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State Proud of Its 'Law-Making Laboratory,' No. 1 in Country

Designed to Help Legislators, It Now Serves Others, Too

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is one in a series of Sunday articles about places in Madison worth knowing.)
By HELEN MATHESON
(State Journal Staff Writer)

A trail-blazer from the start, Wisconsin's legislative reference library today ranks easily as No. 1 among the institutions of its kind in the country.

Sometimes its officials get a little embarrassed at professional conferences by the way other states look to Wisconsin — and them — for leadership.

But it's a nice kind of embarrassment.

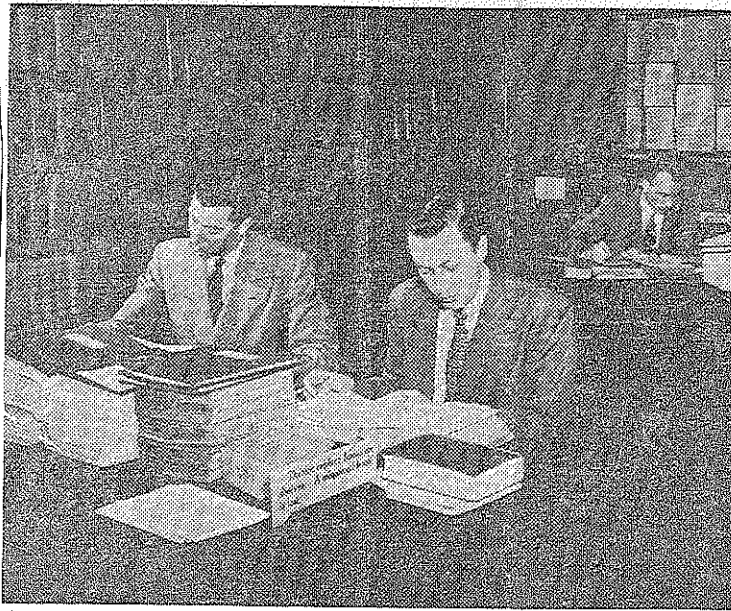
The library started out in 1901 with an appropriation of \$1,500 and a document clerk named Charles McCarthy. It was the first organized effort to provide a state legislature with trained help in studying current issues, with technical aid in drafting bills.

Had to Fight Its Way

It had to fight its way against natural suspicion and doubt. People were afraid it would divulge political secrets, try to "run" the legislature, become "a law factory."

Nowadays the library is so successfully established that it is doubtful whether a move to wipe it out could get a single vote in the legislature. For years every single member has called upon it for help of some kind during every session. The demand on its services requires an appropriation of \$37,000 regular years; \$50,000 in a year when the legislature meets. And it has earned its chosen title of "a law-making laboratory."

People like Theodore Roosevelt, Robert LaFollette, Sr., justices of the state supreme court, and authorities on government, law and libraries have declared that the library deserves a heal-



Using some of the materials in the legislative reference library are Wesley Hillery, left, a University of Wisconsin graduate student who is looking up information on juvenile delinquency; Anton Jacobson, right, a research associate in the library reading a State Journal clipping about the Griffen-Eagen survey, and, at the rear, Victor Hornbostel, another graduate student, studying the department of public instruction.

thy share of the credit for Wisconsin's pioneering legislation; its remarkably clear and compact statutes, and the fact that relatively few of its laws are overturned in the courts.

And in files of letters 2 feet high, people from Wisconsin and all over the world have added their testimony, in letters thanking the librarians for help in answering questions.

Cheerfully Finds Answers

Their main work is for the legislators. But as a sideline the staff cheerfully hunts up answers to everything from "does Wisconsin have a sheep dog law?" "who are the only people permitted to climb Mt. Everest?" and "what are the right names of all birds called blackbirds" to problems like "how do other states provide for the chronically ill" that may foreshadow major legislation when they're brought in by a lawmaker.

Most eminent libraries around the globe operate in silent, handsome buildings of their own, equipped with miles of reading rooms and book collections proudly numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

This one is different.

Its headquarters are a modest suite of rooms in the state capitol. Its reading room is crowded when 12 people drop in. Its librarians have been known to talk right out loud. And whenever its collection begins to look bulky, its officials sit down happily and start sending things to the State Historical society.

Perfectly Cataloged

The legislative reference library doesn't want to have a lot of books. It takes pride in maintaining a small, up-to-date supply of top-notch material so perfectly cataloged that all available information on any subject can be located in a few minutes.

Some of the most precious sources material includes clippings, reports on committee hearings, collections of state documents, a subject file to every bill introduced in the legislature since 1898, drafting records on current legislation, and research studies made by the library itself.

When a legislator drops in and asks for information on the housing problem, say, the librarians don't just heap books up in front of him and stroll off.

"That is enough for the university and research student who writes about legislative problems in seclusion from actual contact with them," concedes Prof. E. E. Witte, a former director of the library. "But the average busy

legislator in the hurly-burly of the session will not—and should not be expected to—wade through a lot of material to winnow the grain from the chaff."

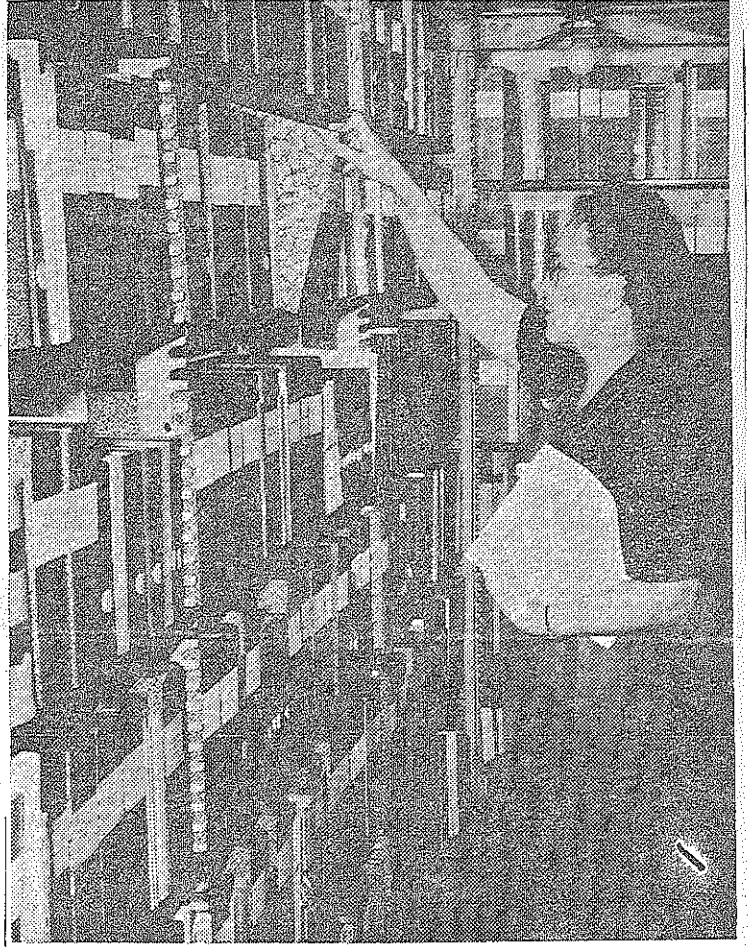
The staff does the winnowing; the legislator gets the results compiled in brief, readable form.

Rules Always Followed

When the library—established originally when the State Historical society moved itself and its building and the legislature wanted some reference material handy—first ventured into the new field of public bill drafting. McCarthy laid down the rules.

The work must be accurate, non-partisan, absolutely confidential, and thoroughly documented.

No draftsman can fill in even



Filing clippings in the library's stacks is Mrs. Ann Johnson, a senior clerk-typist.

the details of a measure without finding out exactly how the legislator wants them.

Those same rules, rigorously observed, still are obeyed by the library here—and by all the others in the states and federal government that followed it. Anything else, according to Witte:

"Is like cutting a coat without taking measurements—a factory process that simply won't do in

a democratic government.'

The draftsmen, points out Howard Ohm, the present director, try to put the measures into so clear English a layman can understand them. They consider themselves the legislator's aides, not his advisors. They'll tell him if they think a proposal is unconstitutional but if he wants to go ahead with it, they'll draft it painstakingly, anyway.

—A. M. Vinje Photos