

EDITORS' NOTE

On 31 August 1976 Nettie Lee Benson was honored in ceremonies at the University of Texas at Austin. Her contributions to Mexican history and historians were reviewed by Dr. Romeo Flores Caballero, with gratitude further expressed in a letter signed by several eminent Mexican historians. Recognition of the library-related aspects of Professor Benson's career were extended in remarks by Mary Ellis Kahler, Chief of the Library of Congress Latin American, Portuguese, and Spanish Division. To join in appreciation of Professor Benson's important work, LARR is pleased to present the following abridgment of Dr. Kahler's talk.

NETTIE LEE BENSON AND THE LATIN AMERICAN COLLECTION

*Mary Ellis Kahler
The Library of Congress*

Nettie Lee Benson can be said to be without an equal and truly in a class by herself. She and the collection which today bears her name are widely known. Admired and respected as a builder and administrator of a collection that has become a standard by which others are judged, she is known not only as a librarian but as a teacher, an unfailing source of information about Latin American library materials, and a scholar of the history of Mexico.

Her persuasive powers and effectiveness of expression have been proved by her ability to secure the gifts and funds that have guaranteed the continual enrichment of the collection with which she is associated; her firm belief in the value of the library resources necessary to support a great center of Latin American studies has helped to convince university administrators that it was necessary to build and maintain a comprehensive Latin American collection; and the acquisitions budget and the quarters she has managed to secure for what is now the "Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection" are the envy of librarians working with similar area collections. Dr. Benson has been no amasser of library accessions for the mere sake of providing numbers that proud administrators can quote. She has the true bibliophile's concern for the variant edition, the edition containing an author's final revisions, and the imprint that can tell us much about the history of printing. Her catalog of Martin Fierro materials testifies to that fact.

An eminently practical outlook has taken her straight to the heart of the matter in her examination and analysis of the Latin American book trade and all of the other aspects of Latin American book production and distribution. She has adopted measures that work around the deficiencies and peculiarities of systems lacking established distribution patterns and in which the traditional

rules of the market place have little or no effect. She has recognized that varying attitudes often prevail in different countries or regions and that it can become necessary to engage and enlist the personal interest of those upon whose good will the success of any acquisition transaction must depend. During extensive traveling and purchasing in 1960 and 1961, when her strenuous and pioneer efforts were laying the groundwork for the Latin American Cooperative Acquisition Program (LACAP), Dr. Benson became more knowledgeable about the local, regional, and national book trade in Latin America than some of the booksellers themselves. Her on-the-spot assessment of the book market, meticulous record keeping, and high level of persistence opened the way for LACAP's best years.

Even though LACAP is no longer in existence, the legacy of its usefulness survives. The utility of personal contacts (direct and through the mail), traveling representatives, and cooperative missions was underlined by the successes of LACAP, and a great deal of practical information was gathered and learned about the acquisition of Latin American library materials. And even in its waning days, the University of Texas remained with the LACAP program, probably and at least in part because Nettie Lee Benson believes in cooperative measures. She has been a staunch supporter of other cooperative efforts. She took a leading part in the development of the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM), and under her leadership that institution has been well represented in SALALM activities. She was its president in 1970–71; the University of Texas has been host to an annual seminar at least twice; and today the SALALM Secretariat is located at the University of Texas.

Professor Benson has been generous about sharing the resources of the collection in her charge, seeing to it that they were reported and made known in union lists and guides to Latin American collections. Even more useful to the scholarly and library community has been the publication of the *Catalog of the Latin American Collection* of the University of Texas at Austin (Boston, Mass: G. K. Hall & Co., 1975), through which information about the rich holdings of the collection has become available at other centers of study and research.

The dissertations ordered for the Latin American collection form the basis for the listing that the Latin American Studies Association uses in its program for the deposit of dissertations on Latin America in Latin American institutions. Professor Benson's personal good will and sympathy have also extended to institutions and persons south of the border, where her understanding of prevailing conditions has increased her ability to suggest solutions to problems prevalent in Latin America. She has been sensitive to Latin American needs and done her best to respond to them. The same practical outlook and willingness to share has been apparent in her efforts to make the cataloging of Latin American materials that was completed at the University of Texas available to other libraries. Through the participation of the University of Texas Library in the Ohio College Library Center network, this objective has now been reached.

If Nettie Lee Benson should need a monument or a historic marker, she has it in the form of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection. At times when funds for purchase were low, she intensified efforts to obtain material

through gifts and exchanges. Some materials, as so strongly emphasized in her LACAP reports, are available *only* as gifts or on exchange, for money will not buy them. Much Latin American material is poorly mimeographed or printed on material that looks as though it would self-destruct if held too long. It has therefore not been easy to persuade those who prepare budgets that such materials can become an important part of a region's cultural history or that they can provide the data needed for explaining the course of a revolution or the strength of a potential market. A persistent message about the need for help from catalogers, bibliographers, and reference librarians and their supporting staffs has had to be delivered; the requirements so readily perceived by librarians are not always as clearly seen by those who hold the purse strings.

Professor Benson has also been active in other closely related fields. She has been a loyal member and committee worker in the Latin American Studies Association. Her contributions to the Conference on Latin American History are noteworthy; writings in the field and her membership on the board of editors of the *Hispanic American Historical Review* are examples. She has taken part in the series of Congresses on Mexican History, has contributed to many projects concerning library resources (such as manuscript material relating to Latin America), and her papers have added to the substance of many professional meetings.

When the University of Texas established a training program for persons working in Latin American collections or as bibliographers or accessions librarians concerned with Latin American materials, once again Nettie Lee Benson became a pioneer—this time in preparing materials and in planning and teaching the courses that were to be the very heart of this special training. The collection which she has done so much to develop offered an ideal laboratory. Today it could be said that many of her pupils form an elite corps in librarianship concerned with Latin American materials. While she has not lost sight of the larger picture, Dr. Benson has at the same time never neglected the less glamorous and more tedious details that are found in any library. It is these small matters that can make or break a library procedure, embellish or mar a bibliography, or complete or fragment a run of related publications.

It is out of such concerns that she has been able to acquire her encyclopedic knowledge of the Latin American collection and to do so much for its development. Her close and intimate acquaintance with library resources and their relationship to specific topics has aided many a researcher in finding material crucial to his study. Scholars and students throughout the United States and Mexico have benefitted from her personal awareness and interest in their problems and needs.