

THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT'S EFFECTS ON LIBRARY SERVICE: A CONSULTANT'S PERSPECTIVE

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In 1979, I was hired as a public library consultant for seven small town libraries in Iowa. Two years later I was hired by the Viking Library System in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, to work with eleven rural libraries. I worked in this position for seven and a half years. Through this experience, I became a participant-observer of the rural environment and its effects on library services. To a large extent this paper is based on this experience.

All institutions work in the context of their social and economic environment. This applies to public libraries as much as to any other agency. It is important, therefore, for those who seek to promote change in libraries to understand the milieu in which that library operates.

Those who provide consulting services to rural libraries, then, must understand these libraries in the context of the rural setting. The purpose of this article is to summarize the important elements of the rural environment, and to suggest how these elements affect rural public libraries. It will also discuss how these elements affect the work of the consultant with these libraries.

General Historical Trends

Generalizations must always be tested against actual experience, and this is especially true when discussing the rural environment in the late 1980s. The news from the country over the past few years has largely been negative: the farm crisis of the middle of the decade, followed by drought in the latter part of the 80s. This was a marked contrast from the 1970s.

For the first time in several decades, the 1970s showed something of resurgence in the rural economy and population. Four and a half million people

left cities to earn a living in the country.¹ Farm prices were relatively high, and many of the young fled the troubled urban areas to try to find a quieter, more relaxed lifestyle on homesteads and hobby farms. Many older people also sought retirement homes in the country.

The 1970s "rural renaissance" only affected selected areas, however.² Areas remote from the conveniences and cultural advantages of urban life did not prosper as much as those closer to the cities. Areas without recreational attractions such as lakes or mountains did less well than those which had these advantages to offer tourists and retirees. The 1970s rural renaissance, in other words, was not a universal phenomenon.

Similarly, the bad news of the 80s has not affected all communities equally. Communities that offer "the amenities" have not suffered as much as the areas that were heavily dependent on farming or mineral extraction. Indeed, many of these more attractive communities have not suffered at all, but have shown both economic and population growth.

The Rural Decline. In spite of the above caveat, it is not unreasonable to say that the twentieth century has been a difficult time for America's rural areas. The 1880 Census demonstrated that changes were occurring in the rural environment, when it reported that for the first time the percentage of the U.S. population living on America's farms had fallen below 50%.³ Over the intervening decades the number has continued to fall rapidly, until now only 2% of America's population lives on farms.⁴

This decline has many causes, but perhaps the most important has been the development of agricultural technology. The invention of McCormick's reaper, the farm tractor, and the self-propelled combine each meant that less people were needed to farm the same number of acres. Farms, therefore, grew larger. While it was not unusual for farm families in the 18th century to work as little as forty acres, the average size farm had grown to 155 acres in 1935, and to 433 acres by 1982.⁵ Similarly, once the movement west no longer provided an ever increasing supply of land, the growth of farm size was only possible by the removal of some farm families to other occupations. Thus, while in 1960 there were four million

farms in the United States, by 1982 the number had dropped to 2.4 million.⁶

An improved transportation system also contributed to the decline in the rural population. With the coming of the railroads and then the automobile, rural people became less dependent on their own small towns to provide them with the goods and services they needed or wanted. The mail order catalog cut into the profitability of running the small town general store, and the automobile made trips to larger cities more convenient. Small town businesses found themselves in competition with the chain stores located in larger communities, stores that could beat their price because they could buy in volume. This competition, combined with the declining farm population, closed the doors of many small town businesses. This, in turn, led the small town to be even less attractive as a place to shop, as fewer and fewer goods were available in it. Caught in this vicious cycle, the smallest towns became little more than a gas station or a wide spot in the road.

Improved transportation and communication led to another factor in the decline of rural America. The younger generations who visited the metropolis to shop or get a higher education or as part of their military service came to see it as a place of excitement and opportunity. The World War I song "How You Going to Keep Them Down on the Farm, After They've Seen Patee?" applied just as much to American cities like Chicago or Kansas City or even smaller towns, like Peoria or Mankato. This was particularly true as the opportunities in farming became less and less plentiful.

Rural Population Traits

The general decline in rural America has created a rural population that is significantly different from the population of America as a whole. The four most important differences are that the rural population is older; it is less educated; it is poorer; and it is socially and politically more conservative.

Age. The 1980 Census showed that the number of people aged 65 or older represented 12.3% of the non-metropolitan population as compared to only 10.9%

of the population as a whole. In counties that contained no town larger than 2500 people, the rate climbed to 13.5% of the population.⁷

Equally important with the number of people classified as aged, however, is the median age of the population. The median age is the number of years at which half the population is older and half younger. The 1980 Census indicated that the median age of the rural farm population was 35.8 years, and for towns between 1000 and 2500 in population it was 31.8 years. This compared to the national median age of 30.0 years.⁸ By 1988 the median age for rural people had increased to 33.1 years, compared to 32.2 for urban people; the median age for people living on farms had risen to 38 years.⁹ In 1920, the median age for farm people was less than 21 years.¹⁰

As stated above, one cause of this difference has been the migration of the young from rural areas to the cities. A second cause has been the attractiveness of some rural areas to retirees. Typically, the cost of living in rural areas is cheaper, the pace is slower, and the crime rate lower than in urban settings. These factors make rural areas attractive to people living on relatively fixed incomes and who find the pace of change in the modern American city uncomfortable.

The older population in rural areas can have several important affects on rural library service. First, older adults typically have developmental needs that differ from those of younger adults and children, and these needs may be reflected in the kind of library materials in which they will be interested. As adults prepare for and enter into retirement, they frequently become more interested in leisure time activities, money management, and health issues. Religion may become more important to some older people, and frequently older people look for ways to assess and evaluate their lives. They may find historical materials, both fiction and non-fiction, dealing with the period of their own life span to be valuable to them in this process.

In addition to the different interests older adults bring to the library, their economic situation may also affect their willingness to pay for governmental services, such as libraries. Many older people live on social security payments and

pensions, and this money is an important part of the rural economy. In nearly half of Kansas' counties, for example, 44% of personal income was derived from transfer payments, such as social security, or property income.¹¹

Income derived from these sources is relatively fixed, and therefore older people may be more resistant to tax increases to pay for improved library services. Older people are also more likely to vote. It therefore is vitally important for the rural library to effectively reach out to this politically powerful part of its population.

Education. As might be expected with an older population, the level of education in rural areas is lower than in the nation as a whole. The 1980 Census showed that 60.4% of the rural population had graduated from high school, compared to the national figure of 66.5%, and while 16.2% of the general population had four years or more of college, only 11.0% of the rural population had this much higher education.¹²

We must be very careful in interpreting these figures, however. The rural population is older, and previous generations were less likely to attend school through the secondary level. This accounts for part of the difference. Secondly, "education" in census terms is only measured by years of schooling. Many older people may not have been able to continue through high school, yet have educated themselves through independent reading or attendance at informal educational activities, such as those put on by agricultural extension or community education programs.

Still, it is not completely inaccurate to say that the rural population may place less value on educational agencies, such as libraries, than the population as a whole. It is not at all uncommon when talking to rural librarians to hear of a mayor, city council member, or county commissioner who has stated with evident pride that he had never read a book, and it had not hurt him. It is less likely that one will hear this kind of statement from urban officials who must answer to a more cosmopolitan constituency.

Typically, however, many of the rural people with whom I have worked expressed more of an ambivalence toward educational agencies than an active

hostility to them. Most believed that it was essential that their young be well-educated. At the same time, they realize that it is education that might lead the young to move away, seeking the greater opportunities for which school has prepared them. Rural people are also suspicious of the cost of education, seeing much in the schools that they consider wasteful or unnecessary.

How then should rural public libraries deal with these feelings on the part of their public? First, they need to avoid being trapped into being considered merely educational. They must work not to be seen as a adjunct to the school system. They can do this by providing practical information that can have an immediate impact on individuals and the life of the community. For example, two of the most useful services provided by rural libraries are tractor repair manuals for farmers and training videos for volunteer fire departments. In both of these cases, the services meet a vital economic or social need of the library's target population.

A second way that libraries can meet the ambivalent rural feelings about education is to be well managed. Writing long-range plans, presenting well thought out budgets and annual reports, developing written policies, and having its financial records independently audited each year will help the library establish itself as a well-run, efficient organization. While this will not allay all criticisms, it will blunt them and can help win the majority of the population to the library's side.

Poverty. Despite the fact that poverty in the United States is usually pictured in its more urban settings, the 1980 Census showed that rural people were more likely to be poor than their urban counterparts. The rural population below the national poverty level was measured at 13.2%, while the nation as a whole had a 12.1% poverty level. It should be remembered that this measure was taken during a more prosperous period for rural people. In 1986 the poverty rate for farm residents stood at 19.6%, but in 1987 it had declined dramatically to 12.6%.¹³

What causes poverty in rural areas? Certainly, the relatively unstable economic conditions have something to do with it. Farming and mining tend to

run in boom or bust cycles. When the bust comes people lose their farm or are thrown out of work. Many then leave for the city, but others stay on, unemployed and poverty stricken.

The lower level of education also contributes, since a higher percentage of rural people have fewer skills which can be transferred from one job setting to another. Thus, when a poorly educated farmer or miner must seek a different means of support, he frequently will not fare well in the competitive market place.

Traditionally, public libraries have been middle class institutions, and their services have been directed toward the middle class. Whether small libraries can ever become major players in helping the poor is questionable. Still, there are many services that can be provided. Literacy programs, providing space for outreach services, such as the Women, Infant, Children (WIC) nutrition program, and providing community information and referral all can be positive services for the poor.

Conservatism. Summarizing some findings of the sociology of rural communities, Susan Rafferty stated: "Rural communities tend to be more traditional in moral orientation, less accepting of minority rights, more ideologically religious and conservative, more likely to oppose the intervention of federal and state governments, and are generally more satisfied with their present life-style."¹⁴

The rural library consultant must understand the conservatism of the rural environment both as it affects the library itself, and the library's approach to change. On the one hand, the conservatism will be reflected in the kind of support the library can expect from its community. There typically will be a greater emphasis on volunteerism rather than in providing more tax money for special projects or even basic services. The library may also be seen as the special province of women because it fits into the traditional role for middle class women as the "cultural guardians" of the community. Old and inadequate library buildings may be kept for their "historic" value. Censorship attempts from conservative religious groups may be more prevalent.

As a governmental agency, the library may also be suspect in some minds. State, federal and even local laws may be regarded as mere technicalities passed by politicians who do not understand rural problems. It may be considered perfectly legitimate to ignore these laws if obeying them would be inconvenient. Federal and state programs for libraries may be viewed with suspicion.

The consultant must remember that rural librarians and library board members probably share some or all of these attitudes. These people are part of the community in which they live, and they are not immune from its values, even if they reject some of them. When consultants suggest a change, then, they must look beyond the actual change that they seek to what this change may represent symbolically to those to whom it is proposed. Even a simple change such as moving from self-produced to purchased catalog card sets, for example, may be seen as counter to the conservative self-reliance in which a librarian or a library board believes.

Consultants, therefore, must be aware of the symbolic implications of any change they are promoting. They should also recognize that in asking a librarian or a library board to make a change, they may be asking them to challenge long and deeply held community values, values which the librarian or board members themselves may never have before questioned. When this occurs, empathy and patience are vital. Changes under these circumstances will not occur overnight.

I was once told by an experienced, rural minister that major changes in rural areas typically take at least five years to accomplish. In my experience this has been true. In my fifth year as a library consultant with the Viking Library System in Minnesota, the changes I had been suggesting for a number of libraries began to occur. The remarkable thing about this was that the suggested changes were in many different areas: one library began a major weeding program, another moved from a volunteer library to one with paid staff, and a third began a building remodelling. In each case I had been actively promoting the change for at least three years.

Rural consulting programs, then, must be seen as long term endeavors. LSCA projects that put a rural library consultant in place for a year or two are

not likely to make much difference in the long run. Nor should new consultants or their employers set unreasonable goals for major changes within the first three or four years of the service. During this period it is best to evaluate a consultant's performance in terms of trust building and smaller technical achievements, rather than the major long-term changes that are envisioned. New consultants that are moving into established consulting programs will be able to make changes more quickly, but even in these cases, there will need to be a period of building trust.

This is particularly true when the consultants are seen as representatives of the state government, or it is known that they are being paid through state or federal funds. State and federal programs are viewed with suspicion by rural people, often justifiably so. It is not unusual for state consultants to be viewed with fear. Librarians or board members may think that the consultants are there only to enforce laws or regulations of which they are unaware, or they may know that they are in violation of state law or rules, and fear that the consultant is there simply to force compliance. It may take the consultant many months to overcome being viewed in this way, and unless there can be fairly frequent contact, it may be impossible to ever completely overcome it.

A Typology of Small Towns

Thus far, we have been discussing the rural environment in a general way. In reality, the values and interests in rural America can be widely divergent. Different towns, even within a small geographical area, can be vastly different from each other. Susan Rafferty has identified six different kinds of rural communities, including: the government-trade communities, the university-professional communities, the industry dominated communities, the tourism communities, the retirement communities, and the resource-based boom towns.¹⁵ The following discussion is based on Rafferty's classification, but expands it by adding a seventh classification--the stagnant farm community. While the classifications are primarily Rafferty's, the discussion of these community types is my own, as are the implications I draw from them.

Government-trade communities. A government-trade community might also be referred to as a regional trade center. They are typically county seats, but they serve people from surrounding counties as well. Thus, not all county seats fall into this category, but only those that serve as a regional center for state and federal programs and that provide major retail shopping resources. Typically, the population of such communities ranges up from about 10,000, although some may be smaller in less densely populated areas.

It is not unusual for the libraries and librarians in government-trade communities to provide leadership to the library community in the region. Typically, the librarians have professional credentials, and will regard the library consultant as a peer rather than as a leader. Occasionally, librarians in these communities may even regard attempts to provide consulting services as an intrusion on their professional autonomy. However, they may also look to the consultant as one of the few people who understands the purpose of the library and what the librarian is trying to accomplish.

University-professional communities. Rafferty's university-professional communities might be better called college communities for it is more likely that the community will have a college rather than a university in it. While government-trade communities may also have colleges, this kind of community is distinguished by the dominance of the college in the economic and social life of the community. In the government-trade center, the college is just one of several important institutions; in the university-professional community, it is the most important institution. The size of this kind of community typically ranges up from 5000.

In university-professional community, the population will usually be better educated and more sophisticated library users. They are likely to expect more from the library, and support for the library is usually good. In some cases, however, the presence of a large college or small university library that is open to the general public may hurt the support for the public library, since local officials can feel that there is less need for a good public library if other resources are available.

Typically, librarians in university-professional communities are professionally trained, and will regard a library consultant much as those librarians who serve government-trade communities. An important issue for this kind of library is cooperation with the academic library. As an outsider, the consultant may be asked to serve in the role of go-between or arbitrator in this relationship.

Industry dominated communities. Industry dominated communities are communities whose economic life is controlled by a single company. A more common term might be "company town." Industry dominated communities can be virtually any size, although typically they range up from several thousand. To a large extent, the character of the community will be determined by the character of the industry. In rural areas the industries are usually based on agricultural products and involve relatively unskilled labor, but in some cases the industry may employ a large skilled labor or professional work force.

To a great extent, support for the library in an industry dominated community will depend on the industry. If the industry is supportive of community development, representatives of the management of the industry or their spouses will likely seek positions on the library board. In these circumstances the library is likely to do well. If the industry is not interested in the community except as a cheap place for its facility, the library will probably suffer. The library's level of support will also be significantly affected by the fiscal health of the company. If the company is thriving, the library will do better; if the company is in trouble, the library is likely to have trouble too.

Depending on the size of the community and library support, librarians in industry dominated communities may or may not be professionally trained. Whether they view the consultant as a peer or more in a leadership role will be determined by their own education and experience.

Tourism communities. Tourism communities are communities whose economies are significantly affected by the tourism industry. It is not unusual for the populations of these communities to vary significantly between seasons, and the needs and interests of the influx of tourists may be quite different from those of the permanent residents.

Tourism communities can be quite small, though they typically have at least a thousand full-time residents. The tourist season typically brings large increases to the size of the community--sometimes doubling the permanent population.

Libraries in tourist communities face the issue of how to treat tourists. It is not unusual for the library to offer its services at little or no cost to "summer people". In these cases the library is seen as one of the amenities that draws these people and their money to the community. Libraries in these situations are under pressure to meet the recreational needs of tourists, and sometimes neglect the needs of the permanent residents.

At other times, libraries may be hesitant to serve tourists, because of their transient status. When this occurs, boards may establish relatively high non-resident fees, and are more likely to focus on the library needs of permanent residents.

Retirement communities. Retirement communities can be of two types. First, there is the community that offers amenities, such as lakes, that are particularly attractive to retired people. These communities are likely to attract a fairly well-off older population--a population that might migrate at different times of the year to different parts of the country. The second type of retirement community is the smaller farm community where retired farmers may live after they leave their farms. In either case, the population of this kind of community is much older even than the more typical rural community.

Retirement communities, particularly those serving a fairly transient population face many of the same issues as in the tourism community. Since retirees typically own property, there is no question that they deserve library service on the same basis as other residents, however. Another issue that frequently occurs in retirement communities is whether "snow birds" should be encouraged to serve on library boards. Should people who will be gone three or more months each year be board members? To allow them to serve may make it difficult to make a quorum "out of season." Not to allow them, however, may cut the library off from a powerful and hard working constituency.

Resource-based boom towns. Boom towns are found in areas that are rich

in natural resources, such as minerals or forests. These are much like industry dominated towns, but more likely to experience violent shifts in fortune due to the nature of their industries. Such towns are likely to experience "boom or bust" cycles, which are dependent on world prices for the product they produce.

Libraries in this type of community may also experience the boom or bust syndrome, doing very well when the community is thriving, and doing badly when the bust comes. In this kind of community, one important library need is to find a way to provide a more stable level of service.

The stagnant farm community. This is the typical smaller community in rural America. It is a community built to serve the needs of its area's farmers. As farms grew bigger, there have been fewer people to serve, and competition from larger towns have further reduced these communities' circumstances. Typically, these towns have been slowly losing population. They range downward from about 5,000 in population. Their populations are older, and to some extent they have become retirement communities for the less wealthy.

Because these towns have experienced loss, they are likely to be conservative. Libraries in this kind of community may save large portions of their budgets, as a "rainy day" fund, even though their operating budget is pitifully small. Similarly, they may resist weeding older books, because they don't believe that they will ever be able to replace them. In some cases, they may keep a very poor library going, because to close it would represent a blow to already-wounded community pride.

Library service in these communities will be hard pressed to keep up, as it competes with other public services for a smaller and smaller amount of available tax dollars. Yet the library may also make a significant contribution to community life, if it can provide information that will help with economic development.

These libraries are very rarely directed by professional librarians, and the consultant will likely be looked to for leadership both by the staff and the board after a trusting relationship is created.

Further Diversifying Factors

Even within these general types of rural communities, a wide variety can be expected. Factors that will affect this diversity will be the geography of the community, the racial and ethnic mix of the population, the history of the community, its religious life, the number, type, and vitality of community organizations, and the quality of community leadership.

The important thing for the consultant to remember is that although rural communities may have many things in common, no two are the same. Each must ultimately be treated as an individual case.

Finding Information About the Community

When a library consultant enters a library's life, it is essential that she or he see the library in the context of the community it serves. To expect a librarian or library board to reject a strongly held community value for the sake of improved library service, for example, is not a reasonable expectation. Therefore, the consultant should spend time to find out about the library's community.

Information about any community is available from a number of sources, some formal and some informal:

Community Studies. In library schools and professional journals, much is made of community surveys or community analyses. While such studies could be very valuable, they are rarely done. This is due primarily to the amount of time such studies take to complete. Most library consultants simply do not have the time to complete such studies for all of the libraries with which they work. Similarly, librarians and library boards are rarely interested in spending the time necessary to make a formal study.

However, in some communities there are other agencies that may have put together this kind of information in a formal way. Agricultural extension offices, for example, sometimes carry out community studies. Chambers of Commerce also collect information on the community, although their reports may be colored by the purpose of attracting new businesses to the area. Such reports can be useful reading for the consultant, even though they are not directly library related.

Census Information and State Statistics. The U.S. Census provides valuable statistical information on virtually every county and city in the country. In addition to population size, information on the age, educational level, and social traits is also provided. The Census itself updates this information periodically between the national census held each decade. Much of this data for individual counties and cities appears in The County and City Data Book, which is published annually by the U.S. Government Printing Office. Other information is available in a variety of reports issued by a variety of federal agencies. State agencies also can provide valuable statistical information on rural communities. This information often is most accessible in newspaper articles and other popular media reports.

Local Newspapers. Library consultants should try to get and read the local newspapers serving their libraries' communities. Although it is true that small town newspapers do not always report the most important news in a community, they do report important public events. If nothing else, knowing the public news for a community can serve as a conversation starter, and it may open up the way to learn about the "news behind the news."

A Drive-around or Walk-around. Much can be learned about a community simply by driving around or walking around in it. The number of empty stores on Main Street, for instance, will tell the consultant about the economic condition of the community. The number, type, and name of churches may not only reveal the religious character of the community, but also its ethnic heritage. Observation of the people on the streets can tell one about the age and racial make-up of the community. Observation of businesses and traffic patterns tell much about the economic life of the community.

Observation can also tell the consultant about the deeper values of community life. For instance, once an outsider commented to me about the cluttered condition of one of the libraries I served. I asked her if she had looked around the community. Struggling to survive, and with much of its population living through the Great Depression, a strong community value was not to throw anything away. The town was cluttered with old automobiles and farm

machinery, salvaged lumber and bricks. The library's condition, which reflected the staff's reluctance to throw away old books, pamphlets, or magazines, was simply a reflection of this larger community value.

Conversation. The most valuable tool in gathering community information, however, will be conversation. If the consultant shows an interest in the community's life, people will be glad to talk about it. The librarian will be the person the consultant knows best, and therefore will usually be the most valuable source of conversational information. However, it is not at all unusual for others to join in this kind of conversation, if it is being held in the public area of the library. As the library consultant becomes more and more well-known in the community, more people will come forward to serve as community informants. This should allow for a broader perspective than could be gained just from talking to the librarian.

Conclusion

While knowledge of the general condition of rural America is a valuable tool for the rural library consultant, it is important for consultants to see the variations that exist between small towns even within the same county. As with any people-oriented job, library consultants face the challenge of recognizing individual differences while developing programs for a number of libraries that share many similarities. It is this challenge, however, that makes consulting interesting, and on those occasions when the challenge is successfully met, it is one of its most gratifying experiences.

NOTES

¹"Rural Crossroads," The Idaho Statesman, 20 August 1989. p. 1F

²Cremin, Lawrence A. American Education: The Metropolitan Experience 1876-1980 (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 470.

³Cremin, Lawrence A. American Education: The Metropolitan Experience 1876-1980 (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 470.

⁴U.S. Bureau of the Census, jointly with the Department of Agriculture, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 439, Rural and Rural Farm Population: 1988 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), 3.

⁵Rosenfeld, Rachel Ann. Farm Women: Work, Farm, and Family in the United States (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 12.

⁶Ibid.

⁷U.S. Bureau of the Census. Demographic and Socioeconomic Aspects of Aging in the United States (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 41.

⁸U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1980 Census of Population: General Social and Economic Characteristics: United States Summary (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 1-67.

⁹U.S. Bureau of the Census. Rural and Rural Farm Population: 1988, 13-15.

¹⁰"Rural America Increases in '88 to 64.8 Million," The Idaho Statesman, 14 September 1989, p. 6A.

¹¹"Rural Crossroads," 4F.

¹²U.S. Census Bureau of the Census. Census of Population, 1-71.

¹³U. S. Bureau of the Census. Rural and Rural Farm Population: 1988, 9.

¹⁴Rafferty, Susan. "Rural Society in America: The 1980s and Beyond," Rural Libraries, v. 6, no. 1 (1986): 7-8.

¹⁵Ibid., 1-18.