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Bookmarks, the Lawrence Brothers, and the Cuban Connection: TLA IN MEXICO

Gloria Meraz

*Gloria
Meraz,
TLA
archivist
and
member of
the
Academy
of
Certified
Archivists,
has helped
coordinate
TLA's
work in
developing
ties with
Mexico
over the
past 11
months.*



Abstract:

For the first time in its history, the Texas Library Association reached beyond its state borders to promote reading, literacy, and the value of libraries. By special invitation of the organizers of the Eighth International Book Fair of Monterrey (IBFM), TLA connected with the public of Monterrey, Mexico during the nine day fair, held September 26 to October 4, 1998. With an estimated attendance of over 150,000 people, the fair provided a cultural highlight for the entire state of Nuevo León. The fair, an annual Mecca for book buying and selling, offered TLA a chance to bring attention to the universal need for stronger libraries and to collaborate with librarians and library school students in Mexico. The TLA thanks some librarians from Monterrey who lent their support in organizing and staffing the booth, and mobilizing the Monterrey library community, particularly our special thanks to Zapopan Muela.

Keywords: Library associations; Texas Library Association; Monterrey Book Fair.

The Background

This broader arena for advocacy signifies part of an ongoing initiative from librarians and other information professionals in Mexico and Texas to work together. While similarly motivated by the common goals of forging a culture of reading and fostering support for libraries, both groups hope to learn from one another. In particular, librarians from Nuevo León are turning to TLA as a resource for advancing professional librarianship and building a strong library infrastructure. For their part, Texas librarians are looking to Mexico for a deep understanding and rich selection of Spanish-language materials. Moreover, both groups want to establish a formal, enduring relationship that will produce collaborative projects benefiting the public on both sides of the border.

Led by the dynamic efforts of TLA's Texas-Mexico Relations Committee (TMRC) and the Centro de Información-Biblioteca del Instituto Tecnológico Y De Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM--the group responsible for organizing the annual book fair), collaboration between Mexican and Texan library and book trade professionals has yielded a wide array of projects and programs. The longest running of these ventures, the annual Texas librarians' bus trip to the IBFM, is now in its fourth year. Sponsored by the IBFM with support from the Monterrey Visitors and Convention Bureau, the bus trip allows Texas librarians to travel free to the fair, where they can select from the highest quality of Spanish-language materials and attend specially-designed courses on the literary and publishing industries in Mexico.

This spirit of collaboration draws interest from other members of the wider library and publishing communities as well. Last year, TMRC worked with Mexico's national library association, the Asociación Mexicana de Bibliotecarios (AMBAC), in providing scholarships to Mexico's top library students to attend TLA's conference in San Antonio. Texas librarians also have worked with Mexican colleagues in coordinating programs that encourage TLA members to travel to Mexico to exchange ideas with librarians working in similar areas, such as technical services. Danelle Crowley, one TLA member who participated in the program, taught Library of Congress classification to library students in Chiapas during her visit. Conversely, library professionals from Mexico, such as Armando Ruiz, have traveled to TLA's Annual Assembly and conference to help plan programs for the Texas library community.

These activities culminated at the 1998 TLA Annual Conference when representatives from Mexican and Texan libraries, the presidents of TLA, ALA and AMBAC, executives from U.S. and Mexico publishing houses, book distributors, and representatives of the IBFM met in a round table forum, "Abriendo Fronteras: Encuentro Bibliotecario y Proveedor/Opening Borders: Librarian and Bookseller Encounter." The discussion allowed participants to begin the long road toward understanding one another, working together to bring top-quality materials to Texas libraries, and expanding the market opportunities for publishers. The round table formed part of a broader TLA prerogative to bring Mexican publishers to the TLA exhibit hall and to increase the availability of Spanish-language materials to Texas librarians.

Exhibiting at the IBFM

Within this context and established dialogue, TLA accepted the IBFM's invitation to participate in the Monterrey Book Fair. The IBFM intended this effort to highlight the

work of professional librarians in advancing the public's interest in a literate and educated society. TLA set three fundamental priorities to achieve this goal and build a foundation for future exchange: 1) continue the momentum of collaboration by advocating reading; 2) reach out to the community of Mexican librarians by working with them to promote the ethics and skills of library professionals; and 3) connect with the Mexican public by involving them in a discussion on libraries.



Bookmarks

Of TLA's three priorities, advocating the value of reading was at once the most apparent and elusive result of the project. Armed with 10,000 bookmarks featuring quotes on the power of books and reading by Mexican writers, representatives at the TLA booth had no difficulty getting across the theme: "Read for Your Life" (TLA's new PR campaign), which was translated on the booth banner as "Vivir--Leer." Video footage, public service announcements, and pamphlets reiterated the theme in promotional material throughout the booth. Not surprisingly, the public approved whole-heartedly of the effort to promote reading. Their comments were recorded in a guestbook at the TLA booth: "Leer es el alimento del alma" (*Translation: Reading is the nourishment of the soul*); "Leer es echar a volar la imaginación y viajar a través del universo" (*Translation: Reading is setting to flight the imagination and traveling across the universe*); and "Si no se lee, no se es" (*Translation: If one does not read, one cannot be*).

Yet, despite this intellectual enthusiasm for reading, members of the Mexican public as well as Mexican librarians concluded that Mexico, for the most part, does not have a culture of reading. One university professor of the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León said that many students in the *facultad* portion of their education (equivalent roughly to an undergraduate degree in the U.S.) read only required textbooks and rarely move beyond fundamental materials. One Argentinean newspaper reporter, who has lived in Monterrey for two years, discussed the reading patterns he has noted in the public. "They read only novelas," he said with dismay. "They read them until the pages are practically worn away. Instead of trying something new, they stay with the kinds of books they learned to read as children. They stay at exactly the same place without ever feeling left behind by a stronger public sentiment," he observed. Another person, a publisher working for the University Press of the Universidad Autónoma de Mexico stated that, even in Monterrey (the city generally considered the most educated and affluent in Mexico), the majority of people attending the book fair were there to see and not to buy. To prove his point, he conducted a quick experiment at the booth. He counted the number of people strolling the aisles at the fair carrying purchases. "See," he directed, "there are many people here, true, but how many of them have actually bought books?" The impromptu sampling revealed less than one in every nine adults held purchases.

While this inertia is frustrating to many in Mexico, it makes sense given other economic and political turmoil, particularly the recent devaluation of the peso. The prohibitive expense of books in general coupled with a struggling public library system make finding reading material a significant problem. Book prices at the Fair were comparable to prices at a commercial store in the U.S. In a country where library school students

pay roughly the equivalent of 55 U.S. dollars for a semester of full-time study (and that rate is taxing for them), the priorities of what to buy are clear. For many, books are luxury items. Compounding the problem, public libraries in Mexico have virtually no money for collection development. Most consist of small collections in such poor condition that the materials are almost unusable. Of the roughly 6,000 libraries in Mexico, only a few hundred function, even in the most basic of terms, as proper libraries, confided a former member of the ministry of education. While universities and a few premier state-sponsored libraries do offer high caliber services and materials, the public remains generally isolated from that world of books. As the Argentinean reporter concluded, "without books to read, engendering a culture of reading becomes near impossible."

Despite this harsh environment, those attending the fair demonstrated an optimistic willingness to consider the problem and identify possible solutions. Although uncertain how to instigate large-scale change, the majority of people visiting the TLA booth asserted a need to actively promote reading in all aspects of life. More than any other point, however, they all uniformly addressed the need to have more reading materials available. A truth made obvious, through declaration and implication, is that a culture of reading relates inextricably to a strong public library system. TLA's presence at the book fair prompted individuals there to consider this link and gave them, many for the first time, outreach on reading outside a school or library setting. As one woman noted, "Es un primer paso." It is a first step.

The Lawrence Brothers

The second priority TLA established for its presence in Monterrey concerned the need to work with Mexican librarians to promote professional librarianship. In preparation for the event, TLA contacted librarians in Monterrey, all the schools of library and information science throughout Mexico, ALA, the three schools of library and information science in Texas, and the Library Science Collection at the Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC). TLA aimed at combining the resources of all these groups in a united front. The event, TLA hoped, would provide a collaborative forum for librarians on both sides of the border. Library schools in Mexico responded enthusiastically to the proposal. Although most could not send formal representative due to the long travel, the coordinators of the schools wrote that they found the prospect of working with TLA both exciting and important. Hugo Figueroa of the Colegio de Bibliotecología for the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, for example, stated a keen interest in collaboration and hoped that the Monterrey project was the first in a series of forums that would bring the Mexico and Texas library communities together.

These groups participated in various ways. Foremost, several library school students from the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León volunteered their time to help staff the booth and meet the public. They worked long hours, passed out bookmarks with unwavering smiles, and answered the public's questions about where to find books and how to search for information. Also, librarians from Monterrey lent their support in organizing and staffing the booth. In particular, Zapopán Muela, Sonia Araceli Hernández Acuña, and Blanca Laura Muñoz Oviedo each played a crucial role in mobilizing the Monterrey LIS community. On the American side, ALA, the TSLAC, and the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of North Texas, School of Library and Information

Sciences provided educational and promotional materials. While all the informational contributions helped draw in the public, one item in particular peaked a large and unexpected interest.

ALA's "Read" slogan poster featuring the Lawrence Brothers of TV fame proved to be the booth's single most popular item. Teenage girls stopped by the booth in droves and, by unknowingly slowing down traffic, helped vendors snag a few more customers. The only problem with the poster came at closing time the last day. In answer to the common request to give away the poster, I informed all interested teenage girls that the poster belonged to the first claimant at the fair's close. Sure enough, 9:00 p.m. the last day, six teenage girls converged at the booth. The winner by half a pace, Ana Lucia González, amended her entry in TLA's guest book: To "Leer es viajar con el pensamiento," she added, "y con chavalos bien guapos!" (Translation: Reading is traveling with thought and with really handsome guys!)

Beyond helping market reading and libraries, the contributions of the various members of the library community--ALA, the library schools, and TSLAC--played an important role in showing the diverse components of librarianship. That cooperation served to exemplify the benefits of a strong professional community. Both the resources allocated to the booth and the commitment by those members to shared goals made an important impression on the library community in Monterrey, who marveled outwardly at the advanced level of advocacy and communication within the U.S. library community. Members of the Nuevo León chapter of AMBAC, for instance, expressed a desire to establish more formal contact with TLA. Although unable to participate this year, José Antonio Torres Reyes, a librarian from Nuevo León, promised that, should the project continue, he and others would establish a partnership with TLA and join the forum for professional networking in the Texas-Nuevo León region.



From the directors of large libraries and information centers to individuals running small libraries, everyone who visited the booth expressed an eagerness and impatience to raise a strong library infrastructure in Nuevo León. "What we need," said Nelly Granados, Supervisor of the Pan American School in Monterrey, "is someone to show us how to organize and who can help us be part of a network." Another librarian, thanking TLA for its participation, described the need for unity on an international level, although also acknowledging that local unity must form part of the process as well.

With very different educational backgrounds, little political support, and virtually no mechanism for collaboration, most library workers have labored largely in professional isolation. The positive and urgent response from the library community in Nuevo León demonstrates a real welcome to TLA's first out-of-state role and an a promise of a burgeoning partnership. For both TLA and Nuevo León librarians, the momentum seems in perfect sync, which begs the question: Why now?

The answer lies somewhere in a timely fusion of critical components. On a broad level, the steady push to keep pace technologically with the rest of the library world has caused a more urgent need to professionalize the field, at least within academic settings.

Lagging behind, Mexico now faces many of the questions that reshaped the library profession here in the States in the 1980s. On the local side, the library ranks at ITESM injected vigor into the Mexican side of the equation. One of the most nationally-prestigious universities in Mexico, ITESM has long sought to offer top services and resources in all of its educational components. The heads of the library, Miguel Arreola and Armando Ruiz, embarked on an ambitious agenda to improve teaching and learning resources. Part of this effort included nurturing an active library network for professionalization and cooperation. Toward this end, they reached toward TLA and offered a commitment to joint projects. The timing could not have been better.

The Texas Mexico Relations had been working already to bring together library professionals from both sides of the border. Members like Nancy Cunningham, George Gause, and Virginia Haynie Gause maintained professional connections with librarians in Mexico, including Arreola, Ruiz, and other members of AMBAC. Soon, librarians from Texas and Mexico banded together in a series of joint programs, the librarian's bus trip to Monterrey for one. These efforts resulted in a growing desire for a more formal structure between TLA and librarians in Nuevo León, including discussion at Annual Assembly concerning a TLA chapter or district in Nuevo León.

The Cuban Connection

The third of TLA's priorities concerned making contact with the public. Participating in the fair established an effective means to offer various aspects of library service and engage individuals in a conversation about libraries. On the most immediate level, TLA was able to help people by answering reference questions. As the only "bibliotecarios" listed in the program, people naturally assumed we were there to help them find books--books for purchases at the fair, books in Monterrey, books from the U.S., and books from all over the world. Equipped with a directory of publishers exhibiting at the fair, some pertinent U.S. addresses and web sites, the Mexican library students' knowledge of Monterrey sources, and a spirit of library service, we answered an average of 25 reference questions a day. The question most often asked most was how to find books from the U.S. Many asked if there were any way to establish some lending program to permit people in Monterrey to have access to U.S. libraries.

The second most frequent category of question was education. Students, in particular, wanted to know about U.S. universities, entry procedures, SATs, TOEFLS, GREs, financial aid, and programs of study. The library school packets available at the booth proved an enormous draw. Most people were disappointed, however, that the packets contained only information on library schools and not on more university-wide programs. Students and teachers repeated a need to have access to study materials for U.S. tests, entry requirements, and contact information for various large universities, especially from those states with large Hispanic populations. Through the list of web sites and addresses, we managed to answer most questions or provide contact information. Clearly though, the public remained hungry for information on educational program--and not just in the U.S. Several questions concerned educational programs (library and otherwise) in Mexico. If the booth had been designed as a center for information on U.S. and Mexican schools and had been promoted as such, the number of visitors at the booth would have increased substantially given the large university environment in Monterrey and the general desire to access the U.S. educational system.

Our overall mission to inform, in fact, proved so important that our booth neighbors, once they learned who we were and what we were doing, decided to help us pass along the word and get people thinking about libraries. Our strongest support came from a surprising source--the Cámara Cubana del Libro, in essence, the Cuban Chamber of Books. Located directly across from us (the irony lost on everyone but the Cubans and we at the TLA booth), the representatives of the Cuban publishers eyed our ALA pamphlets featuring the Statue of Liberty somewhat dismissively at first. But after one full day of faithfully alternating turns with the sound (them playing Cuban dance music and we playing library stories on our monitor), we finally arrived at the conclusion that the other appeared trustworthy. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. I learned about Cuban poetry and they learned about bibliographic instruction. Not a fair trade you say? As the saying goes, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." By the end of the fair, los Cubanos (as they identified themselves) were passing out our bookmarks, getting people to sign the TLA guestbook, and promising on a stack of Cuban novels to wear their new TLA t-shirts in Havana. The decisive moment came late in the fair when I heard Guillermo (the head of the Cuban representatives) describe the TLA booth as "los bibliotecarios del publico"--the public's librarians.

Along with introducing aspects of library service, TLA wanted also to engage the Monterrey public in a dialog about the role of libraries. We welcomed the chance hear individuals' perspectives. By giving people a forum to voice their opinions, we hoped to bring individuals closer towards recognizing a personal stake in the development of libraries. Overwhelmingly, people expressed a great respect for the concept of the library; although simultaneously, most described actual community libraries as tokens of a bigger and unfulfilled ideal. Aware of this contradiction, librarians and members of the public alike discussed the need to improve conditions. Ultimately, however, they all struggled with the grim realities of an unfavorable economic and political environment. Interestingly, instead of expressing apathy, they spoke animatedly about their hopes for a stronger educational system and demonstrated genuine openness for change and collaboration.

What we heard most often concerned the desire for better materials and more libraries. Both librarians and members of the public described limited and often deteriorating collections that simply cannot provide people with a viable means for obtaining current information. With the exception of the academic community, which has access to university libraries, the public agreed that the only way to get materials was by purchasing them (an option that most could not afford), making cumbersome arrangements to trace materials, or getting along without the specific materials sought. Aggravating this problem, many people identified a fundamental dichotomy in the use of libraries. In general, people who described themselves as library users stated unequivocally which type of library they used, either academic or public libraries--but not both. Unlike here in the States, where use of one tends to promote use of the other, in Mexico, social and educational differences have led to a profound distinction between libraries and the types of people who use them. Particularly for those not a part of the academic community, materials seem definitely off limits. True or not, the perception of this line undermines a global view of libraries and signifies a further barrier in creating a cohesive library infrastructure that addresses the needs of both the public and library workers.

A Changing Landscape

The landscape for library work in Mexico represents a complex portrait of mixed, often incongruous elements. While many in the country feel that Mexico lacks a culture of reading, people there crave more libraries, books, and services. In a similar contradiction, librarians increasingly ask for professional unification in the face of a long-standing hierarchy and separatism within the library community. Both the public and library workers are caught in a damaging cycle, wherein limited support, resources, and cooperation yield conditions which further undermine work toward collective improvement. Although ready for change, the public and library community realize they must first grapple with these issues. The heart of the difficulty lies now in finding and implementing effective strategies that address these particular needs.

Though no group on either side of the border underestimates the complexities of the situation, the collaborative work between Nuevo León librarians and TLA has sparked hope for many in the community. As universally stated at the fair by librarians and members of the public alike, outside support is welcomed because it renews energy and offers a means to access (and learn from) a system that is working toward similar goals. While TLA and librarians in Nuevo León continue to strengthen and define this relationship, one thing is certain: both share a stake in the educational well-being of region. As TLA and Nuevo León look beyond their traditional vistas, they are finding fertile ground and a committed partner in shaping the future of these two connected communities.

[TLJ Table of Contents](#)  [TLA HOME](#)