



CARL MILAM

Time to Reflect

on a career worth remembering

By CAROL J. ROBINSON
'59journ

THE local librarian may receive a gold watch for 50 years of keeping the dusty book shelves stocked, the fines collected and the reading room quiet. There may even be a certificate of appreciation from the city council for a career well spent. But very few librarians can expect to be decorated by European royalty, to make *Who's Who in America*, to receive honorary degrees, to become internationally respected in the field, to have a vital part in the workings of the United Nations.

Yet this is exactly what happened to an Oklahoma farm boy named Carl Milam, '07ba, who found his vocation in the University library and stuck with it for 47 years.

Carl Milam started his career in 1903 as a student assistant in the O.U. library under the late Milton J. Ferguson, '01ba, '06ma, and retired in 1950 as director of United Nations Library Services in New York and Geneva. In the meantime he had served 28 years as executive secretary of the American Library Association, directing its growth into a prominent, influential organization both here and abroad.

Born October 22, 1884, on a farm in Harper County, Kansas, Milam was a small boy when his family made the run into the Cherokee Strip and took a farm near Newkirk. He entered the University of Oklahoma in 1903, where he studied English with Vernon L. Parrington and worked in the library, first in old University Hall, then on two floors of the Carnegie Building—the women's gymnasium was in the basement.

He attended the New York Library School in Albany, then spent a year as assistant in the Purdue University library, before taking on the secretaryship of the Indiana Public Library Commission in 1909 at the phenomenal salary of \$125 per month—the salary which would enable him to marry the girl he had met at O.U., Nell Robinson, '09ba. Thirty-six new public libraries were established in Indiana under Milam, and legislation was obtained which gave the state's library system a basis for expansion for years to come.

In Birmingham, Alabama, Milam faced an even greater challenge than his Indiana job had presented. As director of the Birmingham Public Library, he headed a staff of three in a small, dingy room on the top floor of City Hall. The library's income was \$10,000 a year; 40,000 books lined its shelves. In five years circulation was up 100 per cent and two years later the budget was \$25,000. Six suburban branches had been opened.

Milam's energy and ability and his success in Birmingham did not go unnoticed,

and soon he was receiving offers of more lucrative jobs in business. But Milam had chosen his field and outside offers failed to attract him.

With the coming of World War I, Milam spearheaded a new project—establishing camp libraries, supplying returning servicemen with vocational information and consultation services. Finally his involvement with the War Service Committee of the American Library Association—first as assistant to the director, then as director—forced him to leave Birmingham for Washington, D. C., and New York.

In 1919 the ALA made him its executive secretary and launched Carl Milam on the career in which he made his greatest contributions to his profession and one which brought him international recognition.

A COLLEAGUE from Birmingham days recalls that the year after Milam took the ALA job, signs at the national convention, reading "Welcome ALA!" were thought by many to mean "Welcome, American Laundry Association." Milam set out to see that this mistake was never repeated.

When he left ALA in 1948, the membership was nearly three times what it had been in 1919; the budget was 16 times as great. The publishing activities of ALA had been greatly expanded. The association had taken on an international flavor. Milam was instrumental in forming the International Federation of Library Associations in Edinburgh in 1927. When Nazism began to rise in Europe, Milam initiated his own brand of warfare by obtaining funds for a Books for Europe campaign—stocking European libraries with volumes intended to interpret democratic ideals and to show what comes out of democratic societies.

Milam's interest in Latin America began to grow. He had a hand in establishing the Benjamin Franklin Library in Mexico—the second American library in a foreign country. He convinced the State Department that libraries could be strong agencies of international understanding.

Then in January, 1947, Carl Milam got a taste of working with the United Nations. The State Department invited him to serve as consultant on libraries to the United States delegation to UNESCO, Milam came home from the Paris conference, where his proposals for the UNESCO library efforts had been accepted, full of enthusiasm and hope for the potential value of UNESCO.

It is not surprising that Carl Milam's name was at the top of the list when the United Nations decided to do something about its somewhat floundering library ser-

vices. Upon recommendation of Luther Evans, then Librarian of Congress, and Arthur Sweetser of the UN Information Department, Milam was offered the job of reorganizing the UN library. Milam had planned to retire in 1950 but agreed to take the UN job until that time.

The central library had been steadily losing ground in the three years since its establishment by the UN, and the various departments had resorted to setting up their own collections and hiring separate staffs. Milam put an end to all that by drawing up a definitive policy for the library service with the help of many of the higher officers in the Secretariat. The recommendations were adopted by the General Assembly. One of the unusual features of the report was the decision that the library should not try to own every book and document that might be needed by the Secretariat or the delegations—that it should depend largely on inter-library loans for the old or very unusual materials. Following Milam's principles, the UN hopes to keep the library at around 400,000 volumes through a fairly drastic discarding policy.

The budget had to be increased—and it was. The international staff needed some weeding and many additions. Eventually Milam convinced the UN personnel office to adopt the policy of ranking and paying librarians on the basis of education, training and experience exactly as it did for economists, personnel employees and other professions—in spite of the fact that librarians could be hired for less.

At the end of Milam's contracted two years with United Nations, he was invited to stay on, but his wife's serious illness made it impossible for him to accept. They returned to their Illinois farm near Barrington, to grow iris and apples and Christmas trees. Mrs. Milam died in 1956.

CARL MILAM describes his retirement activities as "not many—gardening, some fishing, much correspondence, a little writing." The writing he refers to is in the form of a book on librarianship which he and a collaborator are compiling and editing for publication by the American Library Association.

The idea for the book has been on his mind for some years—to present library work as the challenging, rewarding profession he always found it to be. And certainly no one could be found to express these sentiments more convincingly than the man who has lived them from the day he stepped into the cramped quarters of a territorial university library until the day he left the imposing Lake Success home of the United Nations.