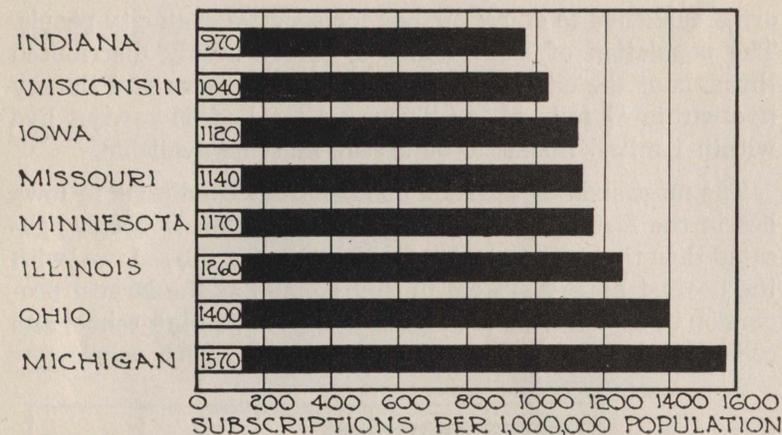


Fig. 18. Book-of-the-Month club and Literary Guild subscriptions in eight midwestern states, 1933.

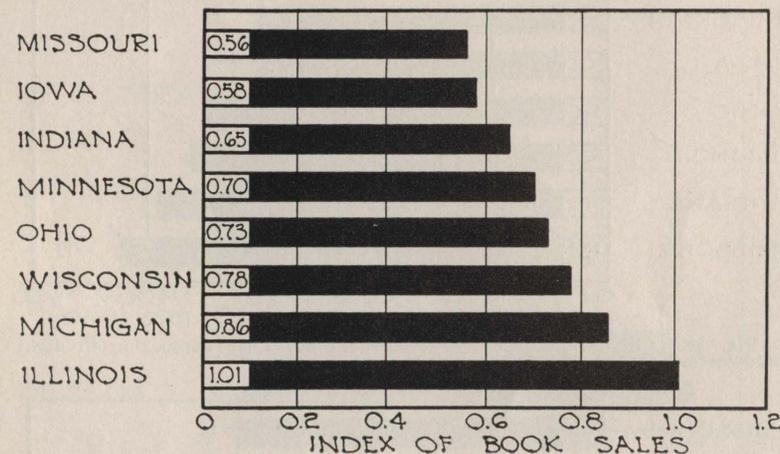


Fig. 19. Index of book sales in eight midwestern states, 1931.

and the use of all sources of new knowledge, and libraries can play an indispensable part in providing this knowledge. Yet Iowa's farmers, with few exceptions, live outside library districts.

The distance families live from the place where they can obtain books has a great deal to do with how much they use a library. Most rural libraries are not only too small; they are also too far away from the farms. Deposits of books in local schools and stores would increase the amount of reading. Some figures for Des Moines will illustrate the importance of distance, though we should allow for the fact that farmers

are accustomed to going farther for services than city people. The population of Des Moines is pretty evenly distributed throughout the city, yet 40 percent of the users of a library live within 1/2 mile of the library; a total of 60 percent live within 1 mile. Books, to be useful, must be available.

The most striking paradox about library conditions in Iowa lies in the fact that the Iowa farm population is better educated than that of any midwestern state (fig. 26). Iowa, with the poorest library system in the region, has the largest proportion of its adult farm group who have had high school and college training and the smallest proportion with only a few

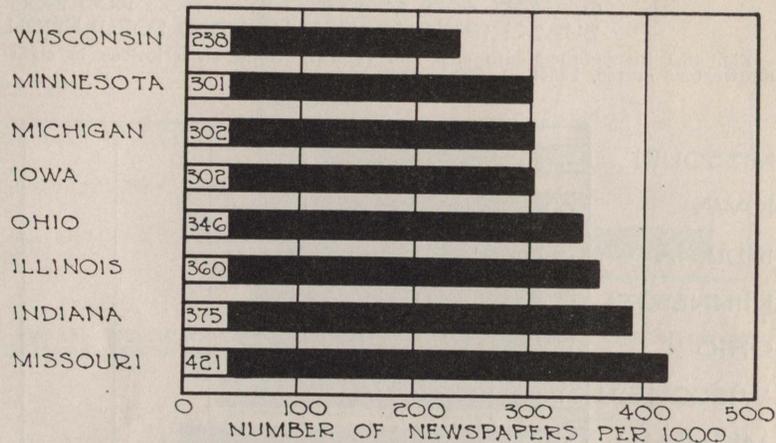


Fig. 20. Circulation of daily newspapers per 1,000 population in eight midwestern states, 1940.

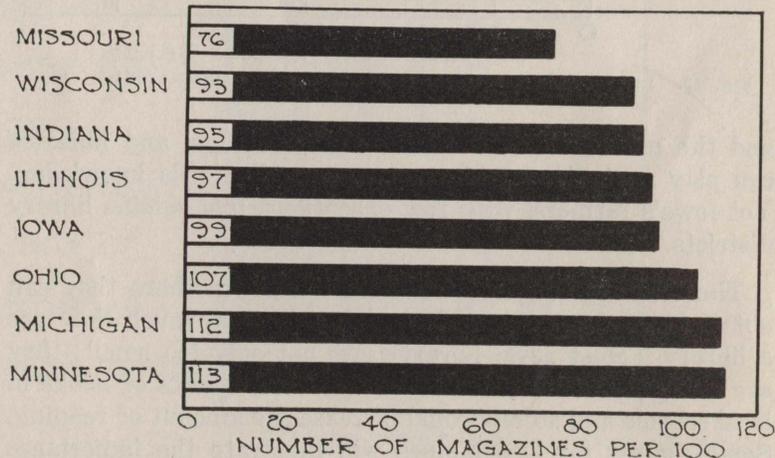


Fig. 21. Circulation of twelve national magazines per 100 families in eight midwestern states, 1937.

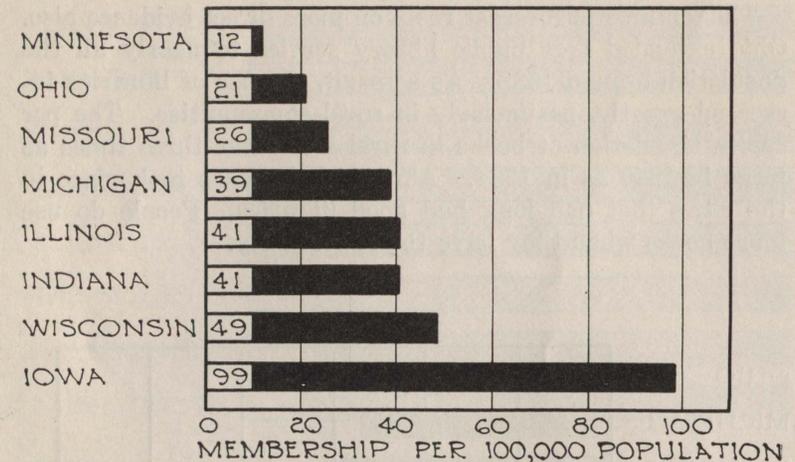


Fig. 22. Women's club members per 10,000 population in eight midwestern states, 1935.

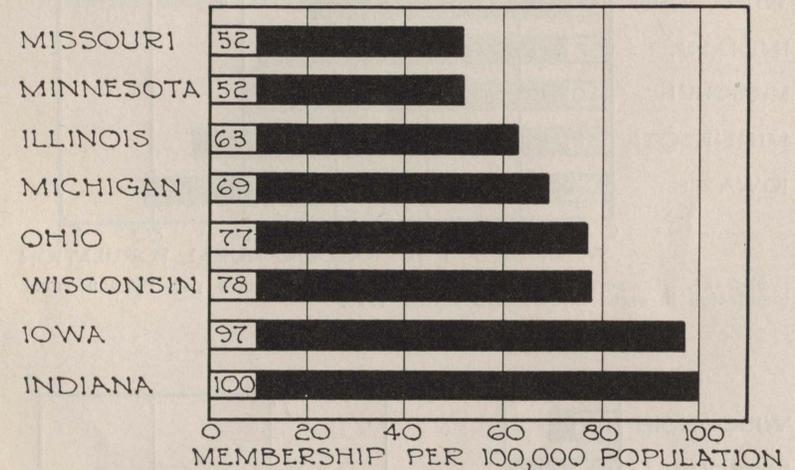


Fig. 23. Membership per 100,000 population in three business clubs in eight midwestern states, 1935.

years of schooling. Only 4 percent of the Iowa farm people have had less than 5 years' schooling, and one-third have gone beyond the eighth grade.

Although libraries are essential for individual education after a person leaves school, the best educated group of farmers in the Midwest have had to be content with almost the poorest free public library service.

All of these facts indicate that Iowa's active and well-educated rural people could and would use improved public library services if the services were available.

This optimistic forecast rests on more direct evidence also. Ohio extended free public library service to nearly all the population around 1938. As a result, the use of libraries increased greatly, particularly in rural communities. The per capita circulation of books in rural areas was three times as large in 1940 as in 1934. Almost no increase took place in the cities that had long had good libraries. People do use more books when they have the opportunity.

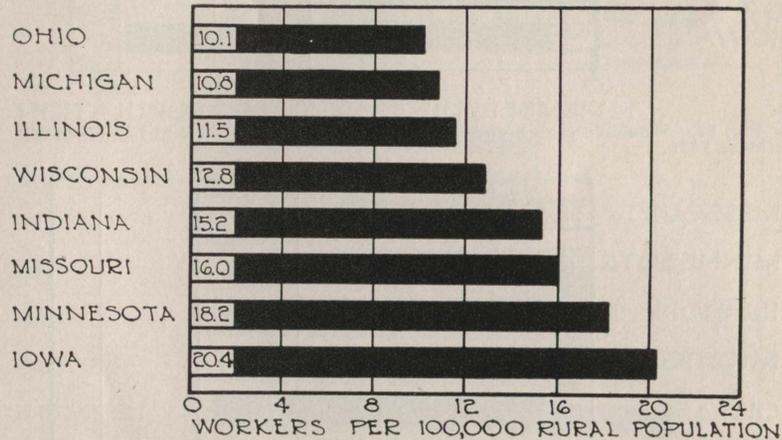


Fig. 24. Cooperative agricultural extension workers per 100,000 rural population in eight midwestern states, 1940.

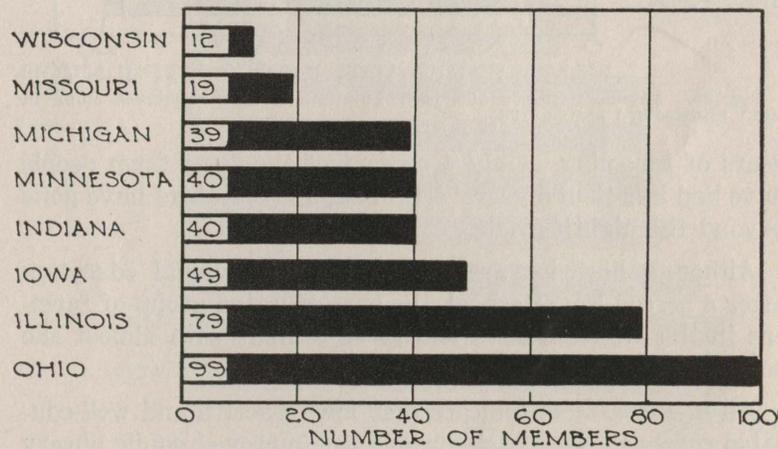


Fig. 25. Farm organization members per 1,000 farm population in eight midwestern states, 1940.

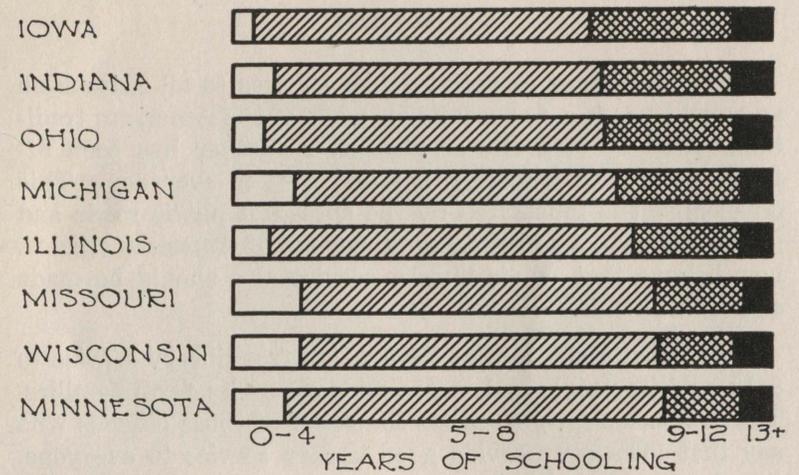


Fig. 26. Percentage distribution of years of schooling among the farm population (aged 25 or more) in eight midwestern states, 1940.

SUMMARY

The provision of essential public services to all citizens on an equal basis is a democratic principle of the American tradition. Step by step one service after another has been offered, at first to a few groups and then to everyone. This development is illustrated by the spread of public roads and public schools. An increasing proportion of American citizens now believe that public library service also should be made equally available.

This bulletin shows that Iowa offers free library service to only half its people and to almost none of its farm families. The evidence clearly supports the belief of those citizens who say that Iowa can provide good library service to everyone. Standards of living in Iowa are high enough to require an informed citizenry. The Iowa level of living and of income can support the small additional cost of an adequate public library system.

It is for the citizens of Iowa to judge these facts and decide whether they will equalize library service. If they decide to take this additional democratic step, there are various ways of proceeding. These methods will be analyzed in another bulletin.

In judging any of these plans, it is helpful to remember that when each locality tried to provide its own public facilities, many communities had to do without these services. Experience has shown that pooling costs over areas larger than a township or county is economical and democratic. Iowa has demonstrated this fact conclusively for its highway system during the last 20 years.

There is no necessity to decide upon any single plan for improving library service; there are many ways to obtain high quality service, efficiency and economy. But we always come back to the basic principle that in a democracy essential public services are regarded as the heritage and the right of every community and every family. Libraries are certainly an essential public service.

APPENDIX

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- Fig. 1. American Library Association, Mimeograph report of Milwaukee conference of June 22, 1942. Where Iowa and one or more other states have the same percentages, the numbers were carried to a third place to determine the precise rank of Iowa; this was done also for fig. 2.
- Fig. 2. American Library Association, *Bulletin*, June, 1942, p. 400.
- Fig. 3. American Library Association, Mimeograph report of Milwaukee conference of June 22, 1942. The grouping of states into the mid-western region is based on H. W. Odum, *Southern Regions of the United States*. Six regions were established by using several hundred indexes of education, income, wealth, population, etc. Those states showing a high degree of similarity on many indexes were grouped together. In preparing this bulletin it was regarded as informative to contrast Iowa with states having a similar social and economic background as well as with all the states of the nation.
- Fig. 4. American Library Association, *Bulletin*, June, 1942, p. 400.
- Fig. 5. *Ibid.*
- Fig. 6. Information supplied by the Iowa State Traveling Library.
- Fig. 7. *Ibid.*
- Fig. 8. Data for 1920 and 1930 from Iowa State Traveling Library; data for 1941 from American Library Association, Mimeograph report of Milwaukee conference of June 22, 1942.
- Fig. 9. American Library Association, *Bulletin*, June, 1942, p. 400.
- Fig. 10. Tabulated from data supplied by Iowa State Traveling Library.
- Fig. 11. U. S. Census Bureau, *Financing Federal, State, and Local Governments: 1941*.
- Fig. 12. Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1941, p. 710.
- Fig. 13. U. S. Census Bureau, *Financing Federal, State, and Local Governments: 1941*.
- Fig. 14. 16th (1940) U. S. Census, *Agriculture*, volume 1, parts for separate states. ("Late model" cars means 1936-40 models.)
- Fig. 15. *Ibid.*
- Fig. 16. U. S. Census of Business, *Retail Trade*, 1939, p. 130; *Retail Trade in Iowa*, 1939, p. 7. U. S. Census of Business, *Service Establishments*, 1939, p. 22.
- Fig. 17. American Library Association, Mimeograph report of San Francisco conference of June 20, 1939.
- Fig. 18. L. R. Wilson, *The Geography of Reading*, p. 217.
- Fig. 19. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- Fig. 20. *Standard Rate and Data Service* (newspaper section), 1940, p. 6.
- Fig. 21. U. S. Department of Commerce, *Consumers' Market Data Handbook*, 1939 edition, p. 2-5.
- Fig. 22. L. R. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 303.
- Fig. 23. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
- Fig. 24. United States Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural Statistics*, 1941, p. 715.
- Fig. 25. Dwight Sanderson, *Rural Sociology and Rural Social Organization*, p. 506-7.
- Fig. 26. 16th (1940) U. S. Census, Population (2nd Series), bulletins for separate states.

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