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AMERICAN PRINTING HOUSE FOR THE BLIND, INC. (1858 - 1961)

A Century of Service to the Blind

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A paper given before The Filson Club, April 3, 1961

I welcome the opportunity tonight to tell you something of the American Printing House for the Blind of Louisville, Kentucky, because I have found that comparatively few residents of this community know much about the work that this institution is carrying on.

So that you may know the nature of the American Printing House for the Blind, I should like to tell you that it is the oldest national private agency for the blind in the United States, having been founded over 103 years ago on January 23, 1858, and is today the largest publishing house and manufacturer of special devices for the aid of the blind in the world. It is unique in that, on the one hand, it is a segment of industry, manufacturing products solely for the use of the blind, and employing the best and most efficient methods of industrial production, and, on the other, it carries on its business on a strictly non-profit basis. It also holds a singular position in the field of work for the blind in that, not only is it the textbook printery for the whole United States, but the materials that it produces are determined, not so much by the Printing House itself, as by the special needs of blind people and work in their behalf. Truly, the growth and development of the institution has reflected its interdependence with the growth and expansion of the field, particularly so in the case of the education of blind children.

This reflection of growth and expansion of work for the blind in the United States began with the very founding of the Printing House. Historically, the first attempts toward the amelioration of the blind

anywhere in the world are always the establishment of schools for their education. Upon the establishment of such schools, one of the first needs to arise is a source of the special type of textbooks and appliances needed by blind students. Kentucky was the third state to establish a school for the blind in 1842. In the beginning, each school attempted to develop its own printing department, with a view to embossing the books (usually by hand) and manufacturing the appliances necessary for the instruction of its pupils. Kentucky was no different except that the members of the governing Board of the school had breadth of vision beyond purely local needs. Thus, when the suggestion was made by a group of states that a national, private printing house for the blind be established in Louisville, Kentucky, to which they would all donate funds, including appropriations from their legislatures for the purchase of books for their respective blind citizens, several prominent citizens of this city, of whom three were members of the Board of the Kentucky School for the Blind, joined together to incorporate under "An Act to Establish the American Printing House for the Blind" as a non-profit institution, passed by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky on January 23, 1858. Among these were Mr. James Guthrie, President of the Printing House for the first eleven years. Mr. Guthrie was a prominent lawyer, active in state and national politics, a United States Senator from Kentucky, Secretary of the Treasury under President Pierce, and President of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad; Mr. William F. Bullock, a prominent lawyer, a member of the Kentucky Legislature, Father of the common school system of Kentucky, Judge of the Fifth Judicial District, a founder of the Kentucky School for the Blind and also the Cooke Benevolent Institution for Indigent Women, and a professor of law at the University of Louisville; Dr. Theodore S. Bell, eminent physician, writer of note, President of the Kentucky Branch of the United States Sanitary Commission, instrumental in moving the Medical School of Transylvania University to the University of Louisville, and in obtaining the first telegraphic connection for Louisville, a founder and long-time President of the Board of the Kentucky School for the Blind, and a professor at the University of Louisville; Mr. Bryce M. Patten, the first Superintendent of both the Kentucky School for the Blind and the American Printing House for the Blind, for which position he gave up a flourishing private academy at a substantial financial sacrifice.

Incorporation ot the institution was one thing; putting the Printing House into operation was quite another. Promised funds from the various states did not materialize, and the intervention of the Civil War, during which even the Kentucky School for the Blind itself was

commandeered for use as a hospital by the Union Army, delayed action until 1865. By that time, the funds appropriated by the states of Louisiana, Arkansas, and Tennessee had been remanded back to the schools in their respective states, and the funds appropriated by the State of Mississippi had disappeared altogether. Donations from the citizens of Kentucky during 1860-1865 amounted to $996, and this money, together with $1,005 from Mississippi, was used to purchase a printing press, type, etc., and to get the project into operation in 1866, in rent-free space provided by the Kentucky School for the Blind, with the first publication a book of fables for children. Additionally, on June 3, 1865, the Kentucky Legislature was prevailed upon to authorize an annual appropriation to the Printing House of $5.00 per year for each of its blind citizens, based on the report of the United States Census, and it was basically this money, accumulated over a period of years, which provided the funds for the erection of the original main building in 1883. Agents were also hired to solicit funds, particularly in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Illinois, Ohio, and Missouri; in May, 1871, the National Association of Publishing Literary and Musical Works for the Blind joined the Printing House and turned over several thousand dollars worth of finished stock to it; thus, by the early 1870's the total resources of the institution, including presses, type, stock, and funds due from the State of Kentucky and from auxiliary boards and individuals in other states, amounted to $40,000.

With all this apparent financial growth, however, the institution was still not truly national in character, only a few states providing funds for the purpose. About this time, the idea of Federal financing gained strength, although a movement to secure Federal aid to promote the printing of books for the blind had developed much earlier.

In the late '60s, a bill was introduced in Congress to found the American Printing House for the Blind and the University for the Blind, to be located in Washington, D. C., but it failed to pass. It was not until 1876 that the educational leaders of the blind, meeting in Philadelphia, appointed a committee to prepare an appeal to Congress for a grant for the maintenance of the American Printing House for the Blind. On March 3, 1879, a memorial and a bill, substantially in their original forms, were adopted by Congress as the Preamble to, and the Act of 1879 "To Promote the Education of the Blind," respectively.

The adoption of this Act by Congress provided a perpetual trust fund of $250,000, to be invested in United States interest-bearing bonds, the income from which, at 4 per cent, would amount to $10,000 annually. In 1906, anticipating that the original $250,000 bond issue

would soon mature, and with United States bonds then paying only 2 per cent interest, Congress changed the authorization act to a direct $10,000 appropriation to the Printing House, to be made annually in perpetuity.

The passage of the Federal Act was designed solely to provide a permanent source of supply for the special materials needed in the education of our blind school children which cannot be obtained from commercial sources because of the relatively small demand for each item. To this end, it was therefore written into the law that all materials supplied out of these funds must be "manufactured at" the American Printing House for the Blind, and, by inference from the non-profit status of the institution, no materials should be manufactured by it which could be purchased from commercial sources, just to make them available through the Federal appropriation. Further, the law required that the money appropriated was to be used solely for the cost of labor and materials to manufacture the books and apparatus needed in the education of the blind, plus a proportionate cost of the overhead of the institution, including management and equipment. Again, by law, no part of the grant was to be used for the erection or leasing of buildings to house Printing House operations for any purpose.

The administration of the Federal funds provides, in effect, that the American Printing House for the Blind shall act as a channel through which the United States Government serves the individual states, and through them our blind children. Allotments of credit are made the schools for the blind and the state departments of education, against which they send in orders for materials listed in Printing House catalogs up to the amount of the quota allocations. Cash payments are also accepted. The Printing House itself, however, does not tell any school or department of education what it may purchase, and any school or state department of education may order special materials manufactured for the use of their pupils within the limitations of the facilities of the Printing House and the quota credit or cash they may have to pay for such books and appliances.

The original Act of 1858 of the Commonwealth of Kentucky created a Board of Trustees consisting of seven citizens of Louisville. The Federal Act of 1879 provided that the superintendents of all the public educational institutions for the blind in the United States should by Trustees ex officio of the Printing House, to act as agents of the Federal government in governing the affairs of the institution, and the Kentucky Charter was amended in 1880 to conform with this provision. Today, the Printing House is administered by a Board of Trustees consisting of an Executive Committee of seven citizens of

Louisville, successors to the original incorporators, and the ex officio Trustees. No member of the Board, either local citizen or ex officio Trustee, receives pay for his services or for traveling expenses to and from meetings. The officers of the Board consist of a President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer elected annually; and a Superintendent, elected biennially by the Board, acts as the paid executive of the institution. Annual meetings are held in Louisville in the fall of each year.

During the early years of its existence, financial woes were not the only problems which beset the institution. Much of the slow growth during the first sixty years can well be attributed to the considerable confusion and uncertainty among educators of the blind as to the best system of embossed printing. Unfortunately, almost from the outset, four systems of embossed print had been developed and introduced into different schools throughout the country. The result was a "type fight" which lasted for more than a generation, and which incited feuds among workers for the blind which were as violent as those of the Kentucky Hatfields-and-McCoys. The necessity of reproducing the same books in a multitude of types kept costs up and production down, and the waste was a serious drawback to orderly growth and efficient production, not to mention what it meant in the way of a dearth of literature for the blind. Clarification of the situation did not come until 1918, when a uniform system of Braille notation was officially adopted for the blind of the entire United States. This system was the invention of Mr. Louis Braille, the blind graduate of and teacher in the school for the blind in Paris.

Upon the adoption of a uniform system of Braille, the Printing House was forced to discard its large catalog of embossed plates and printed stock in the discontinued systems, but the impetus to rapidly build up a complete catalog of Braille books gave a renewed surge to its activities. Faced with this huge program, the already great inadequacy of the $10,000 annual Federal appropriation became even more serious. At the time of the passage of the Act of 1879, only 2,180 pupils were being educated in our schools for the blind, but by 1917 (only one year before the universal adoption of Braille), this number had increased to 5,640, and the per capita allotments were down to less than $2.00 per student per year, with a single small reader costing $2.50 for a first-grade child. Accordingly, at the request of the Trustees of the Printing House, Congress amended the original Act to make possible an additional annual grant of $40,000 "To Promote the Education of the Blind."

Just how enervating had been the 60-year type-fight became immediately evident, for, with the settlement of this vexatious question,

the whole focus of work for the blind began to change. In the field of education, attention was turned to the need for suitable and adequate tangible apparatus, such as writing devices, dissected maps, and mathematical aids; two-side, or interpoint, printing was demonstrated as feasible, thereby cutting printing costs in half; workable Braille codes for the representation of music, mathematical, and other scientific notations were adopted for use in the United States.

The 1930's witnessed an unprecedented increase in mechanical and technical progress. The Braillewriter, analogous to the ink-print typewriter, which had been invented many years before, was put into manufacture on a production basis; a more highly contracted system of Braille, which reduced reading and printing space, was adopted for the entire English-speaking world; and Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph, which he himself had prophesied would be used for this purpose, was adapted for the production of books for the blind—the so-called Talking Book. To make available these new aids in sufficient quantities, and at the same time continue the necessary production of Braille books and the older types of apparatus, more funds were required. Once again, Congress was called upon for aid, and on August 23, 1937, there was approved a third amendment increasing the Federal appropriation to a total of $125,000.

Although the exigencies of World War II during the first part of the 1940's prevented much in the way of expanded services by the Printing House, it did provide an opportunity to evaluate existing services and make plans for new ones. It was at this time that a survey of the blind school population revealed that some 30 per cent of the children classified as blind could better be educated through the use of ink-print books in large type of from ¼ to ½ inches in height, than through Braille. Thus began our large-type department; and last year we produced 50,000 large-type books and pamphlets. By the 1950's, many of our older types of aids were being moulded from plastics; for the first time, plastics made possible the manufacture of world globes in relief on a production basis; and again, through the vacuum-forming process, plastic printing plates could be made from original Braille paper masters produced by hand by volunteer transcribers, so that a few copies of many more texts could be made available. I hope you have been able to see samples of these globes and the other tangible apparatus on exhibit in the adjoining room.

As we enter upon the 1960 decade, I am happy to report that some facets of industry itself are now concerning themselves with the problems of providing literature and special materials for the blind. As examples, may I say that the era of automation has arrived at the Printing House. Through the very generous cooperation of the Inter-

national Business Machines Corporation, substantial funds were made available by them, and a group of their engineers, together with selected personnel from the Printing House, spent several years in the application of the principles of automation to the machine translation of ink-print to Braille. This revolutionary process is now a reality. Braille notation is now being programmed for a 704 Computer which provides the IBM cards to direct the automatic writing of Braille plates on an electronically-driven stereograph machine which was developed by the Printing House. In a different sphere of endeavor, the Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, in cooperation with the Field Foundation, has contracted to underwrite, at a cost of $115,500, the publication of THE WORLD BOOK ENCYCLOPEDIA in some 160 large Braille volumes—the first encyclopedia to be made available to the blind. Both projects are in active production: The first Braille book produced through the IBM machine-translation process has just been published; and the printing plates for the first quarter of the encyclopedia have been completed.

Perhaps more important to the whole field of education of the blind than technical advances has been the sudden impact of a doubling school population. Actually, by the mid-40's, school registrations had been dwindling for several years, as the result of effective preventive medical education and care, and probably because of the low birthrate of the depression years of the '30s. Just as suddenly, however, they began to jump, and as of January, 1959, the total registrations for purposes of the Federal Act had reached 13,491, as opposed to a registration in 1946 of only 5,589—with an additional increase expected again this year. What was the cause? Not only the increased birthrate, but, more ironically, the advance of medical science had imposed a life of blindness, or near blindness, on some 16 per cent of prematurely-born infants through the administration of too much oxygen in an effort to save their lives. It took more than ten years to determine that the cause was not prematurity itself, but excess amounts of oxygen, but today we can look forward to a decreasing number of blind school children within a few years.

Meanwhile, this extra generation of several thousand blind children, the major portion of them now in the primary grades, must be educated. More specifically, the lack of capacity in the schools for the blind to take care of such a sudden influx, plus the desire of parents to keep their children at home to grow up with their seeing brothers and sisters, has provided a mass demonstration of the feasibility of educating many of our blind children in regular public schools for the seeing—provided they are given the proper additional help in learning Braille and other tool subjects, as well as parallel

books in their own reading medium, to keep them on a par with their seeing classmates. This means, insofar as the Printing House is concerned, that it now must not only provide a basic core of three or four choices of texts in each subject, but somehow must find the means to at least partially meet the need for the same text in Braille for each blind child that his seeing classmates are using, notwithstanding that there are probably some forty to sixty general publishers of ink-print textbooks for the general market, and that the textbooks they publish are revised from year to year. Sometimes, we find we cannot even get a new book into Braille before an entirely revised edition has come out in print!

As you have probably surmised by now, part of the answer was more money, and again Congress was called upon. In 1952, the Federal appropriation was increased to $260,000, and in 1956 to $410,000, and today we stand in need of a further increase, not only because of the larger number of children to be served, but because of advances in production costs. For the current fiscal year, the per capita quota allotment is approximately $30—not enough to cover the costs of a set of books for a first-grade child which must be replaced each year because of the damage a beginning Braille reader does to them. Thus, there will shortly be introduced into Congress a bill for further amending the Act of 1879 "To Promote the Education of the Blind," which will provide for additional needed appropriation, as well as a more flexible administration of the Act itself to meet changing needs in the education of our blind children.

By now, I am sure all of you are convinced that all that the Printing House does is to act as the textbook printery for the United States, and whenever it needs money to finance its operations it simply goes to Congress. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The fact is that the materials furnished through the Federal Act "To Promote the Education of the Blind" constitute about one quarter of our total operations, which last year amounted to more than $1,250,000. Similarly, the approximately 14,000 blind children served through the Act comprise only 4 per cent of the estimated 350,000 blind people in the United States. Blindness is primarily a condition of old age, more than 50 per cent of the total number of the blind being sixty years and older, and the reading needs of this age group are the same as those of their seeing contemporaries. It was for this vast group of people who lose their sight too late in life to be able to master finger-reading that the Talking Book was developed, but it was not until 1930, with the passage by Congress of the Pratt-Smoot Law, that a permanent source of funds for this type of publishing was provided. This time, however, the Printing House was not the recipient of the

funds, but the Library of Congress, which contracts with the Printing House and other publishers for the blind for the manufacture of Braille and Talking Books which are placed in 30 regional libraries for the blind for circulation to the blind by mail free of charge. For 1959, a total of $1,355,000 was appropriated to the Division for the Blind of the Library of Congress for this purpose.

General publishing for the blind has always been a part of the work of the Printing House. Records show that as early as 1883, volumes of THE BIBLE were being produced in Louisville for the American Bible Society, and that several years before that it had started publication of the weekly *International Sunday School Lessons* for another agency. But the lack of a uniform type harassed the publishers of general literature for the blind just as it did the educators. It was the decade between 1930 and 1940 which first witnessed any real expansion in publishing for the blind. Prior to that time, practically all books were largely intended for educational purposes, plus THE BIBLE and a few religious magazines. The settlement of the type question and the adoption of a more highly contracted system of Braille in 1932, the development of interpoint printing in the late '20s, and the adaptation of the long-playing phonograph record for Talking Books in the early '30s had all made the time ripe for general publishing for the blind on a large scale. In September, 1928, due to the vision and imagination of Dr. Bramlette, the Superintendent of the Printing House, permission was received from Mr. and Mrs. DeWitt Wallace, owners of The Reader's Digest Association, to publish a limited number of copies of *The Reader's Digest* in Braille each month for school children at the residential schools for the blind. These Braille editions of *The Reader's Digest* created a tremendous interest not only on the part of the school children, but also many adults, and shortly thereafter the Printing House undertook, by direct mail, a public solicitation for the purpose of supplying this outstanding monthly magazine on a national basis to the blind. Mr. and Mrs. Wallace were extremely generous with their personal contributions to this initial effort, and we also received wonderful cooperation from *The Reader's Digest* staff. From this small beginning has developed a circulation of approximately 4,000 Braille editions per month, and the generous contributions received from every state of the Union and many foreign countries now make it possible for us to say that every blind person who is really interested can receive a personal Braille edition of *The Reader's Digest.* In 1939, the Printing House produced its first Talking Book edition of *The Reader's Digest,* and this met with very enthusiastic response, particularly from the middle-aged and older blind people of this country who had never had the privilege of learning to read

Braille. Although substantially higher in cost, for obvious reasons, our production of the Reader's Digest Talking Book is rapidly catching up with the Braille edition, and now totals approximately 3,500 copies a month.

Thus were laid the foundations for the very large magazine publishing department of the Printing House, which is today one of the major projects of the institution; for, having launched on a magazine project of its own, which meant providing the necessary plant, equipment, and trained personnel, the next step was to offer its facilities to other agencies wishing to supply magazines to the blind, thus providing reduced unit costs to all. What this has meant in the way of Printing House expansion can be realized when one considers that, at the inception of *The Reader's Digest,* the Printing House was printing only three or four small Braille magazines of 100 or 200 copies each, while today, in 1961, it produces 70 Braille magazines (including 8 weeklies), 8 Talking Book periodicals, and 1 ink-print magazine (a professional journal for educators of the blind). It became obvious, some time ago, that one important blank spot in the lives of the blind was their up-to-date knowledge of current events. Aside from the capsule form of newscasts available over the radio, they had little access to what is going on in the world of today. To meet this very important and obvious need, the publishers of *Newsweek* got together with the Printing House in a joint venture that resulted in the first Newsweek Talking Magazine coming out in January, 1959. Recognizing that speed of publication was the essence for a news magazine, I am very proud to tell you our weekly production schedule. The ink-print copy of *Newsweek* is received in Louisville about noon on Monday. It then must be read by expert readers on tape; this tape is then dubbed on to an acetate disc which, in turn, is electroplated and becomes the master disc from which the subsequent records are made. All of the foregoing steps, including, of course, the proofreading, are completed between noon on Monday and Tuesday afternoon, and the Newsweek Talking Magazine is shipped on Wednesday, the same day that it is available on newsstands throughout the country. The response to this latest effort has indeed been heart-warming. The 30 regional libraries tell us that they each could use many more copies, and it is our hope and belief that we will receive from the public sufficient additional funds in 1961 to greatly increase the number of copies of the Newsweek Talking Magazine. The head of the Division of the Blind at the Library of Congress recently made a survey and found that an average of 10 blind people are now enjoying each copy of Newsweek Talking Magazine.

For the fiscal year ending June 30, 1959, a total of 589,878 Braille

magazines were issued, and these publications, together with our school textbooks, gave us a production of approximately 50,000,000 pages of Braille for that year. Similarly, 568,401 records, on both sides, were produced during the year for our Talking Book magazines, primarily the recorded editions of *The Reader's Digest* and *Newsweek*, but this figure included a number of religious publications, and excerpts from *The Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* for the Library of Congress.

Of equal importance to magazine-publishing is book-publishing for agencies such as the Library of Congress, the American Bible Society, and a myriad of other institutions, associations, and even individuals. Last year we produced 159,656 Braille volumes and pamphlets for textbooks and general literature. Of significance to the field, too, is the manufacture of appliances, such as slates and styluses (the blind man's pencil), Braillewriters, Braille paper, and so on.

I could continue to extol the work of the Printing House and its benefits to the blind—there is much, much more to tell—but I should prefer at this time to close this address with a tribute to the people who were responsible for the growth of this institution to its present magnitude for the first century of its existence.

Following in the steps of Mr. Guthrie and Mr. Bullock, as President, were:

MR. GAVIN H. COCHRAN, who served for the year 1889. Mr. Cochran, for many years, was a member of the Louisville School Board, and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Kentucky School for the Blind.

MR. ROBERT COCHRAN, from 1890-1901. Mr. Robert Cochran was a Colonel of the United States Army, who led the defeat of General Braxton Bragg in 1862; Commissioner of the Louisville Chancery Court; and organizer and Vice-President of the Louisville Trust Company.

THE HONORABLE JAMES SPEED PIRTLE, from 1902-1905; 1912-1914. Mr. Pirtle was holder of the Chair of "Law" and President of the Board of Trustees of the University of Louisville; an outstanding lawyer; Judge of Chancery Court; founder and charter member of the American Bar Association.

COLONEL ANDREW COWAN, from 1906-1911; 1915-1919. He was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Union Army and Commander of the Artillery Brigade of the Sixth Corps; a successful business man and a civic-minded citizen; Director of the National Bank of Commerce and the Fidelity and Columbia Trust Company;

President of the Louisville Board of Park Commissioners which established the Louisville park system; charter member of Associated Charities.

MR. JOHN WATSON BARR, from 1920-1941. He was an eminent lawyer; President of the Fidelity Trust Company; President of the Fidelity and Columbia Trust Company; President of Cave Hill Cemetery Company; Alumni Trustee of Princeton University; Trustee of the University of Louisville.

MR. CHARLES W. ALLEN, from 1942-1954. Vice-President and General Manager of Belknap Hardware and Manufacturing Company; civic leader; founder of Louisville Community Chest; President of the Louisville Chapter of the American Red Cross, and, with Mrs. Allen, donor of the building and land now occupied by the Louisville Red Cross.

Equally impressive is the roster of superintendents of the Printing House, of which there have been but six, all coming from the ranks of the superintendents of schools for the blind:

BRYCE M. PATTEN, 1870-1871. Noted above as a founder of the Printing House.

BENJAMIN BUSSEY HUNTOON, 1872-1919. As Superintendent of the Printing House and the Kentucky School for the Blind for nearly fifty years, Mr. Huntoon undoubtedly made the greatest contribution of any one individual to make this institution what it is today. He was a gifted scholar and teacher, an inventive genius, and an able administrator.

SUSAN B. MERWIN, 1920-1923. Devoted teacher of the blind; Superintendent of both the Printing House and the Kentucky School for the Blind.

E. E. BRAMLETTE, PH.D., 1924-1929. Eminent scholar and teacher; received his doctorate from the University of Heidelberg, Germany; former Superintendent of the Texas School for the Blind.

A. C. ELLIS, 1930-1947. Able administrator and teacher; former Superintendent of the Texas School for the Blind.

FINIS E. DAVIS, 1947- . Mr. Davis came to us from the Arkansas School for the Blind in 1947. The contribution that he has made during these fourteen years can best be brought out by the fact that measuring either in production units or

dollar volume, our scope of usefulness to the blind has approximately trebled in this period.

The responsibility for the policies and the general administration of the Printing House is vested in seven trustees, all citizens of Louisville. These trustees are: Messrs. Charles W. Allen, Jr., J. McFerran Barr, Charles R. Bottorff, William C. Dabney, Mark Ethridge, John B. McFerran, and George W. Norton, Jr. To these able trustees and administrators, and to the loyal and devoted members of the organization, are due the very existence of the American Printing House for the Blind and the prominent position which it now enjoys. I salute them!