

READ

Like A Cat

SLEEPS (a lot!)



*The Formidable Career of
Librarian Althea Warren*

PREFACE

While researching my grandfather's experience in World War II I was surprised to learn that he and his buddies would read books during their off-time in Normandy. How were they getting books in a war zone? It turns out there were several American programs during the war that put millions of free books into the hands of GIs across the US and overseas. The organizers included military men and "bookmen" of the publishing industry. Librarian Althea Warren was one of only a few women who were leaders in this effort. She had a fascinating life and an impressive career. There was a short biography written by her friend in 1961, but today there are only a few paragraphs about her online. She was the head of the San Diego Public Library and the Los Angeles Public Library, and she was president of the California Library Association and the American Library Association. As a lover of books and 1940s history I wanted to share her story in this little book.



Librarian Miss Hatcher and Richard Bowers Oliver in the Service Club Library, Camp Wheeler, GA, 1941. (from my collection)

Childhood and Education

Althea Hester Warren was born into a well-to-do family in Waukegan, Illinois on December 18, 1886. Her mother was well-educated and well-read. Her father, a Princeton graduate, was a senior newspaper editor in Chicago. They all shared the home of Althea's grandfather Henry Williams Blodgett, a former state senator and United States federal judge. His grand house included a personal library, while nearly all of the fourteen other rooms featured shelves packed with books. Althea spent two of her summer vacations indexing her grandfather's immense collection of books in a single ledger. Judge Blodgett delighted in asking his little librarian to find him particular books using her homemade catalog. Althea enjoyed reading to her younger siblings, and the family as a whole frequently read together.

Althea attended a succession of all-girl private schools. At six years old she spent about a year in Denver while her father briefly owned a newspaper there. She had been back in Waukegan for several years when she began high school, but then her father was hired as manager of a newspaper in Milwaukee, Minnesota. Her father died a month after beginning her sophomore year, and the family returned to Illinois and another private school. Althea was at the public Waukegan High School for her senior year, graduating in 1904.

While still in high school Althea was invited to a writers' retreat at Lake Placid in New York's Adirondack Mountains. She stayed at the great camp two summers. In her notes on the experience it's easy to see her enthusiasm:

"To see poetry actually being made even when it is in flippant limericks and alphabets for the visitor's book; to hear two or three New York sophisticates talking about their plans for a play or novel; to listen to Mother Goose parodies in process of being produced by collaboration of a man and a girl who had published magazines, was to realize the exactions of writing as a profession. My second summer this atmosphere where the fragrance of balsam blended with printers' ink brought a comprehension of what books cost writers both in ecstasy of creation and in numb groping discouragement."

In the fall of 1904 Althea entered the University of Chicago. Her scholarship required that she work for the university. She was placed in the library.

“A resolution to be a librarian was formulated within me by the example of a young woman whom I yearned to resemble, for I never spoke to her except a reverent ‘good morning’ as she moved sure, serene, and helpful, behind the shining mahogany of the loan desk.”

Althea graduated in the spring of 1908 with the research-based degree Bachelor of Philosophy (PhB). The “philosophy” here is not the metaphysical ponderings of the meaning of life, but rather the study of knowledge.

As with many of today’s college graduates, Althea went off to Europe before looking for a job. Her cousin had inherited some money, and she invited Althea to join her trip overseas. After over a year in Britain, France, and Italy Althea came home. Her uncle arranged for her to meet Henry E. Legler, the head librarian of the new Chicago Public Library. He introduced her to the head of his training class:

Faith Smith burst upon me like Flora, Goddess of Spring. I sat entranced on a sofa beside this young woman who looked like a Botticelli nymph with her rippling gold hair and radiant smile. She steered me to the University of Wisconsin Library School.”

For the fall semester of 1909 Althea’s mother, youngest brother, and sister all moved with her to a boarding house in Madison, WI. Althea’s grandfather had died four years prior, but it seems that the her mother and/or aunt kept the Waukegan mansion. Althea graduated with her library science degree in spring of 1911.

The library had become an attractive place for career-minded women like Althea. Through the turn of the century librarians had moved from being 80% male (in 1870) to 80% female (by 1900). Women librarians typically earned more than women in other fields. However, they still earned less than male librarians, and most of the senior library positions were held by men.*

* Today 83% of librarians are women, and the wage gap persists.

Chicago 1911-1914

After graduation and a civil service exam Althea was appointed to a school library in an area that she described as “the most insignificant of nearly fifty branches” in “the worst slum section of the Northeast Side.” The new setting must have been a shock for someone with such a privileged background.* The families of many of the students lived in a single room, often shared with a boarder. Althea looked forward to three o’clock when the children left class and came to her library asking for books. She made sure the library remained a quiet place to study and relax:

*Keeping [the tables] quiet meant winning over a gang who shuffled their feet and whistled at the girls and uttered piercing shrieks as they left. Peace was won by identifying the leader and persuading him to become our sergeant-at-arms. He and his boys, when equipped with lapel buttons, ** suddenly radiated incandescent virtue.*

In June of 1911 Althea was transferred to a much larger branch in a much different setting. The Chicago Public Library had a branch on the first floor of the Sears, Roebuck and Company headquarters building on Homan Avenue. Today only the fourteen-story Sears Merchandise Building Tower remains intact, but in 1911 the massive complex sprawled over forty-one acres. Roughly 10,000 employees worked in a building so big that it had its own fire department, bank, power station, and radio station.

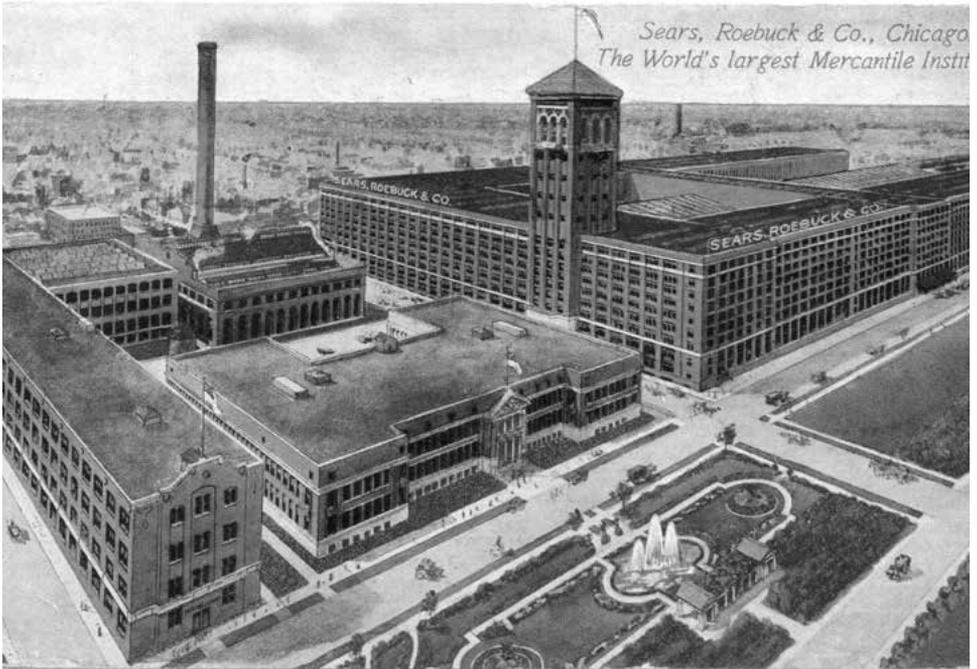
Althea managed a library containing thousands of books for reference (mostly for researchers in the science department) and recreation (for everyone). She streamlined the collection catalog, she created a bulletin for new books, she began classes to help the immigrant workers pass their citizenship test, and she made sure all her patrons had access to whatever type of books they wanted. Later in life Althea talked about receiving a note from a girl in the bookkeeping department. “It’s very slow here on this rainy day. Please send me one of those novels you have had to withdraw from circulation as unfit for a lady to read.” When the book Althea selected was returned there was a new note. “Blessings upon you! You’re quite right. This is not fit for

anybody to read. Please send another just like it.”

In June 1913 Sears paid for Althea to attend her first American Library Association conference in Kaaterskill, New York. Sitting at the top of a mountain in the Catskills, Hotel Kaaterskill billed itself as the largest mountain hotel in the world, holding up to 1,200 guests. Librarians from all over the country filled the hotel completely. Althea called this week, “a great adventure for me!”

* The novel *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair comes to mind.

** I'd love to know what those lapel buttons looked like!



1911 postcard of the Sears, Roebuck and Company building. Althea entered each morning through doors at the base of the tower. (from my collection)

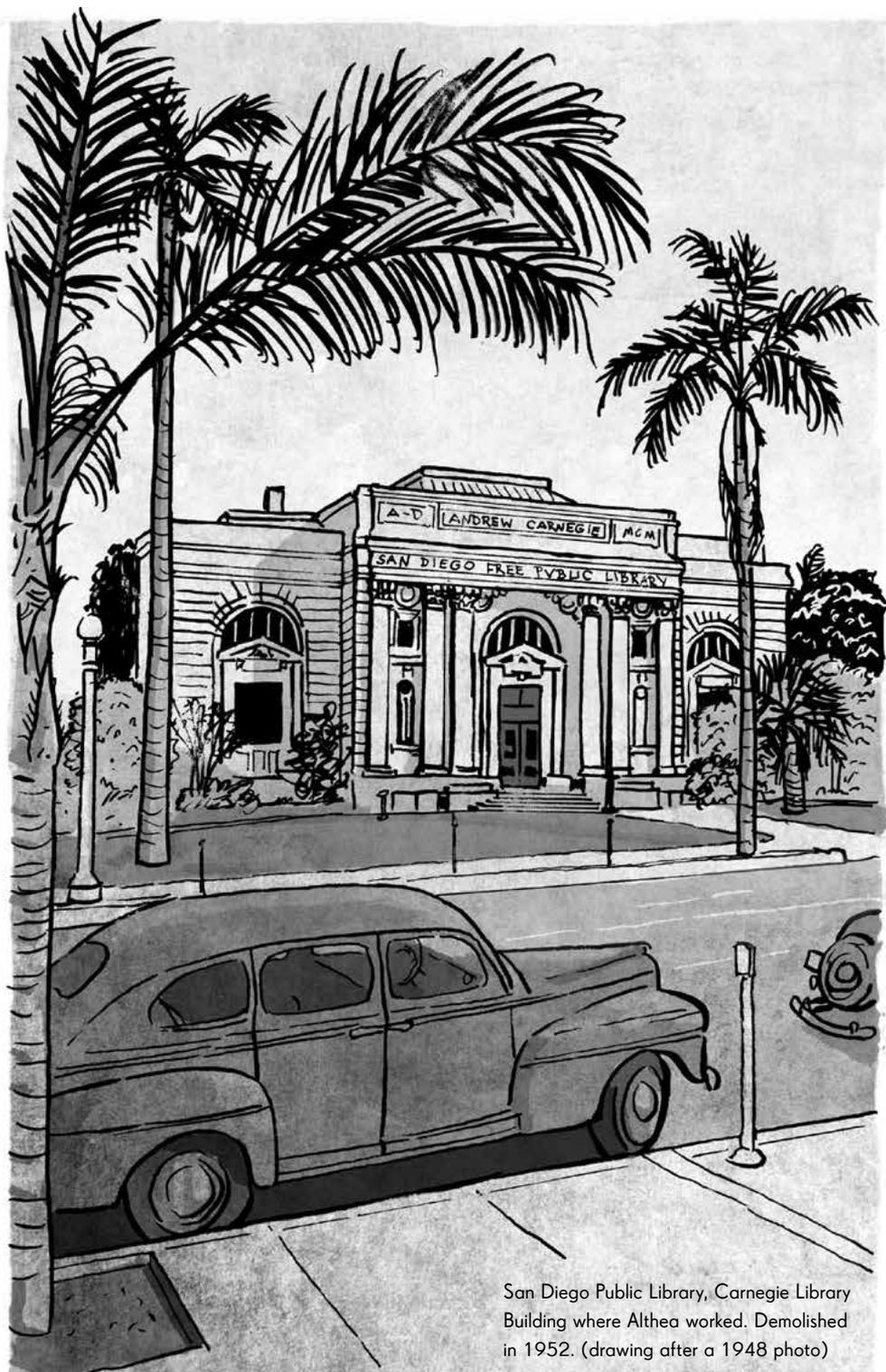
San Diego 1915-1926

The Warren's hometown of Waukegan had become unpleasant. By 1913 factories had moved in, and many residents moved out. It was probably at this time that they sold the family estate. Althea's mother wanted to move West. She and her oldest son went on a tour of the coast from Washington down to San Diego. They settled in Los Angeles. Althea joined them in August 1914. She came with a letter of recommendation from the head of the Chicago Public Library Henry E. Legler. As former ALA president, he was an especially influential connection. Los Angeles City Librarian Everett R. Perry was pleased with the introduction, and when he heard of a job opening in San Diego he put Althea in touch with the right people.

When Althea arrived in San Diego in January 1915 the public library was in a sad state. A population of over 36,000 was served by only two library branches. Books were stored haphazardly, methods of cataloging were obsolete, and the staff had the lowest salaries on the city payroll. As with most of the oldest staff, the head librarian was self-taught, and she resented the young professionally-trained outsider. She actively blocked Althea's attempts at reorganization. This was so discouraging that Althea considered returning to Chicago. Fortunately, the library board wanted to modernize, and they worked out an early retirement package to get rid of the trouble-maker.

Althea set to making improvements. She instituted a up-to-date cataloging system, edited and rearranged the book collection, motivated the staff, and pressured the city council for a raise in salaries. Library workers became more engaged, and by March book circulation was 55% greater than the previous year. Winning over her staff and the library board, Althea was promoted to head librarian in the fall of 1916. For the next ten years she campaigned for more city funds and more library branches. By 1926 San Diego book circulation passed one million, and library branches had increased to nine.

Althea was a well-known attendee and frequent speaker at meetings of the American Library Association and the California Library Association, and she was voted president of the CLA in 1922.



San Diego Public Library, Carnegie Library Building where Althea worked. Demolished in 1952. (drawing after a 1948 photo)

Los Angeles 1925-1941

Emma Blodgett Warren, Althea's mother, had struggled with depression for much of her life. Several times she had wandered away from the Pasadena sanitarium where she resided and became lost. In the fall of 1925 Althea decided to take a leave of absence from the San Diego Library to take care of her mother. She bought a duplex in Altadena. She moved into one side, while her mother and a live-in nurse moved into the other side.

When Los Angeles City Librarian Everett Robbins Perry heard of Althea's arrival he offered her the executive position of First Assistant City Librarian. She took the job and officially resigned from the San Diego Library. Althea's first assignment was to oversee the move into the newly built Central Library on 5th and Flower streets. While eight other new library buildings were being built, she meticulously studied book circulation in the city's branches to see where more staff were needed. She helped increase salaries once again, making LA Librarians the best paid next to those in Cleveland and Washington DC.

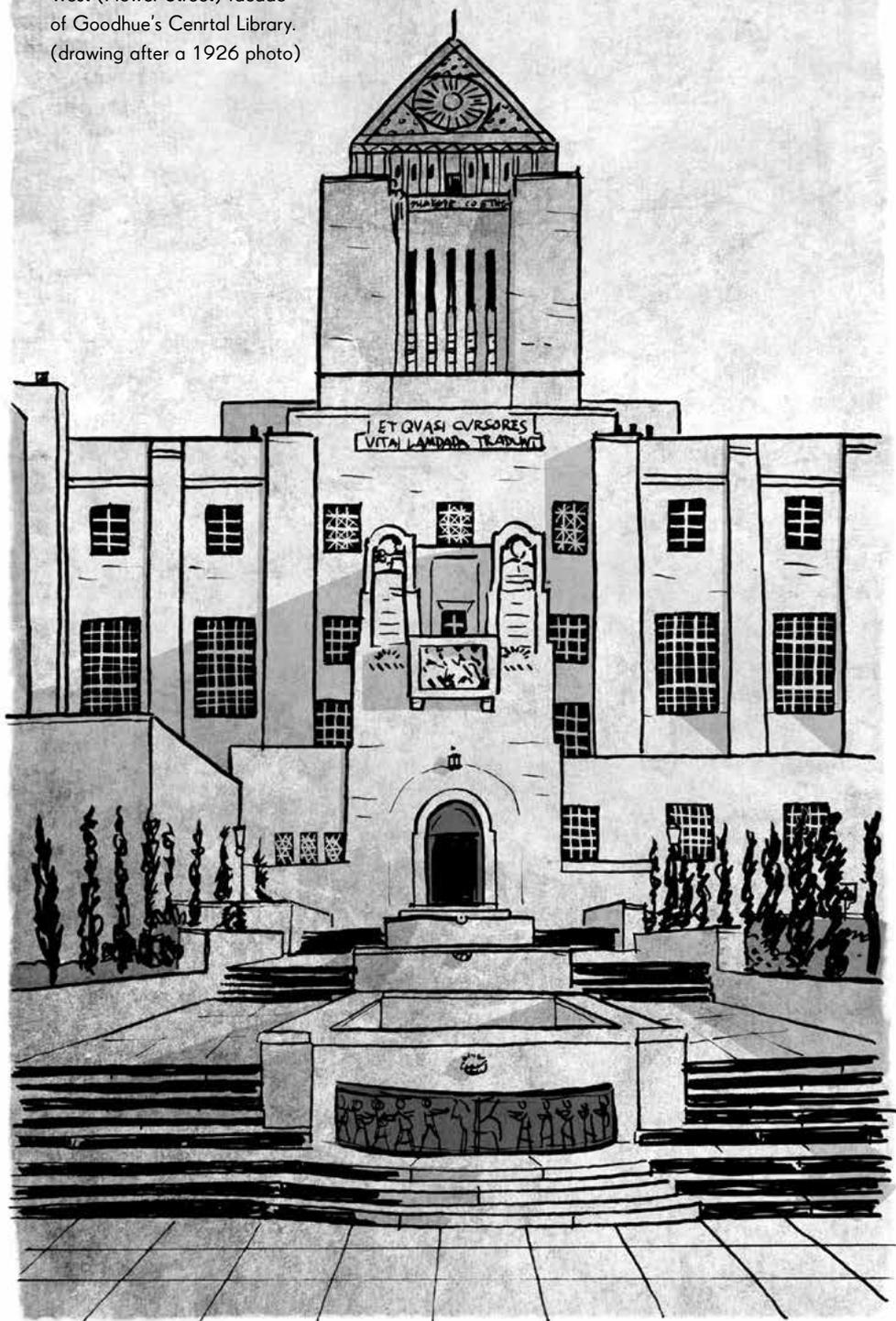
Althea also worked small. She created mini libraries in churches, hospitals, and other businesses throughout the city. She eliminated the restriction that said only third graders and older could receive a library card. Her new requirement was simply that a child be able to sign his or her name.

In 1931 the growth of the LAPL came to a halt as the Great Depression set in. Public demand for books was up, but library funding was down. To meet this challenge Althea focused her efforts on making the library more efficient. Althea had to work under a hiring freeze, shortened branch hours (libraries were closed at noon and on Saturdays), and a reduced budget for new books. Despite these issues, the public and her staff were satisfied.

In November 1933 City Librarian Perry passed away and the board unanimously voted Althea as his successor. The Los Angeles Public Library Staff Association had this to say in the December issue of their magazine:

Once in a blue moon there is a born leader who leads not by elbowing others out of her path, but because her natural stride carries her to the front; a leader with high standards, but generous and appreciative. Under a rare blue moon Althea Warren was born. And she is ours.

West (Flower Street) facade
of Goodhue's Central Library.
(drawing after a 1926 photo)





Every librarian, if she is going to amount to anything in her profession, must read, both systematically and spasmodically, both according to a plan and from the whim of the moment, both classics with a two-mile-an-hour speed maximum, and the cold blooded lacerations of all sanity and decency achieved by the new generation. What is more, librarians should read in working hours, if no assigned duty is being neglected, and outside of work hours, even, on occasion, to the wan light of morning to the detriment of health and eyesight and common sense. They should chop down, root out, burn over, and grub up the thickets and undergrowth of minor pleasures and obligations until an armchair or an arbor or an ambush has been won where there is a chance for reading.

They must be willing to chose the leaden box which contains a duodecimo volume in preference to the silver bonbonniere of social engagements or even the golden casket crammed with railroad and theatre and opera and movie and aeroplane and racetrack tickets. They must read as a drunkard drinks or as a bird sings or a cat sleeps or a dog responds to an invitation to go walking, not from conscience or training, but because they'd rather do it than anything else in the world.

Excerpt from Warren's talk at the Pacific Northwest Library Association meeting in Portland, Oregon, August, 1935.

The Victory Book Campaign

During World War II Althea Warren was called to serve her country by directing a nation-wide book drive that provided much-wanted books to servicemen and women.

Even before the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, the US government was preparing for the strong possibility of war. As thousands of new recruits flooded into training camps across the country, community librarians recognized an opportunity to lend their support. Individual libraries sponsored book drives to donate to their local military bases. In June of 1941 members of the American Library Association met to discuss a plan for a coordinated nationwide drive to supply the troops with free books. The ALA presented their idea to the United Service Organizations (USO) and The Red Cross. The reception by both groups was enthusiastic. That year the USO was setting up more than four hundred recreational clubs on the outskirts of military camps. They wanted books for their reading rooms. The Red Cross wanted books to send to military hospitals, remote camps with no libraries, and their overseas clubs. The Red Cross and USO decided to split the project's funding, while the ALA provided technical know-how. The next step was to approach the government for approval.

Although the government understood the morale-boosting potential of good reading material, supplying more books to military camp libraries simply was not an immediate priority. Congress allocated money for buying new books, but the process was slow, and the book distribution was limited to bases with new construction. The military was at first reluctant to accept donated books. They feared that they would be flooded by unsuitable subjects in poor condition. Yet, as John Jamieson explains in *Books for the Army*, "By the summer of 1941 two facts were very clear: the Army did need books, and whether invited to do so or not, the American people—from school boys to club women—urgently desired to give them. To make a donation of some kind gave civilians a sense of participation in the war effort, and books, to speak frankly, were for most people the easiest things to give." Late in 1941 the Army and Navy gave their approval, and the National Defense Book Campaign was formed.

The new organization was headquartered in the Empire State Building in New York City. The first board meeting took place on November 8, 1941. Althea was the board's choice for their national director. The Los Angeles Public Library granted Althea four months' leave to head east and set the campaign on its course. Althea arrived in New York on November 25th, and she soon wrote an editorial that was published in the *Library Journal* a week before the attack on Pearl Harbor:

Most of us believe, whatever our convictions concerning war, that the able bodied young men of our nation below the age of twenty-eight being in camps or in ships, it will be a satisfaction to scramble to get the books for them which they will genuinely enjoy. Librarians know from their own experiences that some printed pages are medical plasters to extract pain, others are tourists' tickets out of boredom or loneliness to exhilarating adventure; still others are diplomas for getting promotion and drilling ideas into quickstep.

A few weeks later the organization changed its name to the more peppy-sounding Victory Book Campaign. Warren contacted librarians across the country to set up a campaign director for each state. Specialized committees were formed to handle different aspects of the publicity, book collection, and distribution. Althea invited external organizations to participate, including book publishers, universities, the Boy Scouts & Girl Scouts, the Works Projects Association (WPA), and others.

The first day planned for book collections was January 12, 1942. Books were to be received year round, but the bulk of publicity efforts were made from January to March. To inform the public a variety of PR techniques were used. Posters were designed, radio spots scripted, and press releases sent out. Newspapers and magazines wrote articles, and radio stations interviewed VBC members. Letters and telephone calls were made to state and local government officials.

The public was encouraged to give current textbooks for military libraries. For the troops' recreational reading the VBC wanted adventure novels, humor books, sports books, mysteries, Westerns, etc. Most people delivered the books to their local library. Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts went door to door asking for donations. In some areas a family could leave a book on their doorstep for the milkman to collect along with his empty milk bottles. Private



A Victory Book Campaign publicity photo of Althea November 26, 1941. (from my collection)

businesses installed collection boxes for employee donations. Main Street shops designed window displays calling for donations. Children brought books to school. Red Cross trucks could be called to pick up book donations. By March 1942 6.5 million books had been received nationwide. Althea left her position as director that month, and was replaced by her assistant at the VBC, John M. Connor.

Librarians volunteered their spare time to sort the donations. Books in poor condition and excess duplicates were sold for scrap paper. Rare books were sold to raise money for the VBC. Although not requested, many children's books and women's subjects were donated. These were distributed to families in industrial communities manufacturing for the war effort. Books appropriate for the military were sent to warehouses, then distributed to nearby Army, Navy, and Merchant Marine bases. Most of the books were received



A Victory Book Campaign publicity photo of unnamed librarians in Agnello, Illinois, June 20, 1943. (photo courtesy of Molly Guptill Manning)



in the northern and north eastern states, while most of the new military camps had been built in the south and southwest. Railways offered the VBC reduced transportation rates to evenly distribute the books. By the end of 1942 the Victory Book Campaign brought in over 10.8 million books. Unfortunately, a very high percentage of these were unsuitable. VBC staffers discarded over 5 million books.

The military wanted more books, so a second year of collections was planned. In May, 1943 the national director John Connor was drafted into the Army (Althea corresponded with him the entire time he was in the war). He was replaced by Hellen E. Wessells, a New York Public Library librarian who would later join the Office of War Information (1943–1947). OWI was the government agency in charge of wartime propaganda. The office saw books as important to the morale of American soldiers and civilians, so it gave the Victory Book Campaign status as an official government project. OWI designed and produced 100,000 posters, and it assisted in promoting the campaign on the radio and in movie theaters.

Many more national organizations were added to the 1943 list of those assisting in publicity and collection efforts. Churches, 4-H clubs, Lions clubs, Rotary clubs, and others wanted to do their part for the campaign. The 1943 book drives brought in over 7.6 million books. Again, a large proportion of books needed to be discarded: 3.1 million.

The Victory Book Campaign provided a valuable service to American armed forces, and gave the public an easy way to support the war effort. Two years of book drives provided a total of 10,290,713 good quality books to a grateful military.

There were several drawbacks that prevented the VBC drives from continuing in 1944. Chief among them was the inefficiency of the process. Due to their condition and subject matter only 56% of donated books were suitable for distribution. By the end of 1943 the intended readers for these books were being sent to posts overseas. The vast majority of donated books were hardcovers. Their weight and size made shipping prohibitive. VBC books delivered outside the country competed against more crucial military supplies for cargo space. In 1943 the military had made an agreement with American publishers to produce a series of books exclusively for the troops: the Armed Service Editions. These lightweight paperback editions of the newest and most popular titles made the Victory Book Campaign obsolete.

The ALA, Retirement, and Teaching

Returning to Los Angeles from New York in April 1942, Althea faced more wartime challenges. Libraries across the country were near empty as so many young men were in the military and everyone else (including children) spent much of their spare time volunteering for the war effort. It was difficult to hire staff because better-paying war industry jobs were more attractive. Paper rationing reduced the number new books published each year.

In 1943 Althea was again invited to share her skills at the national level when the American Library Association voted her as their president. She visited Washington DC to seek federal aid for libraries (an especially difficult task during the expensive war years). In 1944 Althea called for changes in ALA policy to ensure that meetings were held only in venues where black librarians would not be excluded by segregation. At the end of her two-years *The Library Journal* wrote about her term:

To get results—big results—in the National Victory Book Campaign was a man-sized job, but a woman directed it, and with success! To undertake the presidency of the American Library Association in normal times always meant a back-breaking mountain of extra work for the victor, but the same woman has met this responsibility during the most frightening and uncertain years—1943–1944. Instead of being overwhelmed or impressed with her extra-curricular positions, Althea Warren took them in stride.

Althea could picture big plans for the LAPL but she decided that its future would be in the hands of a younger librarian. In October 1947 at the age of 60 she retired. Her staff and the Los Angeles Board of Library Commissioners held a retirement party for her with over 1,000 people attending.

Retirement did not last long. That fall Althea was asked to teach at the University of Southern California Library School. In the 1949–1950 school year she taught at the University of Michigan Library School. In 1950–1951 she was teaching at the Library School at the University of Wisconsin. In the

second semester of the 1951–1952 school year she was back at the USC. She continued teaching there until June 1957.

Althea Warren spent the last two years of her life organizing a collection of original artwork from children's books. She died on December 20, 1958 at seventy-two years old.

ALTHEA'S "WAYS TO ACHIEVE READING"



Don't try to have time for reading first. Read first and think up excuses for it afterwards.

Lie lightheartedly if necessary. The night you promised to go to dinner with the best friend of your foster aunt, just telephone that you have such a bad cold you're afraid she'll catch it, and stay at home instead and gobble *Lucy Gayheart* in one gulp like a boa constrictor.

Choose for your Sunday, go-on-myvacation-with me friends, people with the gift for finding good books and telling about them.

Personal Life

Althea often referred to herself as an “old maid,” yet she had a close companion for many years. Gladys English was the Director of Work with Children at the Los Angeles Public Library. The two might have been introduced at a meeting of the ALA, but they certainly would have met after Gladys began working in the LA library in 1930. Martha Boaz, a friend to both, wrote that “They were very different in personality and in their reaction to situations, but each needed the opposite qualities in the other: they were devoted and loyal to each other.”

In 1931 Althea and Gladys rented an apartment in Palos Verdes, driving to work together every morning. At the end of the summer they rented a house in Eagle Rock. In 1936 Althea purchased a house that the two shared until 1947. Gladys’ moved out so that she could share a house with her sister in the same neighborhood, about a mile away from Althea’s home.

Althea and Gladys went on work trips and vacations together. Gladys retired from the library in 1950. The two were planning a trip to Central America when Althea was asked to teach in Wisconsin. Gladys joined her. The couple shared an apartment in Madison, and they entertained frequently. Rachel Schenk, Director of The Library School at the University of Wisconsin, wrote that Althea and Gladys “had a happiness about everything they did, and it was infectious.” They enjoyed touring around Wisconsin, and in the winter of 1952 they roadtripped back to LA for Althea’s job at USC.

Gladys died in December 5, 1956. Althea was the driving force in creating the Gladys English Memorial Collection for the California Library Association. Althea and a small committee from the CLA spent much of 1957 and 1958 seeking artwork either by donation or purchase. Althea personally wrote hundreds of letters to artists, publishers, and librarians. In 1989 it was acquired by the LAPL. Simply called the Gladys English Collection today, it now contains over 200 original illustrations from children’s books (mostly published before 1960), including more than twenty pieces by Caldecott Medal recipients.

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A memorial article honoring the career of Gladys English.



A framed portrait of Althea Warren would be very much at home in Leslie Knope's office (if it weren't for Knope's comic hatred of librarians). This biography tells the story of Warren's stellar career as:

- Head of the San Diego Public Library, 1916–1925
- President of the California Library Association, 1922
- Head of the Los Angeles Public Library, 1933–1947
- Director of a nationwide book drive for GIs in WWII
- President of the American Library Association, 1943–1944
- Professor of library science at three universities, 1949–1957



ANDREW J. BROZYNA

is a book designer, illustrator, and a part-time historian.

Portfolio: www.ajbdesign.com

Twitter: @ratherkeen

Instagram: @ratherkeen

On the front cover: Actress Merle Oberon in a 1943 publicity photo for The Victory Book Campaign, a nation-wide book drive directed by Althea Warren.