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And They Were There-Reports of Meetings- Delegation of U.S. Librarians Visits Cuba

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And They Were There — Reports of Meetings

U.S. Librarians Visit Cuba

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Delegation of U.S. Librarians Visits Cuba Report of the First Meeting Among Librarians, Cuba-- United States, September, 1999

Report by **Lynne Lysiak** (Appalachian State University,
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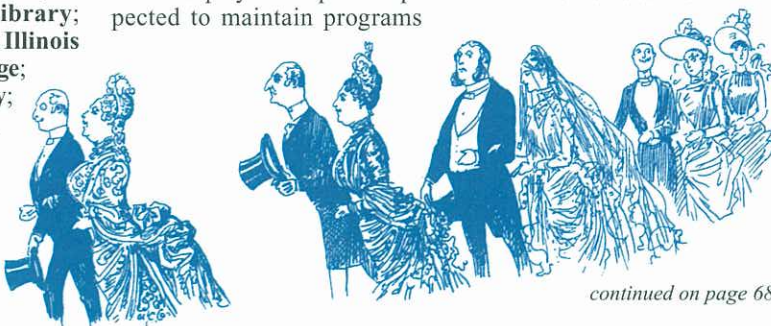
On September 11, 1999, a delegation of U.S. librarians sponsored by U.S. Exchanges arrived in Havana, Cuba for a first meeting between Cuban and U.S. librarians hosted by the **Biblioteca Nacional José Martí National Library of Cuba**. The group represented a broad background of U.S. librarianship. Members of the delegation were: leader **Tom Wilson** from the **University of Houston**; **Dannelle Crowley**, **San Antonio Public Library**; **Carlos Delgado**, **UC Berkeley**; **Allan Lanham**, **Eastern Illinois University**; **Laurie Linsley**, **Seminole Community College**; **Lynne and Robert Lysiak**, **Appalachian State University**; **John McManus**, **Pearland High School (TX)**; **Carolyn Meanley**, **University of Houston**; **Rachael Naismith**, **Springfield College**; **Kenna Noone**, **Seminole Community College**; **Derrie Perez**, **University of South Florida**; and **Terry and Ruth Walton**, **Lee County (FL) Library System**.

Having flown in from Mexico, the delegation was greeted at Havana's International Airport by **Eliades Acosta Matos**, Director of the **Cuban National Library**, who introduced himself to each delegate and distributed the agenda for the week. The group met with Cuban librarians at the **National Library** for working sessions on three days, visited the library program at the **University of Havana's School of Social Communication**, and the **Technical Training School for Library Personnel (Escuela de Técnicos de Bibliotecas)** in Havana during the ensuing week. A professional translator, as well as students from the **University of Havana's School of Foreign Languages** were provided to facilitate communications.

In the aftermath of the Spanish American War, American General **Leonard Wood** served as governor of Cuba. He was responsible for reforming the educational system, and issued a U.S. military order to create the **Cuban National Library** in October, 1901. The Library occupied a number of homes over the years, and in 1957, it moved to its present eighteen-story facility on the **Plaza de la Revolución** in Havana, funded by a sugar tax. The building was projected to accommodate forty to fifty years' growth, but was filled rapidly in the early years after the 1959 Revolution.

The **National Library** falls under the auspices of the **Cuban Ministry of Culture**. The

current Director, **Dr. Acosta**, was appointed in 1997. There has been some recent reorganization, and the Library is now divided into six basic divisions: economic management, public services, promotions/development, public libraries, technical processes including automation, and research. The network of public libraries in the country falls under the jurisdiction of one of the **National Library's** divisions and is further divided into 13 provincial libraries, and below, municipal and branch libraries employing over 3,600 librarians, technicians and other personnel. According to **UNESCO**, Cuba enjoys the highest literacy rate in the hemisphere. After the Revolution in 1959, a concerted effort was made by the government to improve the literacy rate and maintain it. Public libraries play an important part in that effort and are expected to maintain programs



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and activities to promote literacy in the society.

As of September 1, three distinct levels of service were identified and prioritized for the **National Library** to maximize access to the collections: professional researchers, professionals, and students. Public libraries will be required to utilize these levels as well by December, 1999.

While touring the Library we saw only a small percentage of its three million holdings spanning six centuries. There is a small, circulating collection of some 75,000 titles that has its own card catalog. Those items circulate for fifteen days and there is a two-item limit. Current reading is available by the **Minerva Club**, which charges a small fee to belong. A children's room, and a limited music area permit access to materials. Other than those areas, stacks are closed and noncirculating. Library holdings include some twenty-six thousand maps, over two hundred thousand photos, and over eleven thousand posters that were integral to communicating with the populace during and immediately after the Revolution in 1959. ILL is available, and a union card catalog is maintained of journal holdings throughout the country.

Perhaps the most intriguing collection was the rare books area, containing, amongst other items, over two thousand items from the 15th to 17th centuries. We saw priceless world class treasures, including hand-drawn Spanish navigators' maps from the 15th century.

The physical conditions within the building were appalling from a preservation standpoint. The building is open to the outside, so that temperature and humidity, as well as pests, are virtually impossible to control. Some staff areas have air-conditioning, and **Dr. Acosta** hopes to move forward with completing more staff areas by year's end. Overall, though, it is almost impossible to completely seal this building to accommodate air-conditioning. And even if this were possible, sporadic electrical outages such as

we witnessed while we were there would render this only a partial solution. Working conditions are cramped, often windowless, and for the most part hot and humid.

With limited resources, it is no surprise to find that automation is developing slowly at the **National Library**. For a staff of 375 people, there were 39 PCs used for staff activities. The week we visited, the first public access microcomputer was installed for word processing for researchers. There are no other public access computers. The largest and looming automation task is the retrospective conversion of some three million items, with no apparent fiscal support to aid that effort. The Library uses the **UNESCO**-distributed **ISIS system**, and has this last year's acquisitions accessible via



ISIS. Meanwhile, the Library's systems staff is moving forward with Web development, and has a site available at <http://binanet.lib.cult.cu>. In bridging the technological gap caused by an unconverted collection, access to holdings can be gained by researchers consulting the Web page and emailing reference librarians about the

collections. The reference librarians then check the card catalog and email results back.

BINANET is the libraries' network used to communicate between the provincial libraries and the **National Library**. Internet access is available to staff. The Cuban government is the only ISP, and as much as we could determine, filtering of sites deemed pornographic or of sensitive political nature does occur. Email is a norm and the preferred method of communication, and most people at the **National Library**, at the **Ministry of Education**, and our student translators at the University all had access to it.

The **Cuban National Library** is looking for collaborative efforts with sister libraries. The acquisitions librarian is actively seeking journal exchanges, and while these take some time to effect, they are dependable and do eventually make it to this country. Books are not covered by the U.S. embargo, so donations are permitted, actively solicited and very much appreciated. We were given a list of desired topics while there. Not surprisingly, anything having to do with Cuba or Cubans, by Cubans, reference works, bilingual dictionaries, and recent scientific and technical works in English or Spanish top the extensive list of needed materials. All members of our delegation brought books to donate to the **National Library** and collectively we gave hundreds of books. Our group is working to find an expeditious and hopefully inexpensive method of delivering donated materials to the Library.

The biggest problem is a lack of resources to develop and modernize. The building is burgeoning with materials, but has few recent acquisitions due to lack of resources and difficulty in obtaining materials. Even the most mundane items such as pens, pencils, and paper are in short supply and are needed.

This was a fascinating and interesting trip. Our Cuban colleagues were warm and welcoming and eager to tell us about their libraries, their collections, and services. We had many vitally interesting conversations. The delegation returned home committed to helping our peers in Cuba and is now working on various projects to that end. Other librarian delegations to Cuba are planned for this coming year, sponsored by different groups.

A number of photos of the delegation and our Cuban colleagues can be viewed at <http://www.angelfire.com/tn/librarians>. For further information on any of the above, including donations, please contact any of the members of our group, or **Lynne Lysiak** at lysiakld@appstate.edu.

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