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“An Easy Chance to Do a Good Thing”: The Paris *Tribune*’s Campaign to Save the American Library

Nissa Renn Cannon

- 1 “There has never been a local movement among the Americans of this city that offered everybody such an easy chance to do a good thing,” declared the *Chicago Tribune*’s Paris edition on October 21st, 1919. The “good” and “easy” action the paper encouraged was donating money to the campaign to fund the ongoing existence of an American library in Paris. The next day, the paper continued its appeal — asking sentimentally, “who of the native sons and daughters has not felt the lo[n]ging for the books and magazines of his own land, for long rows and rows of them in which to browse, and for the kindly advice and assistance of the trained American Library worker [?]” These efforts on the pages of the *Tribune*’s Paris publication — known familiarly as the “Paris *Tribune*” and formally as the *Chicago Tribune European Edition* — were in support of an institution that had arrived in the city in 1918: the central reading room of the American Library Association’s Library War Service. By the time these pleas were printed, the war was over, demobilization was in progress, and the American Library Association (ALA) was ending its program for soldiers. The *Tribune*’s fundraising campaign was in response to the needs and desires of a growing civilian American community in Paris, which saw a peacetime purpose for the place the *Tribune* described as “the focus of our common intellectual interests and our distinctive culture.”

A Shared History

- 2 The Paris *Tribune* and the American Library share similar origins: both were founded for the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in France during the First World War, and both reinvented themselves after demobilization. The *Chicago Tribune* began publishing

an "Army Edition" on July 4, 1917, in response to War Department encouragement that publishers provide "newspapers to furnish the men with a brief résumé of home news as well as publishable facts about what is going on in France" (September 18th, 1917). Employing a separate staff from the paper's hometown edition, the Army Edition enumerated its content as "the best features of *The Tribune* and cartoons, sporting news, general news of special interest and importance, and carefully selected official or semi-official news of political or military interest and value to our men abroad" (*id.*). The Army Edition ran until February 18th, 1919, when it responded to the shifting makeup of Paris' American community in the wake of the war by changing its title from the "Army Edition" to the "Paris Edition," and, soon after, the broader "European Edition¹."

- 3 Although this abrupt change on the nameplate suggests a sudden shift from military readers to civilians, in practice the process was gradual — a fact made visible through advertisements in the paper for the department store Au Bon Marché, at various points in 1919. While the *Tribune* was publishing as the Army Edition in the first months of the year, Au Bon Marché's ads began by touting their "Military Accoutrements" and appealing to male soldiers. In the middle of 1919, with the paper now titled the "Paris Edition," the gender of its readers appears unchanged. A July ad describes the store's "lingerie, hosiery and gloves" as "souvenir[s] of Paris, suggesting these pocket-sized garments were intended to be carried home by soldiers. But the shift in Paris' American demographics becomes noticeable later that year: in the store's September ad, souvenir apparel is replaced by "light dresses, blouses and shirtwaists," publicized alongside the store's "very select Tea Room and Restaurant," evidence of the expectation that women were now in the audience. These changes are symptomatic of a transformation taking place in Paris' American population after the war, as soldiers were replaced by businessmen and their families, journalists, students, and artists².
- 4 This demographic change was of great import for the ALA's Paris reading room. In 1917, the ALA had begun operating the Library War Service (LWS) — providing troops with access to books: a program that spread rapidly across the United States and Europe³. At the service's peak, the ALA had established 32 libraries in buildings, 35 large camp libraries and 237 departments in hospitals and Red Cross establishments. Lending libraries could be found overseas in:

hospital trains, with the sections of the American Ambulance, in Foyers du Soldat which serve American troops, in nurses' clubs and hostess houses, in naval bases and on the ships of the Fleet, in recreational centers such as the Soldiers' and Sailors' Club, the Moose headquarters, the University Union and the quarters of the Y.M.C.A in Y.M.C.A. huts, Salvation Army cabins, Knights of Columbus huts, [and] Red Cross hospitals. (August 30 1918)

Figure 1: Soldiers gathered in one of the ALA's Library War Service reading rooms in a training camp.

From *New York Herald Paris Edition*, October 20, 1919, p. 4.

- 5 Beginning in 1918, the LWS's French operations included a central location, in an elegant building once occupied by the Vatican's ambassador, at 10, rue de l'Élysée, near the Place de la Concorde. As the frustratingly slow process of demobilization began, an increasing number of American soldiers and civilians made their way to Paris. Although the library was intended for soldiers, Mary Niles Maack writes that "once the ALA reference library was opened to the public this very diverse American community made use of its service" (Maack M., 2005: 401). On October 2nd, 1919, the library's director, Burton Stevenson, explained that "although most of the soldiers have gone home the circulation of the library is to-day greater than it ever has been. American and English civilians in increasing numbers are taking advantage of the convenient facilities for getting good books and magazines."
- 6 The *Tribune* and the American Library were imbricated institutions from their beginnings. The *Tribune's* Army Edition first wrote about the LWS three weeks after the paper began publication, when they reported that the ALA "ha[d] been asked by the War Department's Commission on Training Camp Activities to furnish public library facilities to the 32 cantonments and National Guard training camps to be opened" (July 26th, 1917). The Army edition wrote regularly on the LWS's progress, including a report that "the War Service Committee of the American Library Association has already sent more than half a million books to the training camps" (January 29th, 1918). With the LWS's books initially reaching State-side camps, the Army Edition recorded that "110 cases of fiction, books, dictionaries, histories, books of science, in sectional book-cases, just like an up-to-date American public library" (May 2nd, 1918) had arrived in France. The news with the most impact for American soldiers in Paris came on August 30th,

1918, when the *Tribune* announced that a "new library [has] opened in Paris for soldiers and all war workers," which included "a reading-room equipped with the latest American magazines and newspapers, and a reference room."

A Library in Crisis

- 7 As the *Tribune* shared the American Library's news with Paris' Americans, it also reciprocally gave these residents a means to communicate with the library, such as a May 20th, 1919 piece urging "Yanks" to "write to the A.L.A. if the outfit hasn't enough books." Although the date of this appeal suggests the LWS was still expanding in 1919, it was, in fact, ramping down its operations, and beginning to look towards its future. The *Paris Herald*, the *Tribune*'s main daily competitor in the city, reported on July 24th that the Library "has no funds and no authority to carry on the work" beyond the AEF's departure from France, warning that "the time available for securing [funds] is growing short, and if anything is to be done it must be done quickly." That month, the *Paris Tribune* and *Herald* began reporting on plans being made for the War Service's books, now largely sent from camps back to the Paris warehouse, to be divided among institutions, with the tabulation that "while two and one-half million books were brought to France, about a million have been worn out or are unaccounted for. Of the balance, over a half a million volumes are *en route* home or will be sent" (July 31st, 1919).

Figure 2: Women getting books ready in an ALA mailing room to send to the LWS.

From *New York Herald Paris Edition*, March 10, 1919, p. 2.

- 8 However, this dispersal of the collection and plans to close the popular reading room at 10, rue de l'Élysée appeared to be no one's goal. While the library's director Burt Stevenson ^{believed} that the "ALA had no obligation whatsoever to present these [civilian] residents with a library — asserting that 'every library should be supported by the

community which it serves," (quoted in Maack, M., 2005: 401) — his aim was not to shutter the library, but to find it local support. He advocated for "leaving a permanent collection for a public library in France" in order to "place authoritative information on American subjects in an easily available place both for Americans in France and for the general public" and "help perfect Franco-American relations." And so, in Fall of 1919, a campaign to save the library was launched and promoted by the newspapers that had long reported on the LWS's every action.

The First Campaign

- 9 On October 20th, 1919, the Paris *Herald* informed readers that "one hundred and fifty thousand francs must be raised in the next two weeks if the American Library is to be kept in Paris as a monument to American enterprise and American literature." On October 21st, 1919, the *Tribune* encouraged readers to "pin a five-franc or ten-franc or hundred or thousand franc note to a slip" and mail it to the *Tribune* — assuring them that the "*Tribune* [would] receive subscriptions, account for them daily in its columns, and turn the funds over" to the Library. The library's continued existence was of such concern to Paris' Americans that updates on the fundraising efforts — including the names of each individual donor — were reported on nearly every day in October and November by the Paris *Herald* and *Tribune*, often as front-page news.
- 10 For those not swayed by the practical matter of losing access to the only substantial Anglophone library in Paris at the time, the *Tribune* offered readers sentimental and historical appeals for the library's preservation. It described the library as "worth preserving if only as a reminder of the splendid young soldiers who found in its books their refuge and their rest from the terror and the bitter toll of war"; argued for its place in American history — calling it "the liaison agent between all of great America and the Americans whom chance has placed for the time in cosmopolitan Paris"; and continued to play on patriotic sentiment by declaring that the library "offers the connecting link to keep the American in Paris in touch always with the changing ways of his homeland" (October 22nd, 1919).
- 11 The Library's appeals, amplified in the Paris *Herald* and *Tribune*, succeeded in raising the necessary funds — in fact, they raised twice as much as Stevenson estimated the library needed in order to remain solvent through 1920⁴. In May of 1920, the ALP incorporated as a private entity with the three objectives of "serv[ing] as a memorial to those American soldiers for whom it was first established"; promot[ing] French "acquaintance with American literature, institutions, and thought"; and "supplement[ing] the meagre collections of American books in existing public libraries in Paris," ("Some Facts"). The ALA ceded their claim to the library with "the hope that it will always be maintained as an American Library, which will be a somewhat adequate representation of American life and thought" (quoted in Thompson S., 1964: 180).

Conclusion

- 12 The success of the Paris papers' campaigns to make the ALP a permanent institution marked the beginning of ongoing collaboration between the library and the local

newspapers, a relationship which would grow and change as Paris' American population did. In the early 1920s, both the *Paris Tribune* and the *Paris Herald* began collaborating with the library on weekly columns of book reviews and literary news, and the papers helped the library raise money through subscriptions and donations for decades. When the *Tribune's* society columnist May Birkhead declared on the paper's front page that "tourists may come and tourists may go, but the American Library in Paris shows signs of going on forever" (Birkhead M., 1927), the Paris papers could rightly take credit for making the library's persistent presence possible.

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NOTES

1. Weber, R. 2006 offers a brief history of the *Tribune's* Army Edition.
2. For more on Paris' interwar American community, see Green, N., 2014.
3. A further account of this program appears in Stauffer, S., 2019.
4. The most thorough history of the American Library in Paris' early decades can be found in Thompson, S., 1964.

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