

# Today's librarian: Information specialist

Reference works lay foundation for 'treasure hunting'

By CELIA GROSSBLATT

Librarians have long been stereotyped: They are spectacled, spinsterly, and wear their hair in a bun; their day consists of stamping books and stitching people.

Not so today's reference librarian. "Every day you've helped at least one person to find the information they needed," explained Cynthia Garrick, reference coordinator at Yakima Valley Regional Library. "There's also an element of the treasure-hunting kind of thing."

June Thurston, the library's former director, agreed that the chase for the information was a thrill in itself. "It gets to be like a puzzle—you really want to find the answer," she said.

According to John Naisbitt in "Megatrends," 65 percent of us work in information jobs, and information is "not the only resource, but the most important . . . We now mass produce information the way we used to mass produce cars."

When Garrick received her master's degree in library science, she had three specialties from which to choose: reference, cataloging and children's work. Now, Garrick explained, that list includes "information science," which makes increased use of computers.

Today's librarian is part of a vital, growing trend, not at all like the old stereotype. "They think it's a dull profession," said Muriel Adams, now retired, "but it's the most exciting thing you can possibly do."

The Yakima library's reference desk answered about 77 questions per day in July. They have what Garrick describes as a "good" standard collection of reference works, with extra emphasis in the areas of high demand, such as agriculture.

"I think what people don't realize



Cynthia Garrick, Yakima Valley Regional Library reference coordinator, has wealth of knowledge at her disposal

is the level of sophistication in many areas," Garrick added.

Questions most often deal with cars, pets, home repair, medication, the law and consumer information. Not all questions are mundane,

however, as Garrick explained. "I'm usually surprised at the diversity . . . We get all sorts of different subjects and degrees of complexity."

Over the past year, the librarians have fielded questions like these:

What is the history of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"; how do you build a dog sled; what is the origin of the term "pinky" for the little finger; how many people have died by the death penalty; when was punctuation first

used; what is the correct spelling of "th-th-th-th-that's all, folks!"; what is the term for the study of monkeys; and everybody's favorite: What are the names of the Seven Dwarfs?

"It's one of those odd ones," Gar-

rick said of that last question. "A couple of times a year, at least, which is frequent for that kind of question."

During the centennial, Frances Hare, archivist at the Yakima Valley Museum and Historical Association, was also kept busy by information seekers. Hare recalled one group of women that came in. They wanted to give a tea exactly as it would have been given in the late 19th century. Hare researched and compiled information from old cookbooks, etiquette books and clothing. "They proceeded with that," she said, "and I guess they had their tea party."

Some questions can prove frustrating. Thurston recalled one woman whose daughter was nearing her 10th birthday. She wanted to present the girl a poem about turning 16 as a present. "Well, I looked and looked," Thurston said, "and I couldn't find anything. So I wrote her one. She was so pleased that she invited me to the birthday party."

Library work can occasionally involve dealing with complaints, as Adams related. "There was one book — 'Catcher in the Rye' — that somebody complained about. She was just incensed over it — came in and threw it on the desk — and she'd only read about half of it. I told her to go home and finish the book. She came back and was very, very grateful."

Almost by definition, a reference librarian would have to be persistent, curious and enjoy books and people. Cynthia Garrick had one other motivation: She believes, as did Thomas Jefferson, that a free flow of information is necessary to develop an informed citizenry.

"That's what it's really all about," Garrick stated. "One of the main functions is to have information from various points of view and on various subjects so that people can be informed about whatever decisions they make."

"That's what a democracy is about," she added. "That people have access to this information."