A country collection

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The Shire of Augusta-Margaret River is at the southwest corner of Western Australia, with a population of approximately 7900, and growing at a rate of almost four per cent per annum. It comprises two towns, Margaret River and Augusta, each with a library, and four hamlets (Cowaramup, Gracetown, Witchcliffe, and Karridale). This coastal rural paradise is now famous for its surf, caves and wineries, but was primarily developed by the timber industry and dairy farming. Augusta was first settled in 1830, and Margaret River town was established in 1913. Significant development of the district was achieved by a post-war group settlement scheme in the 1920s, and again by land settlement schemes in the 1950s.

The local history collection comprises forty-eight published histories and biographies, journal articles and papers, oral history tapes and transcripts, council minutes and rates books, shire archives, flora photographs, pamphlets, newspaper clippings, and even a thesis. It is currently scattered among the two libraries, the Augusta Oral History group, Augusta Historical Society Museum, Cowaramup Hall, the Shire Archives, and in memories. The monographs are catalogued, but the remainder of the material is very loosely organised into chronological sequence, and stored in files and cupboards. As members of the Library and Information Service of Western Australia system, most of our stock is part of the state collection, but we would like to see the majority of the local history publications become part of our own stock. To achieve this, and to make the loose-leaf and pamphlet material more accessible, we will need to apply for external funding.

The challenge for a 'newcomer' librarian who has only lived here for a year or so, is to learn who to talk to, where the historical material is, and to earn the trust of the community to house and organise it. The fifty-year history of the library includes its beginnings in the foyer of the Roads Board Office, to 'the shed' next door to the bakery, then the purpose-built library of 1955, to our new building in December 1996. The greatest advantage of acquiring a new building is the space which enables us to provide the local history collection with its own shelves and study area.

(top) The Margaret River Library as it was in the first half of the century; and the Margaret River Library in its latest form (December 1997)

We must now decide what should be included in the local history collection, how it should be gathered and, most importantly, what staff resources can be allocated to its management. The tyranny of distance and the scattering of materials are our most pressing problems. Staff resources have always been lacking for special programs. Our 1997–98 Information Services Business Plan outlines programs to develop the Margaret River Library as a meeting place and research area for local history; to continue working with the Augusta Oral History Group to make their tapes and transcripts available for loan; and to organise revised storage that will ensure correct preservation of the shire archives. We also have plans to implement inter-generational story-sharing workshops with a view to the children and their mentors working with our talented resident storytellers to produce local history memoirs for the collection.

The greatest challenge, in the short term, is the urgency of gathering material while it is still available and promoting the willingness of the library to develop and manage the collection. To achieve this we must ensure appropriate storage for materials while we gather the staff and financial resources to process them, but continue to make them available for research as required. My responsibilities include the libraries and record-keeping for the shire, and this will mean my studying an extension unit in archives management in 1998. We have the greatest gift of all, though, in both staff and community with enthusiasm and a willingness to accept the challenge. ∎