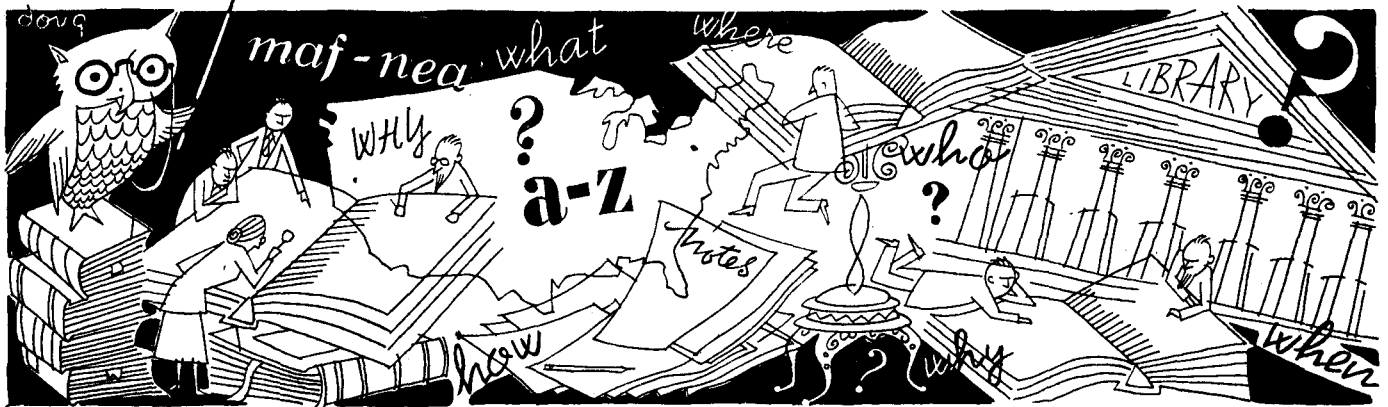


REFERENCE BOOK SECTION



What Americans Wanted to Know in 1951

LOUIS SHORES

FROM coast to coast, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Great Lakes the people of the United States exercised their traditional American right of free inquiry last year by going to their tax-supported, free public libraries by the hundreds of thousands. They asked questions, carried on individual investigations, contributed to research. To insure complete freedom of inquiry the libraries provided reference sources, professionally trained personnel, and working space. No limitation was imposed on freedom of investigation. If the local library didn't own and couldn't buy the book, it was borrowed through the system of inter-library loan which has been established cooperatively by accredited libraries of the United States.

With this generous opportunity for free inquiry, what did the American people want to know in 1951? To find out, a representative group of public libraries was asked to analyze the use of its reference facilities in the following terms: What were the subjects of inquiry of most interest to their patrons? Who were the inquirers? What books furnished the most and best answers?

Eight public library systems cooperated in this survey—Seattle and Los

Angeles in the Far West, Denver in the Rocky Mountain States, New Orleans, Atlanta, and Charlotte, N. C., in the South, Newark in the East, and Detroit in the Midwest. Their individual reports at the end of this article show common, national interests against a background of local concern. Broadly classified, the inquiries undertaken by the people in these eight cities during 1951 fall into five categories: current events, contests, household problems, people and places, and curiosities.

The MacArthur debate topped the current events inquiries, especially during April. Some clue as to the vehemence with which Americans exercised their right of free inquiry in this connection is indicated in the frequency with which one library was asked the question, "How do you impeach a President of the United States?" More objective curiosity was shown in the questions concerning the origin of the phrase, "Old soldiers never die," and precedents of disagreement between the Commander-in-Chief and his field-general. Other current events questions not far behind the MacArthur debate concerned Korea, the United Nations, and the Kefauver Committee investigations.

American free inquiry during 1951 was by no means confined to the serious problems of the world and of the nation. Contest competitors, led by the army of crossword puzzle workers, kept reference librarians working overtime to find five-letter words meaning the same thing spelled back-

wards as forward. The object could be a refrigerator, a trip to Bermuda, or merely the satisfaction of filling the squares in the evening newspaper.

More serious were the household problems. Most often these took the form of "how-to-do-it" or "how-to-make-it." They dealt with home construction, repair, and furnishing. But they dealt also with crafts of every kind and with better ways of pursuing hobbies.

Equally frequent were consumer questions about buying. Comparisons of makes of refrigerators, stoves, automobiles, appliances, food, clothing, and accessories engaged the inquiring minds of citizens everywhere. Back of these investigations was the constant awareness of rising costs of living and stern inquiry as to the economic trends. There were other questions by the people, more somber, if not portentous. These involved laws relating to income tax, to labor, to operating a business, and to marriage and divorce.

Questions about people and places are always among those asked most often in public libraries. Last year was no exception. Public figures in politics, entertainment, science, and fine arts came in for serious as well as curious investigation.

INTEREST in places stimulated by business, travel, resident, or retirement opportunities created a host of questions for reference librarians. In some cases the purpose was serious historical research. In a great many more

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cases the aim was recreational. For the reassurance of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, Californians' interest in Florida is reciprocated.

Many Americans used their right of free inquiry to indulge their curiosity. During 1951, for example, the Newark library was asked: "How do you tame a lion?" The Seattle library was asked: "How do you use ultrasonics to repel birds?" In Charlotte: "How do you bathe a skunk?" In Los Angeles: "What kind of a noise does a porcupine make?" And in Detroit: "How do you cook a raccoon?"

Curiosity was not confined to animals. There was curiosity about such literary questions as: "What Dickens character died of spontaneous combustion?" and "What was the color of Tom Sawyer's hair?"

Who asked all of these questions? Americans of both sexes, all ages, and a variety of occupations—students, housewives, business, professional, technical, skilled and unskilled workers, parents, writers, church workers.

From the wide range of reference sources available in the public libraries of these eight cities the following reference books or classes of reference books were apparently most often consulted: (1) dictionaries, with "Webster's New International" most frequently cited; (2) encyclopedias, with the "Britannica" and the "World Book" specifically cited; (3) almanacs, with the "World Almanac" in the lead; (4) atlases, with the "Rand McNally Commercial Atlas" often noted; (5) indexes, the "Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature" of the H. W. Wilson Company and the "New York Times Index" mentioned; (6) biographical sources, with "Who's Who in America" and "Current Biography" leading.

Other specific titles mentioned include Thomas's "Register of Manufacturers" and Moody's "Manuals for Inventors," "U.S. Statistical Abstract," "Facts-on-File," Fishbein's "Home Medical Adviser," Stevenson's and Bartlett's books of quotations, "Hendley's 20th Century Formulas," Thompson's "Encyclopedia of Music," and Kane's "Famous First Facts."

But let the libraries report for themselves.

1. Los Angeles

Harold L. Hamill, City Librarian,
Los Angeles Public Library.

The central building of the Los Angeles Public Library averages more than ten thousand reference questions a week. This vast volume of inquiry maintains a certain constant quality, unaffected by seasonal change and trends in public opinion. Year after year, for example, the secretaries of

nearby business firms telephone for help in punctuating or deciphering, by remote control, the aberrations of their employers' thought or handwriting. And the tide of questions relating to patents, directories, business services, geographical locations, population statistics, dates, biographical information, and quotations, lay or Biblical, varies little in any single year. Nevertheless, reference questions, like readers' interests, generally are markedly influenced by events.

The MacArthur controversy, for example, flooded the library with questions not only about all aspects of the General's life, career, personality, and family background, but also about the public issues involved in his differences with the President and the resultant "great debate." These questions ranged from historical precedents concerning the disagreement between a Commander-in-Chief and his field officers all the way to the deeper issues of our Asiatic policy. Of scarcely less general interest were the dramatic television broadcasts of the Kefauver Committee, an interesting example of one occasion, at least, when television actually sent people to their libraries to inquire about crime and criminals and corruption in government.

Many of the questions received by the library were colored by special features of the Los Angeles community, such as the concentration of motion pictures, radio, and television, and the unusually large number of free-lance writers and researchers. It is interesting, in this connection, to note the widespread use of fiction as a reference source by the motion pictures. A forgotten period novel will often contain details of an era unobtainable anywhere else.

Unusual questions that were taken in stride by librarians during the year included the kind of noise a porcupine makes (you may find it described in the "University of Arizona Biological Science Bulletin No. 3"), the Dickens character who dies of spontaneous combustion (Krook in "Bleak House," answered through the "Readers' Handbook"), whether the USA ever let the USSR use our plates to print money (a Congressional hearing on occupational currency transactions found we did, in Germany in 1944).

There are many hardy perennials among individual questions, of course. Recurring over and over again come queries on cost of living, marriage and divorce laws, common abbreviations, time differences around the world. During 1951 we were a little nonplussed to find that in a tourist paradise like Los Angeles there was an unusually large number of requests for travel information to go elsewhere,

including considerable interest in the best ways to retire in Florida!

2. New Orleans

John Hall Jacobs, Librarian,
George King Logan, Ass't Librarian,
New Orleans Public Library.

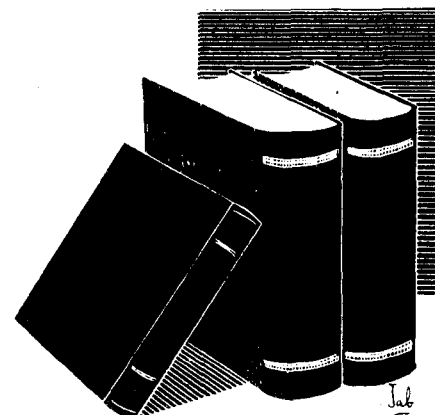
In New Orleans the average citizen thought of his public library's information service first as a source of help for answering the current contest question. Radio programs stimulated thousands of people to telephone the library for assistance from the reference staff who suggested visits to the library—probably resulting in thousands of additional patrons. Other most frequent calls of the year came in approximately the following order: (1) words—their spelling, pronunciation, definition, and use; (2) local information—"Is New Orleans below sea level?" "Who was Louis Philippe's host when he was in New Orleans?" "Did Napoleon ever live in the Napoleon House?" (3) grammar—"Is it shall or will—who or whom?" (4) etiquette—"At a Mardi Gras ball, do the men guests dance?" "What is a 'call-out' to a Carnival ball?" (5) geography—"Where are our army posts in the USA and how do you get to them?"

3. Atlanta

John C. Settelmayer, Director,
Atlanta Public Library.

The topics or subjects that most interested Atlantans were definitions and spelling of words. After that, quotations, questions of grammar, questions of etiquette, addresses of people and companies in other cities, questions concerning biography, genealogy, geography, and history follow in frequency in that order.

It seems to us that more business men and business women ask questions of the Reference Department than any other category of patrons. This includes secretaries who call for their bosses and individuals in busi-



ness, such as interior decorators, artists, mechanics, etc. After these come students, and finally the curious, that is, the people who are interested in finding out something because they either read an article about it or else because they saw it on TV or heard it on the radio.

Probably the most unusual question which we had was whether there was a name in the Bible which begins with X-two. It actually turned out that the man wanted a quotation from Shakespeare, "Et tu, Brute." We also had such questions as how to tell French poodles to sit down in French; the average annual production of honey per colony of bees in Georgia; and is there a Georgia law which requires boarding houses to change their sheets at stated intervals? Answer to the last question: "There is not."

Most frequently asked were contest questions. In our library it is our policy to answer contest questions if the answers are readily available. An example of their availability would be the question that was most asked during the year: "Who was the first child born in the White House?" When MacArthur made his famous speech there was a deluge of questions concerning the origin of the song "Old Soldiers Never Die," and particularly of the phrase. Another that was asked quite frequently was the origin of the quotation: "You can't go out hunting lions with a pea-shooter." Incidentally, our reference department never was able to find the answer to that one.

4. Charlotte

Hoyt R. Galvin, Director,
Mae Tucker, Reference Assistant,
Public Library of Charlotte &
Mecklenburg County, N. C.

The patrons of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County usually set a utilitarian tempo in their reference needs, and 1951 has been no exception. The teachers and students of local high schools and colleges ran a close race with the business people and laborers in competing for the position of chief intelligence seekers. The former requested material in biology, English literature, American and world history, and vocational guidance, while the latter sought information in business management, salesmanship, building construction, and mechanical engineering. Reporters desired principally biographical data. Ministers and church workers required Bible and worship material as well as analyses of current questions. Housewives ran the gauntlet from queries on etiquette, entertaining, house plans and decoration, flower growing, and genealogy to widely

assorted book club programs. Current events caused flurries of interest in Korea, United Nations, and impeachment procedure. G.I.'s belatedly sought information on trade schools



and colleges before termination of Government finance of their education. Contest workers were always with, and sometimes against, us, but have temporarily ceded their persistence crown to crossword puzzlers.

The most unusual and unanswerable question was "How much tuna fish was consumed by Negroes in Charlotte from June 1950 to June 1951?" The question "How do you bathe a skunk?" received a general answer on bathing pets from C. B. Moore's "Book of Wild Pets."

5. Newark

John Boynton Kaiser, Director,
Bradley W. Leonard, Principal Librarian,
Lending and Reference Department,
Public Library of Newark, N. J.

Aside from topics growing out of the school curriculum, which we are ignoring, the following seem to be the topics or subjects of greatest interest to the people of Newark:

Consumer information: home repair, radio repair, auto repair, etc.

Laws as they affect the individual: rent laws, housing laws, marriage and divorce laws, income tax laws, labor laws, etc.

Civil service examination information.

Self-improvement: etiquette, letter writing, grammar and spelling, health, etc.

The following are some questions of more than usual interest: "How do you tame a lion?" "What is the crookedest river in the United States?" From a boy: "How can I get along with girls?" From a worried husband: "How can I get my wife's sweater back into shape? I just washed it and it shrunk!" A nine-year-old child requested information on "space and the future."

6. Detroit

Charles M. Mohrhardt, Associate Director,
Roy W. Schlunkert, Reference Services
Director,
Detroit Public Library.

Topics of greatest reference interest in the fifteen departments and twenty-six branches of the Detroit Public

Library in 1951 ran a wide gamut of subject coverage. Applied psychology, travel information, international relations, government controls as the result of defense mobilization, engineering, genealogy, and biographical questions were most prominently represented at the Main Building.

Most prominently represented in the branches were questions relating to the home, the "how-to-do and make" inquiry, occupations, and hobbies. "Home" subjects included interior decorating, home repair, garage and fence building, homemaking, family life, child care, consumer buying, cooking, family budgets, problems of health, entertaining, and care of pets. "How-to-do" queries covered boats, models of all kinds, slip-covers, building attic rooms, outdoor fireplaces, and miniature golf courses. Tool-making, radio and television, auto mechanics, and civil service opportunities typified the vocational interest. The hobbyists wanted to know about stamps, gardening, ceramics, coin collecting, and sports.

Some unusual questions included: "How do you cook a raccoon?" "Hypnotism from a practical standpoint for a policeman." "Building an electric organ at home." "How closely can money be reproduced?" (It is illegal.) "How can you develop a sense of humor?" "What opera singer practised singing lying down?" (Lawrence Tibbet.) "What is radar cooking?" "How many inches does the top of the Empire State Building sway in a high wind?" (Three inches in a sixty-mile north or south wind.) "How were geese used as messengers by the Chinese?" "What is the present location of stones on which the Ten Commandments were written?"

7. Denver

John T. Easterlick, Librarian,
Doris Wells, Supervisor of Reference,
Public Library, City and County of Denver.

The Denver Library's Reference Department reports that its questions come in waves. There will be many on one topic and then the interest shifts to something else.

There are always many questions concerned with current events. For example, the air waves had hardly ceased to vibrate after MacArthur's speech before people were asking for the words of "Old Soldiers Never Die." This department also had many biographical, geographical, and quotation questions. Students ask the most questions in the reference room. The other patrons form a very representative cross-section of the population of Denver.

Some of the unusual questions con-

cerned building in ancient times, i.e., codes and methods of building in Egypt, Babylon, Persia, etc.; the width of human hair; the source of the prayer used by Alcoholics Anonymous; the apples of King John. This year the public seemed to be especially interested in Adam and Eve. They asked what language Adam and Eve spoke and if the days of the week were the same during their time as now.

The questions most frequently asked of the reference department concerned addresses (persons, firms, organizations), quotations, meanings of names, bibliographical information about books, grammar, etiquette, definitions, and spelling. The questions which stumped the librarians were statistics on the trade of Russia with her satellites, and the source of the quotation, "Out West where women are women."

8. Seattle

John S. Richards, Librarian,
Willard O. Youngs, Ass't Librarian,
Seattle Public Library.

Here they are, the dominating patterns among the ten thousand inquiries reaching Seattle's public library each month:

Questions affecting the pocket-book: requests for consumer information, automobile repair data, and manufacturing specifications. Most frequent inquiry: "What is the best TV set to buy?"

Inquiries reflecting topics of the day: background data on Congressmen and state legislators, the 1950 population figures, Seattle's centennial celebration, fill-in on the Truman-MacArthur controversy. Most frequent question for April: "How do you impeach the President?" Question most often heard: "What's the cost-of-living index this month?"

Questions concerning literature: identification of maxims, poems, and familiar quotations.

Who wants to know all this? Housewives and students, engineers and industrial workers, club women and writers, Sadie, the office secretary, and, one assistant adds bitterly, "idle old men."

Most unusual question of the year: "How can you use ultrasonics to repel birds?" (The inquirer was referred to design of ultrasonic sirens in *QST*, October 1943, p. 10). Another odd request was for an explanation of the use of the Japanese abacus. Company policies regarding smoking on the job were also investigated. Ample evidence of tolerant policies in this regard was readily found.

A Dozen New Ways to Find Out

WAYNE SHIRLEY

NINETEEN fifty-one was a landmark year in reference books, for the new "Mudge" appeared on December 7. True, Miss Constance Winchell was the editor, but she will have to wait to become the institution Miss Isadore Mudge now is. Too many librarians were raised on the six previous editions for them to call the work by any name except "Mudge." This large volume is the frame in which all reference books either do or do not find their places, so all discussions of reference books properly begin with a reference to "Mudge." The bibliographical details are:

GUIDE TO REFERENCE BOOKS. Seventh edition. By Constance M. Winchell. Based on the GUIDE TO REFERENCE BOOKS. Sixth Edition. By Isadore Gilbert Mudge. Chicago: American Library Association. 645 pp. \$10.

The past year was notable also for another departure. Many sound, useful reference works began appearing in pocket-book, paperback format. One good example is: *THE POCKET BOOK OF GREAT DRAWINGS*. By Paul J. Sachs. New York: Pocket Books. 112 pp. 35 cents. Here is an art book by a professor of fine arts at Harvard University which contains sixty-nine drawings, a list of the schools and the dates of artists whose works are reproduced, and four pages of recommended readings, all for thirty-five cents. What more can an impecunious scholar ask?

The great difficulty with these books is finding the proper place to buy them. They are found wherever the detective and confession magazines are sold, as they are distributed by the same firms, but these few grains of learning are concealed among much bosomy chaff.

In making his selections for the following list of important reference books of the past year, the writer has applied a few simple yardsticks. Some reference works are published at regular intervals. Others are published

only once or are revised so seldom that the new edition differs markedly from earlier editions. Since the important books in the first group are already familiar to *SRL* readers through the magazine's annual surveys in the past, all books described below come from the latter group. Only books in English were considered, and as a rule only works of one volume.

The Arts

DICTIONARY OF THE ARTS. By Martin L. Wolf. New York: Philosophical Library. 797 pp. \$10.

MR. WOLF has interpreted "the arts" as any activity of a cultural nature which is of interest to man. By a simple device he has done away with the frequent repetition of (q.v.) and similar directional aids: he writes in italics any words used in a definition which are themselves defined in this book. Thus a user can tell at a glance whether he has enough information for his purpose or whether he must seek further. There are some 10,000 definitions, all of them written with clarity and conciseness.

Current Affairs

THE ARMY ALMANAC: A Book of Facts Concerning the Army of the United States. Washington: Government Printing Office. 1009 pp. \$3.

ANY PERSON who expects to dwell outside the shadow of the military for the next few years at least is indeed an optimist, so it seems obvious that we should know more about our army. Here is the authority. The preface states its purpose: "... to gather in a single volume useful data concerning the United States Army

Wayne Shirley is dean of the library school of the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn.

