

# LIBRARY COLUMN

## AN OPEN-SHELF SYSTEM.

By H. L. Elmendorf, Buffalo Public Library

**T**HE Buffalo Public Library, which was formed in 1897 out of the Buffalo Library, was born with a large collection of books and a building. The books had been gathered during a period of sixty years. Some of them were too valueless, by reason of age and consequent lack of interest, to be put in the way of unskilled readers, and, on the other hand, some of them were of value to the few, the students merely, and of so great value that it would be the height of extravagance to allow them to be worn out by the aimless handling of the many, to whom they are without interest. The building was arranged to store the books in what is called a "stack,"—that is, in this case at least, a long, rather narrow room, with two stories of bookcases throughout, separated by aisles less than three feet wide, the whole rather poorly lighted. It was evidently quite impossible to admit people in any numbers into such a room and expect them to find what they wished, and keep even reasonably out of one another's way. It seemed a foregone conclusion that the public could not have free access to the mass of the books, and a compromise was in order.

### The Open-Shelf System.

In the course of some alterations in the building, to make it more fit to accommodate large numbers of people, by the removal of partitions and the cutting of new openings, an attractive, well-lighted, easily accessible room, 75x48 feet in dimensions, was provided. This room was shelved with oak bookcases seven shelves high, around the walls only, leaving the centre of the room free for tables and hospitable chairs. Shelving was thus at hand where about eight thousand books could be comfortably displayed to a large number of people. Upon these shelves was placed a select library representing all classes of literature, with the exception of books for reference only, not omitting a generous supply of the best novels.

The plan was to throw open the best popular books of every description,—not books for scholarly research, or even for careful study, but the best of everything to attract and interest that large class called "general readers." Besides the permanent collection, a section is reserved in this room where new books are shelved for three months after they are added to the library. Everyone is welcome to this room to read and to examine the books as he will, and such as have library cards may borrow the books in the usual way. These books serve best those who come to the library not knowing precisely what they want, but needing to be reminded of something that they have long desired to see but have momentarily forgotten, or to be pleased with something that attracts them by its appearance. Those who prefer to ask directly for what they want can be best served in the outer room, where assistants hand them books over the counter from the stack. The books in the open shelves, except the comparatively small number of new books, are all duplicated in the stack, and do not interfere with presenting lists in the time-honored way.

### Advantages of the System.

The purpose of the open shelves is to recommend the best books by placing each book where it can recommend itself by being seen and handled. Large numbers of duplicates are provided, so that favorites may always be represented on the shelves. Twenty thousand volumes are necessary to keep the eight thousand places on the shelves reasonably well filled. The list is constantly revised, and no book that proves unattractive is allowed to cumber the shelves, but is retired to the stack, to give place to something more desirable. No book is shelved here that has not something attractive in itself, which will make the book more likely to be read because it can be seen and examined.

Experience shows that no book which is well made,—that is, well printed and bound, and has a real, vital message for mankind,—fails to find appreciation. Many of the best and greatest books are borrowed from the open shelves four or five times as often, during the year, as copies of the same book are lent from the stack. To show that the collection is really liked, it is only necessary to say that, during 1903, these 20,000 volumes gave a circulation of 215,000,—that is, each book of the entire number was taken home and, presumably, read twelve times during the year. This is, of course, an average; some did not go out twelve times, but others went oftener. The ordinary library methods are used to attract attention to the books, such as special lists and special displays of books on current topics of interest, critical notices posted near the new books, book-posters and bulletin displays.

### Scope of the System.

The open shelf collection,—a library for the general reader, carefully selected, tested by experience, and constantly revised,—cannot and does not strive to keep pace with the skilled novel reader. It does attempt to put most of the old, great books, the authorities on special subjects, the pleasant, lovable authors, and the best new books, be they delightful, useful or instructive, before its readers, and the steady and, in many cases, growing use of these books is a constant source of encouragement and delight.

The question is always asked, and may as well be answered, "Do you not lose books under this system?" We certainly do, but very few,—less than 1 to 5,000 of circulation. The board of directors and library authorities have long ago lost the fetish idea in regard to books. This collection represents current books, easily replaceable and worth just the money it will cost to replace them. The money loss is many times made up by the saving in attendants' salaries, as it costs about one-third as much to circulate books in this way as under the old system. Neither the loss nor the saving is to be taken into account as compared with the pleasure and profit of the many who enjoy these privileges, and who, collectively, pay the pittance of loss.

The open shelf department may be considered the most distinctive feature of the library's work, so much so that among librarians it is often referred to as the "Buffalo plan"—Review of Reviews.

### NOTES.

A movement is on foot in Woodstock to secure a grant from Mr. Carnegie for the erection of a library building.

The new library at Brantford is now open. It is centrally situated and of an attractive appearance. The stack room has a capacity for 10,000 volumes. Brantford will supply \$3,500 per year for maintenance.