

## Her job: Finding answers

# Lorry Plath good bet for quiz show

By JUDY DAVIS

Lorry Plath would be an absolute ringer on the TV quiz show circuit.

After 15 years in the reference department of the Yakima Valley Regional Library, she's heard nearly every question there is. And, by hook or by crook, she and her staff have been able to come up with answers for most of them.

From how to construct a telescope or hang glider to locating an illustrated cross section of a starfish, the reference department has tackled a wide range of problems.

As years go by, much of the information is tucked away in their individual heads for easy reference, but as questions resurface again and again, the search continues for an even better, more complete answer.

"The inscription on my gravestone will read, 'And then, what?'" said Plath, with a smile that seemed to touch every inch of her face. "How will the patron use the information we've provided or how will the next person understand it?" she asked.

The average person might be surprised, answered Plath. People today are exposed to more technical information than ever before and, especially in the Yakima Valley, have turned to do-it-yourself projects of all kinds.

"There's a great deal of stubborn individualism in this Valley," commented Plath, who has seen hours of the reference department expand greatly over the years. "There's a great interest in 'how can I make or

do things' in our community," she said.

The result has been inquiries for building boats, trailers and carnival rides, or concocting pesticides to a recent interest in saving water.

Requests to the reference staff average more than 1,000 for any given month, Plath said. Records of each are kept in query books according to the general subject areas. Answers provided by the staff are rated according to how well the problem was solved. The staff continues to work on those questions it feels were not answered adequately.

An added advantage of the query files is an ability to note shifts in public interest. When a certain subject area prompts increased interest, the staff begins bringing in additional materials to meet those needs.

"The library has developed in response to community use," said Plath, who will retire at the end of April. Herself something of an individualist, the Yakima native enjoys hiking and backpacking and has been a cellist with a local chamber music group for several years.

Following her retirement, Plath intends to pursue those interests and others including gardening and "reading for restoration."

By far, materials which have had the most consistent, intense use countywide are Yakima County history files, Plath said. Back newspapers and pioneer family histories are well-used items, along with the Click Relander collection of

Indian history which has attracted patrons from as far as Arizona.

The library is the only location in Yakima County offering a full range of law references, including federal, state, county and city statutes, Plath added. It also serves as a depository for the state library in Olympia and receives daily shipments of bills as proposed, amended and passed by the state legislature when that body is convened.

But, even experts sometimes fail and if the answer to any given question isn't to be found in the Yakima library or among community resources available, the reference staff contacts the state library or the Pacific Northwest Bibliographic Library to search out the information.

The only question for which no definitive answer seems to have yet been found is the names of the two thieves crucified with Jesus Christ on Good Friday, Plath said. It's a seasonal question that pops up each Easter, she said, but one on which no two religious scholars seem to agree.

"The harder (the answer) is to find, the more convinced we are it has to be somewhere," she said. "Our job is to know where the answer is."

Responses to patron interests also have led to increased topographic maps of the state, catalogues of consumer information, do-it-yourself helps such as Sunset magazine and Mother Earth News, and several others, she said.