

## What Libraries Mean to the Nation - April 1, 1936

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*District Of Columbia Library Association Dinner*

It has been a great pleasure to be here this evening and to hear all the things that have been said about libraries in the district and in general, and the librarians, without whom the libraries would be of little use, I am afraid. But as I sat here I fear that I have thought a good deal about the fact that there are so many places in the United States that have no libraries and that have no way of getting books.

What the libraries mean to the nation is fairly obvious to all of us, especially to those who are here this evening. We know that without libraries, without education, which is based largely on libraries, we cannot have an educated people who will carry on successfully our form of government, and it seems to me that what we really are interested in is how we can make this country more conscious of what it has not got, because we do pat ourselves on the back for the things that we have and that we do. I was looking over some maps which were sent to me and I longed to have these maps very much enlarged and put up in many, many places throughout this country, because I do not think that many people know how many states do not spend more than ten cents per capita for library books a year, and how many states have large areas, particularly rural areas, where one cannot get books.

One of the things that I have been particularly grateful for in the years of the depression--and, of course, I think, sad as it has been, we have some things to be grateful for--is that we have discovered so many things that we had not known before. These facts have come to the knowledge of a great many people who had simply passed them by before, because they did not happen to think about them, and one of these things, that we used to be able to hide, is the areas of the country which are not served in any way by libraries. I have seen photographs, for instance, of girls going out on horseback with libraries strapped on behind them, taking books to children and grown people in places that have been without libraries. We know a good deal about Mrs. Breckinridge's nursing service in Kentucky, but we know very little about the libraries that go out in the same way that her nurses do, on horseback.

I have lived a great deal in the country, in a state which prides itself in spending much money on education, and I am quite sure that some people think there is no lack of education and no lack of library facilities, and sometimes I long to take people and let them see some of the back country districts that I know, in New York State. I know one place in the northern part of the state where I camped for a while in the summer, and I went to the school and talked to the teachers. They are using school books which have been passed down from one child to another. They have practically no books outside of the textbooks. The children in the district are so poor and some of them so pathetic that I suppose the struggle to live has been so great you could not think much about what you fed the mind, but I came away feeling that right there, in one of the biggest and richest states in the country, we had a big area that needed books and needed libraries to help these schools in the education of the children, and, even more, to help the whole community to learn to live through their minds.

We are doing a tremendous amount through the home economics colleges to help people to learn how to live in their homes, to better their standards of material living. We have got to think in exactly the same way about helping them to live mentally and to attain better standards, and we can do it only through the children. We can do ground work with the children; we must begin with them; but we have got to do a tremendous amount with the older people.

I had a letter the other day which was pathetic. It was from a man who said he was 74 years old. He wrote to ask me to see that the adult education classes in that particular community were not stopped, because it had meant so much to him to learn to read. He did not think that I could understand what it meant never to have been able to understand a word on the printed page. He said, "I am not the only one. My next door neighbor is 81 and he

learned to read last winter, and it has just made life over for us." It gave you the feeling that there is a good deal of education that is not being done in this country, in spite of all that is done.

We have come a long way. We have done a great deal, but we still have a lot that can be done to improve our educational system, and we still have a tremendous amount to do with our libraries. We have got to make our libraries the center of a new life in the mind, because people are hungry to use their minds.

## A NEW ERA AHEAD

We are facing a great change in civilization, and the responsibility, I think, for what we do with our leisure time is a very great responsibility for all of us who have intellectual interests. Somebody said to me, "I would not be so worried and I would not mind facing the fact that we are working fewer hours, if I only knew what people would do with their free time. I would not know what to do myself if I had only to work six hours a day."

That is a challenge. We, here in this country, ought to know what to do with our time, if we have it. I do not know whether we are going to have it, but if we are going to have more leisure time, it is the library, and people who live in the libraries and work in libraries, who are going to lead the way, who are going to give other people the curiosity and the vision of useful things, and pleasant things, and amusing things which can be done in those hours in which we may not have to work in the ways in which we have worked before. It is a very great responsibility, but it is also a very great interest.

Now, I think here in the city of Washington, and in nearly all big cities, the problem is a different one from the one I know so well in the country districts. I think that perhaps there are more facilities and, for that reason, there are more stimulating people engaged in solving the different problems that affect education in cities. But there is a great need, a very great need, in rural America. There is a great need for imagination in the ways used to stir the interest of old and young to use what library facilities they have, and to insist that they shall have more and to make them willing to pay for more, because, in the end, they will get something that they want out of it.

The more I have thought about the problem, the more I have felt that we do not use all our opportunities to stimulate an interest in books. Everything today in which people are interested, the radio, the movies--all of these--should, if properly used, stimulate the use of books. For instance, if there is a remarkably good movie, like *The life of Pasteur*, it seems to me that it should be used by people in our rural schools and rural libraries to create an interest in the life of Pasteur, the things that Pasteur did, the people around him, and all the discoveries that have come from that time on. I am sure that if we put our minds on it, there are a great many ways in which we can use the things which are coming constantly into the lives of people throughout the country to stimulate an interest in the oldest and most interesting recreation there is.

But you do have to learn to love books, you do have to learn how to read them, you do have to learn that a book is a companion, and this is done in a great many different ways. I think we can do a great deal by having more copies of the same book, perhaps less expensive books, in the libraries so that we can have a good many people reading the same books and coming together for discussion.

I know, for instance, that even in a small group, like a family, we all want to read one book at the same time, and we all want to tear each other's hair out when we can't get a copy. It seems to me that here is something we should be thinking about, to stimulate the reading of books in families and large groups of people. I think the CCC has made me realize this. One boy said to me, "Do you know about that book? I am so glad to be able to talk about it.... You know, it takes such a long time to get a book around." Now, if there had been a dozen or more copies of that book, the group would have talked about that book and it would have been a valuable contribution. It would have stimulated their intellectual thought.

I feel that the care of libraries and the use of books, and the knowledge of books, is a tremendously vital thing, and that we who deal with books and who love books have a great opportunity to bring about something in this country which is more vital here than anywhere else, because we have the chance to make a democracy that will be a real democracy, that will fulfill the vision that Senator King has just given us. It will take on our part imagination and patience and constant interest in awakening interest in other people. But, if we do, I think we

shall find that our love of books will bring us a constantly widening audience and constantly more interesting contacts in whatever part of the country we may go.

*Speech from <http://www.famousquotes.me.uk/speeches/Eleanor%20Roosevelt/index.htm>.*