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### The Civil Rights Movement's Effect on Libraries<sup>1</sup>

*The twilight zone that lies between living memory and written history is one of the favorite breeding places of mythology. C. Vann Woodward*

Libraries are viewed as democracy at work. Only in a democracy would people be able to read what they want, when they want. It is vital for a democratic nation to have an informed citizenry and what better place to continue ones education then at the library. And yet this was not always true. The early years of the Cold War allowed for rampant censorship in libraries and it was the intervention of the ALA along with an agreeable president that stopped this practice. Censorship of some form has always been occurring in libraries with the most recent issue being the Internet. Segregation occurred openly in the South until the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1950s all through the 1960s. Lunch counters, bus depots, and department stores were some of the establishments that were segregated. These were not the only places segregated; libraries can also be added to the list. There were different buildings for each race and in some cities there was no library whatsoever for African Americans. People remember the bus boycotts and the marches and they remember places such as department stores and lunch counters as being targets. However no one talks about democratic institutions such as libraries also being targets for the movement against segregation. The New York Times reported unrest occurring within libraries, but this information was relegated to the very last pages of the paper jumbled in with other miscellaneous items. On some level the sit-ins, or read-ins, at libraries were not as dramatic. The librarians did not want trouble within the library and were often more open to the

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<sup>1</sup> The term African-American will be used throughout this essay to represent blacks. Terms such as Negro will only be used when using a direct quote. One could argue that African-American does not fully represent blacks, but that would be the subject for an entirely different paper.

idea of integration. Often a dozen or so students and/or citizens of the African-American community would go and ask for service in libraries, but this was not as strong of a visual as the hundreds who would march down streets. Libraries did not feel as threatened about integration because they did not have to worry about losing business. Even if the whites of the community did not want to use the facilities then the African Americans surely would. States could threaten to take away funding, but this would likely only work for a while since cases were being decided nationally that would have forced the states to support the libraries. Interestingly enough states and cities would threaten to close the facilities rather than cut funding. Maybe segregation was not as popular with whites as it once had been.

There was segregation in the South and no one will argue this, but there was also segregation in the North as well. The Northern segregation was different from the South in that it was not openly acknowledged. On some level this type of segregation was more harmful for it could never entirely be proved as segregation and therefore be fought in court. The North of course denies any type of segregation at all. If the North was not segregated then why is it that unrest occurred there as well? If the North was not segregated then why was the unrest so violent? In some ways the North was more segregated then the South could ever be since the Northern segregation was so hard to prove. A subtle example of this Northern belief that they were not segregated nor ever have been can be found in the Library of Congress subject headings. There is the subject heading Southern states, but when one tries the term Northern states no subject heading exists. The note for the subject heading "Southern states" states that this heading is to be used for states south of the Mason-Dixie line, Ohio River, and the Southern border of Missouri and Kansas. The states included start on the Atlantic coast below this line and continue west to the end of Texas. Would it not be possible to create a definition for the

states North and West of this line? Apparently no books have been written about the Northern half of the Mason-Dixie line which would create a need for the subject heading.

Segregation and racism continue on today. The South has learned from the North and turned their segregation into the de facto segregation of the North. Michael Moore's movie Bowling for Columbine shows de facto segregation in action with part of a cartoon showing the exodus of whites from the city to the suburbs. This type of exodus is not something that can be challenged in court since technically anybody can move to the suburbs and yet it is interesting that the people most often to be found in the suburbs are white. According to the cartoon clip this move occurred at the same time as the Civil Rights Movement. This de facto segregation affects schools, libraries, and any other public institution since part of the funding comes from property taxes and the people of the suburbs on average have more money than the people of the cities. And yet all is not lost. If people study their history they can see that change is possible and has occurred. The Civil Rights Movement is a perfect example of this. Great changes occurred in both the North and South and those changes are still in effect today. This essay will look at how those changes came to be and the reactions to those changes. But first a small history of segregation is required in order to understand how the movement came to be in the first place.

### **History of Segregation**

According to C. Vann Woodward one needs to look at the beginnings of segregation not in the South, but in the North. This system was firmly in place in the North by the 1830s even though the North did not have slavery. The farther west one went the worse the segregation was. The North was a place that did not have many African Americans and therefore did not know how to treat them. While the North found slavery abhorrent they were in complete agreement

with the South that African Americans were inferior beings. The Republican Party, Lincoln's party, did not think African Americans should be given full citizenship. As Woodward concludes from this:

It is clear that when its victory was complete and the time came, the North was not in the best possible position to instruct the South, either by precedent and example, or by force of conviction, on the implementation of what eventually became one of the professed war aims of the Union cause—racial equality” (21).

Clearly Jim Crow laws had been in existence for several decades before the South started using them. Woodward does not deny that segregation was in existence in the South during this time period, but that it was a different kind. The segregation that was being fought in the 1960s was similar to the segregation of the North of the 1830s. The new kind of segregation came into existence shortly after the Civil War. It was not until *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) however that separate, but equal became acceptable law.

An excellent example of Southerners' beliefs that segregation was a part of the South is Bailey's "Free Speech and the 'Lost Cause' in Texas: A study of Social Control in the New South". This article looks at how Texans, amongst the other Southern states, used censorship in libraries and schools to control the thoughts of Southern children. The aim was not so much to enforce segregation as to enforce the idea that there is an aristocracy and this is the group to be trusted to run the government. Of course it was necessary for children to believe that African Americans were inferior and that separate, but equal was beneficial for all. This thought was required because:

In Texas, and throughout the South, the region's social elite felt their status threatened by the aspirations of lesser whites and long oppressed African Americans. Southern elites once again manned the parapets to defend their status. This time the contested field was not the bloody ground of Shiloh or Gettysburg, but the interpretation of the past. They fought for history correctly

inculcated into school children. If victorious this campaign would insure that all Southerners would respect their properly appointed leaders (454).

As this statement shows segregation worked best for the elite. At the same time this elite would pretend to be equal with all whites in order for segregation to work. Southerners rewrote history in order to keep this belief alive, but to no avail. Separate, but equal was eventually challenged and abolished.

Southerners used other reasons to keep segregation alive. The Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown by Louise S. Robbins is an example of this. Ruth Brown was the head librarian at the Bartlesville Public Library. Brown was quite active in the resistance to segregation. Unfortunately for her the city was not ready for this and they used the Red Scare to have her fired. As Robbins determined though this was just an underlying reason. The true reason she was fired was because of her integrationist ways. The citizens of Oklahoma had grown up learning the history decided by Southern society. This history convinced them that separation was equal and that whites had to stick together. The Red Scare actually helped because it was not only the Soviets that had to be watched out for. Immigrants, African Americans, and unionists were just as threatening. That Ruth Brown allowed such scandalous material as the New Republic and The Nation into the library was bad enough. She also however was willing to allow African Americans in as well and this was more than the citizens of Bartlesville could accept.

Segregation has a long history in both the North and the South. Like so many other repressive institutions it could only last for so long. Eventually it would be challenged by such a mass group of people that segregation had no choice but to fall to defeat.

## **The Fall of Segregation**

The most active years of the Civil Rights Movement were 1954 to 1965 (WMU Political Science-MLK page). Of course much occurred before and after these dates, but these are the years when the most change occurred. Sit-ins were occurring at libraries during this time period as well. Bernice Lloyd Bell looked at integration in public libraries during the years 1954 to 1962 and she found that by 1962 most of the public libraries in the South had been integrated. Her results came from surveys she sent to librarians and the responses were mainly based on current library policy and how it came to be as well as librarians' perceptions to the success of integration. Most librarians felt integration had been quite successful and some could not remember what the library was like before integration. Unfortunately the study did not actually check policies to see if these libraries had actually integrated. Also there was no question that asked how exactly integration was treated. Some libraries may have allowed African Americans to use the circulating material of the library, but none of the reference material.. The study also shows that the outer fringe of the area considered to be the South integrated with little or no legal pressure. The deep South however was another story. As can be seen throughout the large amount of literature on the Civil Rights Movement the Deep South was where the most resistance was met and fought against. These conclusions also hold true for libraries. National policy and interference was necessary for the Deep South to move from segregation to integration.

The Access to Public Libraries report commissioned by the American Library Association agrees with Bell's conclusions. It actually split the South up into three regions because there were clear distinctions between the regions of which one factor was segregation policies. The Deep South again had the worse segregation policies and was also the last to

integrate. And yet this is not what is the most interesting about the report. What is interesting to note is that the report also looked at Northern libraries and found segregation occurring there as well. According to the report this segregation was different in that it was de facto segregation. The report concluded this based upon urban populations which showed that populations in the North were segregated by race. The library service to African Americans was poorer than that of whites. This report caused an uproar from the Northern libraries implicated. The D.C. public library system wrote a paper in response to the findings. They argued that the results were preposterous. They said that the D.C. public libraries had never been segregated and that anyone was allowed to use any branch that they so desired. What the D.C. public library missed however was the fact that the report did not say that they were openly segregated. What the report pointed out was that the city as a whole had relegated certain people to certain areas of the city and that African Americans areas tended to be poorer hence leading to poorer libraries. Also the D.C. public library apparently forgot that many African Americans held jobs that barely paid for expenses, much less extra bus fare to go to a branch in a wealthier neighborhood. Overall the Northern libraries were unable to accept the fact that they might have been just as segregated as the South. It was just morally impossible.

Alabama was considered to be a part of the Deep South. Like the other states of the Deep South integration had to be fought for tooth and nail. The fight for integration was a long, hard fought one. Libraries were of course one of the places where the fighting took place. Patterson Toby Graham describes why libraries were one of the places to be picked for direct action:

They were conspicuous institutions most often located in the center of southern cities. Also, public libraries were ideally agencies of democracy and of culture, above such base impulses as prejudice. The exclusion of African Americans from these libraries presented a powerful image of the troublesome contradictions that characterized America's racial dilemma (70).

Many cities in Alabama considered closing libraries rather than integrate, but this did not happen. Many of the public libraries particularly in cities such as Montgomery and Birmingham were forced to integrate by federal court orders. The scenes of violence seen in newspapers from the time period were not only witnessed on the streets, but in libraries as well. At least one city, Anniston, was involved in violence when attempting to integrate. The African Americans of this state did not let these barriers from stopping them to gain all of their rights including the use of the public library.

Kentucky on the other hand had few problems of integration. This state was one of the Border States. After the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision Kentucky decided to integrate both schools and libraries. According to Renette F. Jones, Kentucky used 1955 as a transition period from segregation to integration and by 1956 the state removed questions from its annual report asking specifically about African American services since segregation no longer prevailed.

The ALA was not much help to libraries in these times. It was afraid that if it tried to force change on Southern libraries it would do more harm than good. The ALA felt that it would cause whites to resist integration policies even more than if they left it up to individual librarians and communities to address the problem. The most important step the ALA took was to require states to have only one state library association. Before this decision states were allowed to have two: one for African Americans and one for whites. This decision was implemented by the early 1960s. As Stephen Cresswell pointed out this decision was good for the long run, but was initially bad because the African American associations were forced to disband and the African American librarians were not allowed into the white library associations. In the long run

however as integration became more prevalent African American librarians were allowed into the state associations and segregation of state library associations was never to be allowed again.

Even though the ALA was not doing much about segregation, librarians were and this is most readily apparent from the professional journals Library Journal and Wilson Library Bulletin. The editors of these two journals were strongly opposed to segregation and used their editorials to speak about the issue. These journals also featured many writers against segregation. Wilson Library Bulletin May 1961 issue featured the opinions of four prominent African American librarians to voice their opinion of the ALA addition to the Library Bill of Rights which stated among other things that libraries would be open to all regardless of race. All four of the librarians applauded the ALA's recent action, but said that more needed to be done. Most of all they felt the ALA could publicize the issue more and help African Americans in their fight for equality. Rice Estes was another librarian who wrote an article for the December 15, 1960 issue of Library Journal. He noted two stories from the September 1, 1960 issue. One story talked about the city of Danville opening a private library and the other talked about books being sent to Ghana. As Estes states, "The two stories could not have been more ironically placed, showing up as they did one of the anomalies of our time, namely, the American concern for the welfare of our darker-skinned brothers in distant parts of the world on the one hand, while on the other, failure to provide adequately for the education of the Negroes of our own country" (4418). He goes on to criticize the ALA for not providing more support to African Americans and in particular the librarians of the South. As he pointed out, many Southern librarians would welcome integration, but feared to say anything because of the real possibility they would lose their jobs (4419). It was up to the ALA and Northern librarians to make change come to the South. This was in 1960 and 1961 respectively. In 1963 when the American Library

Association study came out an editorial was written about the study. It stated that it agreed with a study being connected, but wanted it to be on Southern libraries only. It felt that looking at Northern libraries as well as Southern libraries tainted the study. The editor felt the study looked at the issue incorrectly. He wanted the study to only look at the worse cases, in this case the Southern states. Apparently it was all right for librarians to criticize the South, but the North was above such accusations of segregation. As can be seen again the North was unable to except the truth that it was also segregated.

Thomas F. Parker also wrote about the study as well. He felt that the study brought up a good point about the segregation in the North. He stated that African Americans needed properly maintained libraries in order for African Americans to educate themselves. The African American community also required libraries to be near by so they could walk to them. Unfortunately most of the money went to the libraries of the white suburbs or to build more libraries in the suburbs. Parker suggested that it was up to the librarians of the cities to encourage Africans Americans to use the libraries as well as obtain sufficient funds to buy material that the community could use such as books that taught African Americans basic skills they could use to advance themselves in the workforce.

## **Conclusion**

The Civil Rights Movement was a tumultuous time. There were marches and riots and violence occurring around the country. This unrest did not occur only on buses or in department stores, but also in libraries. The democratic institution called the library was as segregated as everything else in the South. It took a mass uprising for segregation to end. Unfortunately, segregation has not completely left as can be seen in Michael Moore's Bowling for Columbine. Segregation may never be completely abolished, but it is much harder to enforce segregation

policies because of the Civil Right Movement. Due to African Americans constant pushing libraries were finally opened to all. Yet libraries have not been able to completely fulfill their role as a democratic institution because of other factors such as white flight to the suburbs. The libraries of African Americans still continue to provide poorer services than that of whites. What the Civil Rights Movement has taught is that change is possible and the best place to achieve change are in public institutions such as libraries. These are the places that represent freedom and can be used to fight for equality of all. Without libraries there cannot be democracy. The fight continues for equal access to all.

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