



A VLA Conference Retrospective

by Gregg S. Grunow

The programs of the VLA Conference from years past provide an interesting perspective on the history of the association. While not every year is covered, due to gaps in the collection of program booklets in the Archives and Manuscripts Department of the Library of Virginia, those that are represented show strong ties to the national organization, an eye to improving the profession, and a finger on the pulse of library issues of the times.

The first conference program held at LVA dates back to 1923. We know from Henry James Jr.'s VLA seventy-fifth anniversary article, "Milestones in the Evolution of VLA," that general meetings were held from 1905 to 1910. The next meeting occurred in 1912. Then follows a gap until the VLA reorga-

nization meeting of 1922. Whether any formal meeting or conference agendas or programs were written for these early years is unknown.

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Although the first conference with a specified theme did not occur until 1955, and themes were included very sporadically until becoming a regular part of the conferences in the early 1960s, many conference session titles reflected the concerns of each decade along with library issues that will sound very familiar to those in the field today.

The surviving programs from the 1920s are very sparse. The meetings sound businesslike, with separate sessions for each type of librarianship—college, public, cataloging, and school, among others. The booklets from the 1920s show a strong tie to the American Library Association (ALA), with a keynote address by Dr. H. H. Meyer, President of ALA, at the 1924 conference. The 1930s programs demonstrate a continuing tie to ALA. Tommie Dora Barker, the ALA Regional Field Agent for the South, spoke at the 1931 and 1935 conferences. Dr. Carl H. Milam, Secretary of ALA, addressed the 1934 conference.

Gregg S. Grunow is Virginia Room Librarian for the Newport News Public Library System.



Many of the concerns of the 1930s are still familiar topics for us today. In 1930, Henry M. Brimm of the Union Theological Seminary covered the "Proper Type of Formal Instruction for Novice Assistants." In 1931, attendees discussed the "Certification of Librarians." In 1937, the conference offered a panel forum on "Certification and Salaries" as well as one on "State Aid."

The Great Depression had an effect on VLA conferences, too. Thomas P. Ayer of Richmond Public Library presented a session on "The Library and the Unemployment Situation." In 1934, the Public Library Section discussed "Fines During the Depression." During

the 1939 conference, there was a session on the Works Progress Administration (WPA) State Library Project. The Honorable James H. Price, Governor of Virginia, made the main address in 1939.

World War II dominated the 1940s. The war disrupted VLA and its annual conferences, as it did most aspects of American life. In his VLA seventy-fifth anniversary article, Henry James Jr. tells us that no annual conferences were held from 1942–1945 due to the war. In 1940, the Honorable Francis P. Miller, Member of the Virginia House of Delegates, addressed "Virginia Libraries in the Present Crisis." In 1941, Thomas Pinkney of the College of William & Mary

gave an address that focused on "Books as Implements of War." In 1946, the first conference after WWII seemed to satisfy the need to regroup after the hiatus, with individual library specialty sections and business meetings. 1947 saw a return to VLA's ties with ALA, as Mary V. Rothrock, Past President of ALA, addressed the conference.

Many conference firsts occurred in the 1950s. In 1953, the conference exhibitors were first listed by name in the program. The first book and author dinner occurred in 1954. The 1955 conference had the first stated overall theme, "Virginia Librarians Look Ahead." The speakers in the 1950s were respected representatives of the library world—most notably, David C. Mearns, Assistant Librarian of Congress, in 1950; Jack Dalton, Director of the International Relations Office of ALA, in 1958; and Dr. Benjamin Powell, President of ALA, in 1959.

The stated conference themes of the 1960s are still of interest to librarians today. 1962 looked "Toward Better Service in Virginia," 1963 promoted "Cooperation for Service," 1965 focused on "Sharing Our Resources," and 1968 examined "The Profession of Librarianship in Virginia." Current events also came to the forefront in the 1960s. In 1961, Melville J. Ruggles spoke about "Soviet Libraries," while Professor Louis D. Rubin Jr. of Hollins College marked the suicide of Ernest Hemingway. The concept of using computers and technology in libraries began in the 1960s, as seen by the following conference addresses: "Libraries in an Age of Communications Information Revolution" by Honorable John E. Fogerty, House of Representatives, 1966; "Libraries, Codex to Cobol" by Melville J. Ruggles, 1967; and "Introduction to Data Processing" by Joseph Becker, 1969. 1964 saw another visit from an ALA president, Edwin Castagna.



The VLA Annual Conference has been the time to come together to meet authors like Rita Mae Brown, to learn from outstanding librarians like Caroline Parr, to be informed by library leaders like VIVA's Kathy Perry, and to network with colleagues between sessions.



In 1969, the last conference of the decade looked to the future: "Our Next Decade: What Will the Seventies Hold?"

The 1970s continued the search for cooperation between libraries. The 1970 conference proclaimed, "Virginia Libraries Cooperate." In 1971, Verdelle Bradley, Librarian at Virginia Union, continued this theme with an address titled "Three Cooperative Programs in Virginia," while the 1972 conference featured a panel discussion called "Library Cooperation in Virginia." In 1974, a nod was given to the upcoming Bicentennial in 1976 with a panel discussion on "Oral History and the Bicentennial." Unfortunately, the programs for 1975 and 1976 are missing; it



Longwood's Lydia Williams and Patricia Howe can be counted on for lively, member-led sessions, but there is also time at the conference for friends like Nolan Yelich and Jim Rettig to find a quiet moment to talk.

would have been interesting to see if more programs focused on the Bicentennial. Unless included in 1975 or 1976, there were no ALA representatives who addressed the conference in the 1970s. At the 1978 conference, Mrs. Virginius R. Shackelford Jr., Chair of the Virginia Governor's Conference on Library and Information Services, provided an update on their work.

In keeping with the times, the 1980s saw an increase in the discussion of technology, as illustrated by the following themes: 1980, "Communications for the 80s"; 1981, "Looking at Priorities: From Books to Technology"; 1982, "Resources and Management in the 1980's: New Problems—New Possibilities"; 1986, "High Touch in a High Tech World"; and 1989, "Pathways to User Success." Themes also demonstrated a continuing interest in the subject of cooperation, as shown by "Independence through Cooperation" in 1983 and "Freedom and Knowledge Give Us the Opportunity to Provide Better Service through Cooperation" in 1984. The 1980s brought in speakers from libraries outside the Commonwealth: in 1982, Frederick J. Glazer, Director of the West



Virginia Library Commission, and Richard T. Sweeney, Director of the Public Library of Columbus and Franklin County, Ohio; and in 1985, Donald J. Sager, City Librarian and Director of the Milwaukee County Federated Library System. 1988 and 1989 started to show a shift to renowned authors as speakers—among them Rita Mae Brown, Pat Conroy, Henry Taylor, and Maya Angelou.

The 1990s were spent looking to

the future. Witness such themes as "Libraries, a Decade of Surprises: An Optimistic Forecast for the 1990s" (1990) and "Focus on the Future" (1993). The theme for 1996 was also future-oriented: "Libraries Connect the Commonwealth: Weave the Vision." 1994 looked at both the changes in and future of technology in the library with the theme "From Quill to Keyboard," while 1998 followed with "From Gutenberg to Gigabytes." The

Fairfax County Librarian Sam Clay was able to convince ALA President Carla Hayden to participate in a recent conference, while other public library directors made it clear that ours is not a humorless profession.



1990s ended with a glimpse at the future, "Virginia Libraries: Values and Visions for the 21st Century."

Both authors and ALA officials addressed the conferences of the 1990s. The decade began and ended with authors: Patricia D. Cornwell in 1990 and David Baldacci in 1999. In between these years,

other featured authors included Charles McDowell, Will Manley, Nikki Giovanni, and Sven Birkerts. ALA made a strong showing, with Linda F. Crismond, Executive Director of ALA, in 1990; Dr. Hardy Franklin, President-Elect of ALA, in 1992; and ALA Past Presidents Ann Symors and E. J. Josey in 1999.

We are now almost halfway through the first decade of the 2000s. So far this decade, we've seen themes that reflect on our place in the community: "Celebrate Virginia's Libraries," "A Community of Partners," "People Serving People," and "Defining Moments." Themes such as these remind us



VLA has cultivated vendor support for the annual conference by ensuring that vendors will have access to current customers and the opportunity to meet new prospects. Below, members take a break from conference activities to enjoy dinner together.



that we are more than providers of technology. This decade the VLA conferences continued to attract renowned authors: so far, we've heard addresses by William Styron (via video), Sarah Paretsky, Rick Bragg, and a return engagement by Rita Mae Brown. We've also continued our ties with ALA, as seen by the 2004 address by Dr. Carla Hayden, ALA Past President.

The VLA conferences demon-

strate how Virginia libraries have both influenced and been influenced by the times. Our libraries have adapted to each decade's changes and challenges. The conferences have been a large part of our ability to adapt by providing a forum to teach each other and be taught by others who influence the field of librarianship from outside the borders of Virginia.

Supporting Documents

Virginia Library Association. VLA Conference programs, 1923–2004.

James, Henry Jr. "Milestones in the Evolution of VLA." In *VLA LXXV Anniversary Program*, 29–37. Virginia Library Association, 1980. **VI**