The year 1947 marked the 100th anniversary of the founding of an important forerunner of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. To be sure, the group of enterprising citizens who founded the Young Men's Mercantile Library and Mechanics' Institute in July, 1847, were not the first who had attempted to fill a cultural need in the community. As early as 1813 the short-lived Pittsburgh Permanent Library Company had been organized; and in 1825 certain business men had opened a library for the use of apprentices. The latter at least entitled Pittsburgh to a place in the list of trade centers that had been trying to get into the swim since the establishment of the Apprentices' Library in Boston in 1820. Unfortunately it was on a small scale, and its influence was narrowly limited. But the Young Men's Mercantile Library and Mechanics' Institute, an amalgamation of several small groups, contributed so much to the cultural life of Pittsburgh that it deserves an honored place in the history of the city.

During its first year the association, under the presidency of Samuel L. Wickersham, numbered about sixty members. After one year in temporary quarters it moved in September, 1848, to a three-story building on Fourth Street between Wood and Market owned by F. H. Eaton, whose trimming store, "undoubtedly the most extensive establishment of the kind West of the mountains," occupied the first floor. The association had the entire second and third floors. Here they remained until 1870, when Library Hall, their own newly erected building at the northwest corner of Penn Avenue and Barker Alley, was ready for occupancy.

1 An article contributed by Dr. Goodfellow, associate professor of English at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pittsburgh, as a by-product of his researches in the field of American literature, with special reference, in this case, to noted authors and lecturers brought to Pittsburgh in the third quarter of the nineteenth century.—Ed.
In 1848, the second year of its existence, the association had 253 members and a library of 600 volumes. By 1851, an important year in its history, it had 500 members and 1,477 volumes. Thereafter its membership appears to have been rather erratic. For example, there were 308 members in 1858, 457 in 1859, and 44 in 1860. But according to the annual report for 1871, the almost incredible number of 414 new members had been added during the preceding year. The library itself enjoyed a steady growth, the number of volumes as of January 1, 1871, being 10,242. And evidence of its increase in popularity is found in the circulation figures for 1858, 1860, and 1870, respectively: 1,785 volumes, 4,052 volumes, and 31,017 volumes.

According to the first of the annual reports of the Young Men's Mercantile Library and Mechanics' Institute to be found in the Carnegie Library, that for the year 1859, the annual membership fee was then $4, life membership $35. A peculiar form of discrimination, suggesting that now affecting the charge for fishing licenses in some states, permitted unmarried ladies to join for only $2 a year. Honorary members might be elected by the board of directors.

The rules governing the borrowing of books differed little from those in effect in libraries today. Members might keep a book for two weeks, and renew it for one week, except for new books, which were on a one-week list and were unrenewable. A fine of ten cents a week was imposed if a book was overdue; and if the book had not been returned within three months, the borrower must pay the fine plus the value of the book. No reference book was to be taken from the library.

Although the Young Men's Mercantile Library and Mechanics' Institute did not provide the public with a free library, it served a definite educational purpose in the community. One valuable function that it hoped to perform is mentioned in an article in the Pittsburgh Morning Post for Monday, April 21, 1851.

The Young Men’s Mercantile Library and Mechanics’ Institute, we feel confident, has now taken a firm and prominent stand among the meritorious and praiseworthy institutions in our midst. It has won its way through many difficulties and obstacles to the confidence and respect of the community. It has worked nobly for its present position, and for the flattering prospects, which now begin to dawn upon it, and it certainly deserves well from all who desire the advancement of knowledge and morals, who regard
with anxiety the prosperity of our city at home and who wish to make for it a reputation abroad. . . . They (the members) intend, also, if encouraged and sustained by the community, to have frequent courses of Lectures, both literary and scientific, delivered by men of celebrity and talent.

Throughout the second quarter of the nineteenth century, one of the most valuable contributions to the cultural and social life of the American population as a whole was made by the lyceum. In Pennsylvania, says Leland Baldwin in Pittsburgh, the Story of a City, a system of lyceums, organized in 1836, lasted "at least until 1846," and brought to Pittsburgh audiences such noted authors and lecturers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Ward Beecher, William Lloyd Garrison, Horace Greeley, Horace Mann, Lucy Stone, George W. Curtis, Bayard Taylor, and Thomas Hart Benton. Actually it was the Young Men's Mercantile Library and Mechanics' Institute that was responsible for the appearance of at least five of these speakers. Beginning in 1851 with a series of lectures by Ralph Waldo Emerson, a full course was presented annually.

In a letter dated February 1, 1851, Emerson informed a committee consisting of Charles McKnight, William Hersh, and David Wilkins that he could be in Pittsburgh by the third week in March to open a course of six lectures which would extend over a fortnight and for each of which he would receive forty dollars. He mentioned that he had just been preparing "a series of topics on 'The Conduct of Life,'" and named specifically "Power," "Wealth," and "Culture." Apparently the committee found his terms and his topics acceptable. But when, after a wearisome journey across the Alleghenies, he was pressed to give a lecture the very evening of his arrival, he replied that he had preliminary statements to make "which required a little faculty and time to make ready," and begged to be permitted to open with an old lecture rather than with one of the new series. Accordingly he read that night—March 20—his lecture entitled "England." Then followed "Laws of Success" on March 22, "Wealth" on March 25, "Economy" on March 27, "Culture" on March 29, and "Worship" on April 1. Because of the inclusion of "England" it was necessary to drop "Power" from the list originally announced in local papers. At any rate, it was Emerson's Pittsburgh audience that first heard some of the lectures which were later published under the title The Conduct of Life.

According to advertisements, the lectures were given at the New
City Lecture Room on the first floor of the Lafayette Building on Wood Street and began at 7:45. The price of a course ticket for an individual was two dollars; for a gentleman and a lady, three dollars. Single tickets could be obtained at the door for fifty cents.

The Morning Post reported on the day following the first lecture that the room had been crowded to capacity; that the lecture was a brilliant and beautiful production; and that Mr. Emerson uttered no commonplace thoughts, dealt in no commonplace language, and presented ideas that were bold, fresh, original, and striking. The notice concluded with the following laudatory comment: "The Young Men's Mercantile Library and Mechanics' Institute deserve great credit for the good taste they have displayed in securing so talented and distinguished a Lecturer to appear before a Pittsburgh audience." And on March 22 the same paper commented enthusiastically on the success of the opening lecture, expressed the hope that other literary institutions would follow the example set by the organization that had sponsored it, and concluded with the advice: "We would suggest to our merchants and others who are in the habit of keeping their stores and shops open to late hours in the evening, that they would find it to their interest to let the young men in their employ off as early as possible, so as to enable them to attend these intellectual feasts." Another paper, the Saturday Visiter, stated that this course of lectures, the first attempt of the sort in Pittsburgh, would constitute "something of an era in the history of the Iron City, whose fame has hitherto been acquired chiefly by the products of her manufactories."

Through both its library and its lyceum program the association continued to serve Pittsburgh throughout the third quarter of the century under the presidencies of such men as John Finney, Jr., Robert E. Sellers, James McAuley, Felix Brunot, David Ritchie, William Frew, John R. McCune, and Joseph Albree. In 1870 it moved into its new quarters with high hopes. But by 1877 it was in such serious financial straits that the only way out was through reorganization. The annual report published at the close of the year 1878 by the Pittsburgh Library Association, which had replaced the Young Men's Mercantile Library and Mechanics' Institute, tells the story. "A year ago," explained the managers, "we found your library in debt . . . to an amount exceeding $6,500.00 with expenditures more than receipts, having but little pros-
pect for a brighter future.” It had been decided that the best means of raising funds would be a public entertainment; and accordingly the ladies of Pittsburgh and Allegheny came to the rescue. The proceeds from their “Bazaar of Nations,” held in Library Hall, were $5,001.09. As a result, the treasurer showed “a larger expenditure for books, binding and necessary improvements than in former years” and also “a balance of cash on hand of $530.20, this being sufficient to pay all the liabilities, and place the Library entirely out of debt.” The librarian reported 15,099 volumes in the total collection and a membership of 1,200 active, 26 life, and 4 honorary.

With the organization of the Pittsburgh Library Association, the Young Men’s Mercantile Library and Mechanics’ Institute passed out of existence. But for the work as well as the faith which had been invested by its public-spirited members over a period of nearly forty years, there would have been no foundation on which to build—and no library building. Through books and lectures the institute had provided hundreds of citizens with mental food of incalculable value. As an agency for the diffusion of knowledge, it had done its bit toward injecting come intellectual leaven into the loaf of American democracy.