



Mary Utopia Rothrock

19 September 1890 - 30 January 1976

Vanderbilt University: BS (1911); MS (1912)

New York State Library School: Certificate (1914); BLS (1922)

University of Chattanooga: D.Litt [Hon] (1948)

Head of Circulation Department at Cossitt Library, Memphis (1914-1916)

Director of the Lawson McGhee Library, Knoxville (1916-1934)

Tennessee Valley Authority Supervisor of Library Services (1934-1948)

Tennessee Valley Authority Library Consultant (1948-1951)

Knox County Librarian (1949-1955)

She is considered to be the founder of modern public library service in Knoxville, and is responsible for the system of branch libraries used in Knox County.

Opened the Carnegie-funded Negro branch of the library in 1918; praised by the *Knoxville Herald* for "her fine courtesy and gracious manner to those of the most lowly station..." (21 September 1928)

The Rosenwald Fund selected the Knoxville Library as one of nine libraries in the country where funds for service to all the people of the county, rural and urban, Negro and white, were provided (1929)

President of the Tennessee Library Association (1919-1920 and 1927-1928)

First Honorary Life Member of the Tennessee Library Association (1956)

Founding member of the Southeast Library Association (1920) and its President (1922-1924)

Chair of Tennessee Education Commission's Subcommittee on Libraries (1925-????)

One of the founding members of the East Tennessee Historical Society (1925) Secretary (1925-1928), Treasurer (1929-1932), President (1932 and 1937), and member of the Editorial Board (1929-1976)

Member of the Tennessee Historical Commission (1944-1967)

Lobbied the American Library Association to hire the first and only Field Agent for the South (1930)

Captured the imagination of those attending the 1933 Conference of Southern Leaders with her proposal for the establishment of regional library services, which evolved into the present-day Tennessee Regional Library System (begun in 1939).

Member of American Library Association Council (1932-1942)

Member of Library Extension Board (1933-1938)

Recipient of the first Joseph W. Lippincott Award given by the American Library Association for her "rare vision and intelligence shown in organizing a regional library service and related adult education activities" as the most outstanding contribution to librarianship during 1935-1936 (1938)

Member of the U.S. Office of Education Advisory Committee on Libraries (1941)

President of the American Library Association (1946-1947)

Member of the Advisory Committee for the ALA Public Library Inquiry (1947-1950)

Awarded ALA Honorary Membership for lasting importance to the advancement of the whole field of library service (1976)

Author and publisher of school textbooks: *Discovering Tennessee* (1936; 1951) and *This Is Tennessee* (1963) with Ben Andrews

Editor of *The French Broad-Holston Country: A History of Knox County, Tennessee* (1946)

Editor and publisher of an annotated version of John Haywood's *Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee* [the state's first published history, which had been out of print for 136 years] (1959)

Said Louisville, Kentucky, Free Public Library Director (1942-1977) Clarence R. Graham:

"I remember her best as a pleasant debater. She did not suffer fools gladly, and one had to defend every single statement he made or be laughed into defeat. We called her 'the Best Man in the Library Profession.'"

Wrote Cossitt Library, Memphis, Director (1925-1960) Jesse Cunningham:

"She knows all the answers and is one of the smartest persons in the library profession." (1949)

Rothrock's philosophy was that of
"making books available to all."

"Wherever they live or work, the library follows."

The librarian's role is,
"to integrate the library thoroughly with the life and work of the community it serves."

Her slogan **"Taking the Library to the Worker"** was the TVA policy of making the opportunity to read convenient and easy.

She called schools, libraries, and bookstores
"the appliances of mental growth."

"Our rural libraries have more need for knowledge of calves than of Plato."

Objectives for Rural Library Service by Mary Utopia Rothrock.
<http://arsl.pbworks.com/f/ROTHROCK+-+Objectives+for+Rural+Library+Service+2+column.pdf>

Books for the People by Tennessee Valley Authority.
<http://www.tva.gov/heritage/books/>

History of the TVA Libraries: From Book Boxes to Computers by Frances Edna Bishop.
<http://tnla.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=260>

An Homage to a Bold Library Director, on Her Birthday by Jack Neely.
<http://www.metropulse.com/news/2010/sep/15/homage-bold-library-director-her-birthday/?print=1>

“The Rare Vision of Mary Utopia Rothrock: Organizing Regional Library Services in the Tennessee Valley.” Mary Mallory. *Library Quarterly*. Vol. 65, No.1, pp. 62-88. University of Chicago, 1995.
<http://arsl.pbworks.com/w/file/attach/77805206/ROTHROCK%20-%20Mallory%20article.pdf>

“Rothrock, Mary Utopia (1890-1976)” by Lucile Deadrick. *Dictionary of American Library Biography*. Bohdan S. Wynar, editor. pp.448-449. Libraries Unlimited, 1978.

Mary Utopia Rothrock (“Topie”) was a librarian, community activist, historian, author, editor, (and some would say feminist) who, as one of her colleagues wrote, “knows all the answers and is one of the smartest persons in the library profession.” She was active in her local community of Knoxville, Tennessee, throughout the state, the Southeastern states, and the nation with her substantial work with the American Library Association. Her career spanned the years from 1914 through 1955, always able to think ahead of her times.

After being invited at age 26 in 1916 to become the Director of the Lawson McGhee Library of Knoxville, Tennessee, she oversaw the building of a Carnegie-funded branch library (1918) for the Negro community who were not allowed by southern custom to use the main library in Knoxville.

In a 24 August 1930 newspaper-covered conversational debate with the Knoxville mayor, who wanted women to quit their jobs so unemployed men could have a job, Ms Rothrock said:

“You assume that your jobless men could take the place of your employed woman. But could they. Society would be injured more by the mal-adjustment set up by men in women’s jobs, than it is by unemployed men. Women get their jobs and hold their jobs because they can do the work better than men. ... When you deprive women of the possibility of economic independence, you have enslaved them. ...” The mayor had nothing to say, reported the paper.

In 1933 she created the idea of regional library services to help local communities establish public libraries. This idea evolved into the present-day Tennessee Regional Library System.

In 1934 she accepted a position as Supervisor of Library Services with the Tennessee Valley Authority where she was responsible for building library book boxes to be attached to the saw filers/tool box and then using bookmobiles to distribute reading materials to the workers building the TVA dams, fulfilling her slogan of **“Taking the Library to the Worker.”**

In her seminal and prescient 1937 article, **“The Objectives of Rural Library Service”** (in *Rural America*, published by the American Country Life Association, September, 1937), she wrote that the librarian’s role is **“to integrate the library thoroughly with the life and work of the community it serves.”** With a tweak here and there, this article could be used in training workshops and library board meetings as a blueprint for customer service in rural and small communities (and larger ones too, for that matter).

Her 1946 ALA presidential inaugural address, “Libraries in a New Era,” was a plea for librarians to become more actively involved with technology and non-print media.

In 1949 she wrote about the role of audiovisual materials in language that is equally applicable (maybe with a tweak or two) to electronic information today:

“Audio-visual materials can never take the place of books, of course. They should not be thought of as devices for building up the circulation of books. They are useful in themselves, but not for stimulating much more reading of library books. Neither should they be used merely to divert with sound and motion. Their function is purposeful communication. Wisely used they can enrich the library’s book services by supplementing them. **They can take information and ideas to large numbers of people whom books are not reaching.** By increasing the volume and intensity of the library’s services they can multiply its community contacts and increase its effectiveness.”

In addition, she was a Fellow of the American Library Institute, a member of Delta Delta Sorority, the Colonial Dames of America, the Presbyterian Church, and the Democratic Party.