The Arlie Conference

ONE HUNDRED PERSONS gathered at the Arlie Foundation outside Warrenton, Virginia, May 26-29, to discuss "Libraries and Automation." It appeared that perhaps half of the participants were librarians, the balance being engineers, systems men, computer people, and information and communications experts, but frequently during the three days the former half was indistinguishable from the latter. All avowed as a common goal a more rapid and efficient delivery of information to the man who needs it than is presently being accomplished.

This is not to say that there was unanimity on all counts; there was frequent difference of opinion expressed on how to attain the goal, on what steps in attaining it should enjoy priority over what other steps, and the relative importance of the many areas of prospective improvement in library services. At times these differences prompted spirited exchanges of views. There seemed to be a pervading impression among the nonlibrarians, however, that the most immediate need to improve library activities was at the reader service level, whereas the librarians appeared more intent upon seeking methods of improving their internal processing of information, feeling that thereby they would automatically be increasing their ability to serve their readers.

There was also a certain standoff between the two groups resulting from their general unknowledge of one another's respective mystiques. There was some tendency on the part of the librarians to say, "Tell me what you are capable of doing, and I will tell you if we can apply it to libraries"; the computer people, on the other hand, were inclined to invite the librarians to tell them what in libraries needed doing so that they could determine whether or not a machine could be applied to the problem. There was also a basic dichotomy of language which rendered library parlance awkward to the systems men and computer terminology self-conscious to the librarians.

But these differences must not be overstressed. All participants recognized the basic problem for what it was and spent their seventy-two hours pitting their minds solidly against it, and the resulting interchange of ideas and concepts, suggestions and problems, witticisms and even limericks, was salutary and profitable. Yet firm decisions and solutions, systems and programs, were neither sought nor arrived at. The purpose of the conference was exploratory—an obvious attempt to establish a rapport between the two groups and give them opportunity to find a common ground on which to build future action programs. In accomplishing this goal, the conference was eminently successful.

Six formidable working papers on the "state-of-the-art" were distributed to conferees in advance of the conclave to furnish a basis for discussions. Librarians found them to be hard reading but well worth the effort; discussion indicated that they read them carefully. The papers and their authors were:

1. "Index Files: Their Loading and Organization for Use," by R. L. Patrick and D. V. Black, computer consultants, Planning Research Corporation.
2. "Automated Storage and Access of Bibliographic Information for Libraries," by Richard Libby, director, Westchester Laboratories, Itek Corporation.
3. "The Current Status of Graphic Storage Techniques: Their Potential Application to Library Mechanization," by Samuel Alexander, chief, Data Processing Division, National Bureau of Standards.

4. "Output Printing for Library Mechanization," by David E. Sparks, Lawrence H. Berul, and David P. Waite, Information Dynamics Corporation.
5. "Library Communications," by J. W. Emling, and James R. Harris, Bell Telephone Laboratories, and Harvey J. McMains, American Telephone and Telegraph Company.
6. "The Automation of Library Systems," by Gilbert W. King, vice president and director of research, Itek Corporation.

Albert Warhheit, Mortimer Taube, Joseph Becker, Henry J. Dubester, Frank B. Rogers, and Foster Mohrhardt acted as discussion leaders, and Don R. Swanson gave a stimulating talk describing the kind of console through which the future library user will find the information he needs.

A conference such as this one, wherein no resolutions were passed nor action taken, defies brief summation. A few, however, of the hundreds of salient and provocative points made by conference participants can be reported here to give an indication of the range and depth of the discussion:

1. The ultimate library console which will bring the user and the computer store face-to-face will be more than a teaching machine allowing dialogue between the two; it will also be a "learning machine" able to benefit from the search techniques and experiences of all previous users.

2. Automation of libraries will upgrade the library profession by freeing librarians from much of the less-demanding repetitive activity they must now perform and by enabling them to devote their full intellectual efforts to reader assistance.

3. A proper demand upon a librarian's attention is the need to formalize as many as possible of a library's activities; once they are formalized and codified, however, they lend themselves to machine handling, and their accomplishment is not a professional task.

4. There is a danger of mechanizing what we are doing rather than what society needs.

5. The computerization of the intellectual content of libraries will come later; prospects for the beginning of computer storage of the bibligraphical record exist now.

6. Careful systems planning is essential before mechanization should be attempted; the compelling necessity of a national system of libraries should be recognized in planning for mechanization as it has been recognized in the planning of conventional libraries.

7. We cannot, however, await the day when all the problems of mechanization have been resolved before beginning to work, because such a day may never come.

8. Libraries should not compromise standards and accept a lower level of service just because machines can render it now. They should hold out for machines that can do at least as well as is now being done without them.

Innumerable other points, many of which were no doubt more significant than these, were also made during the three days. Interested persons may learn of them later if they wish, as the proceedings of the conference are to be published.

The Arlie Conference was sponsored jointly by the Council on Library Resources, Inc., the National Science Foundation, and the Library of Congress. It was useful to the profession in lending momentum to the library automation movement. This momentum must not now be lost.—*D.K.* ■■