The Editorial Notebook

THE PEOPLE'S LIBRARY

BY KEITH L. RUNYON

The writer is editorial page editor of *The Courier-Journal.*

THIS IS National Library Week. I learned that Wednesday morning while I was driving to work and listening to WFPL-FM, one of two library stations, on the car radio.

Of course there are "national weeks" for all sorts of worthy causes, so this one is no big deal. Right?

Wrong.

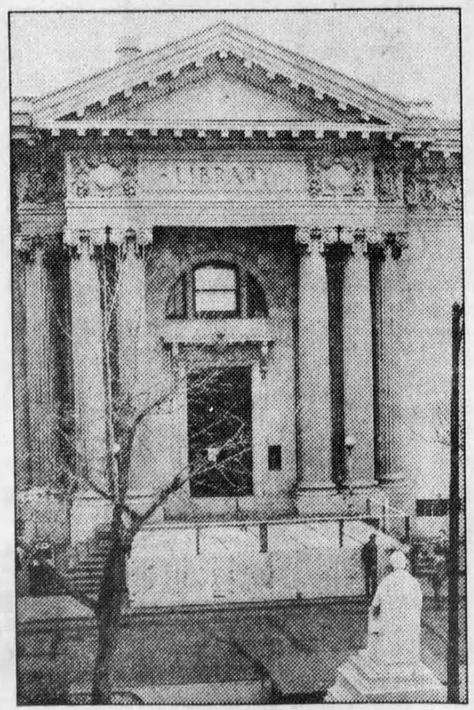
Louisville has a special treasure in its library. At a time when we fret over the things this city and state don't do very well, we need to refocus on one area in which we've excelled and been a model for others.

There was a time when our library system was considered among the best in America — probably the finest for a city this size. That national reputation was largely attributable to the vision of two local leaders — former Mayor Charles P. Farnsley and the late Clarence R. (Skip) Graham, the librarian. They saw the library as an agent for democracy and opportunity. And it's important to give the people of Louisville credit for embracing the changes and supporting them.

In 1948, according to a story in *The Saturday Review*, Mayor Farnsley — having found a $50,000 surplus from bridge tolls — walked into Mr. Graham's office bearing a check. "Here's some money, Skip," he said. "Now tear down the walls. Take the library out to the people."

It was a remarkable assignment, one that received praise across the nation. The Farnsley appropriation was spent by the library to begin its FM broadcasting ventures, to start lending prints of fine art, to open what was in those days the finest 35mm free film library in America. College professors even taught courses in branch libraries.

Back then the main branch was housed entirely in what is now the old-wing of the complex at Fourth and York, a Beaux-Arts building erected with Andrew Carnegie's money in 1906. In those days, scores of cities



Louisville's library: a place to grow 'socially and intellectually'.

were recipients of Carnegie libraries.

Before the beautiful new wing opened in the late 1960s, space was something that the library longed for. Like a well-organized attic, the library in those days seemed to cram everything in tightly, but there was something inviting about the dusty rooms where serious readers spent long summer afternoons huddled around well worn tables — and where employees weren't embarrassed to say "shhhhh!" to chatty patrons.

The library has welcomed generations of Louisvillians. Some who entered and saw the paintings of Kentucky pioneers were newcomers to the city, and perhaps to the nation.

U. S. Rep. Romano Mazzoli, the son of an Italian immigrant, once recalled the role the library played in his father's life: "Many times over the years, Dad told me that in his judgment, he was 'Americanized' by the free public library system in the city of Louisville. What Dad meant by this, of course, was that the libraries enabled him to gain the knowledge and understanding and appreciation of things around him which he did not acquire in the formal setting of a classroom.

"The public library system," he added, "enabled him — a man of few means — to grow socially and intellectually."

Surely many others have had similar feelings. One of my first notions of "growing up" occurred when I was taken downtown to the children's department for my first library card. It was symbolic of the fact that now I could read and was able to begin venturing beyond the primer we used in school and the familiar picture books at home.

Of course, using the library is not a natural skill. It has to be acquired, and in Louisville, we've been fortunate to have some remarkable people to show us the way. One of the best was Mrs. Barbara Miller, who was for many years the chief of children's services. Her story hours stimulated a generation of young imaginations and sent the inquisitive off in search of answers. She was one of the people who made me realize that the library can unlock a world that seems all too distant for children.

Summers became so much more interesting if I could float down the Yangtze with *Ping* or through turn-of-the-century Manhattan with the *All-of-a-Kind Family*. Reading books like *Stuart Little* at 10 taught me that bliss was available between two covers — a notion that is essential for our children who grow up in a world with so many visual distractions that anaesthetize the mind. My own parents' recognition that hours spent at the library were time well spent was a crucial factor, too. As I grew older, the skills I learned as a child enabled me to not only tackle my homework assignments, but also to continue my own education and to build a career.

Among the institutions in our society that

FILE PHOTO

Story Hour: Barbara Miller, in the children's department of the Louisville Free Public Library in 1958. Her guidance 'stimulated a generation of young imaginations.'

we need most — and value least — libraries must rank near the top. A few years ago a top local elected official told me that as much as he sympathized with the value of the public library system, surveys conducted by the University of Louisville consistently placed it near the bottom of community concerns.

People do in fact value the library a great deal, I suspect, but they take it for granted because it is so consistently reliable. Consequently, it's bound to show up near the bottom of polls that; the beauty of Mayor Farnsley's approach to government was that he did was he knew was right — not what the polls told him would be popular.

Now that the issue of a tax has come up again, I reject the claim that the library should once more wait its turn, in part because the county budget is in such bad shape. The library is *always* asked to wait its turn.

What's more, I was not convinced by the claim that what the library lacks is a strong, visible leader. The minds and hearts of many Louisvillians have been shaped by the People's Library. Our voices can and should remind officials of the mistake they make in short-changing this precious resource.