

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY?

by

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I believe it is useful to start this morning, not with a statement on the role of the public library, but with an interesting description of a small library written some 40 years ago by a distinguished librarian and educator, Ernestine Rose (1954, p. 76):

I sometimes think that the chief difference between a small library and a large one is that in the latter there is a job for each worker, while in the former there is one worker for all the jobs.

Rose's description followed her discussion of the public library as a unique civic institution, as an organization which varies significantly from place to place and which was then taking on new responsibilities in a "postwar world."

There is great truth and an important omission in Rose's observation, (I shall come back to that point), but in the light of the focus of this conference, Rose's statement and the context in which she posed it, suggests three important facts for us today:

1. There are more significant points of likeness among all public libraries, regardless of size and location, than differences.
2. For an individual library, the relationship between the library and its community is more important than differences in size.
3. Public libraries have never faced a more important challenge or critical point in their history.

With these points in mind, I would like to talk with you this morning about:

- ♦ The role of the public library in relation to the community it serves.
- ♦ The revolution in information and our economy.
- ♦ Access and equity issues that affect the health of our communities, states, and nation.
- ♦ The leadership needed for public library service today.

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Buildings say a great deal about the people who design them, pay for them and live in them. Today, we are experiencing a renaissance in library architecture. Who dreamed, 25 years ago, as hundreds of new public and academic libraries were being dedicated across the country as a result of Federal construction funds available through the Library Services and Construction Act and the Higher Education Act, how different library styles would be in 1992?

Today's emphasis on restoration, preservation and enhancement of grand buildings surely was not generally foreseen. (I use the term "grand" in the sense of materials, detail and style — not necessarily size, because some of our grandest public buildings are the library, the bank, the churches, the courthouse and the Masonic temple in countless small towns across the nation). Beyond restoration, who foresaw the renewed use of classical detail in such new libraries as the Chicago Public Library, the Georgetown Law School Library, and others?

Whether it is the stunning restoration of the Library of Congress Jefferson Building, The New York Public Library, or the expansion of the Richmond Public Library in Batavia, up in Genesee County of Western New York State, or the Chicago Public Library, somehow seems more appropriate today to again express our belief in the mission of our public libraries in old fashioned terms:

When years shall have passed away; when the founder
and we his contemporaries have departed... when Science
shall have realized some its proudest hope and answers have
been found to some of the enigmas which now perplex
mankind; while all the time this institution [Enoch Pratt Free

Library] has been faithful to its duty of disseminating among the people whatever is best in human thought, then let a balance sheet be struck and an estimate of this great benefaction be made up. — *James Hodges, Mayor of Baltimore at the Enoch Pratt Free Library dedication, 1886* (Kalisch, 1969, p. 12).

Together with the schools, libraries have been a staging ground for upward mobility. Here the language was learned, the culture absorbed, the 'high tech' of each age made available — to all. People came from all parts of the globe — an extravagantly rich mixture of races, religions, and languages — and they found in libraries a window on their new world and the tools to function in it — *Richard Wade, Chair of the New York Governor's Commission on Libraries*, (New York State Governor's Commission on Libraries, 1991, p. 1)..

Libraries are the granaries of knowledge, and are as necessary for growth and improvement of the mind, as granaries of corn and wheat for the sustenance of the body — *Thomas Hale Williams, Librarian of Minneapolis Public Library* (Benidt, 1984)..

Statements such as these affirm the power of ideas, books, and learning and relate them to education, prosperity and culture in a democratic society. The wonderful intaglios, friezes and inscriptions on our public buildings of the 1920s and 1930s stated these ideals even more succinctly. Much of those messages were captured in 1991 in the terse White House Conference themes of "Enhance Literacy," "Increase Productivity," and "Strengthen Democracy."

But what, in addition to succinctness, is different in 1992? It is the computer and telecommunications technology that is fundamentally reshaping our society and economy. But is it different? The libraries of a hundred years ago were built midst revolutionary industrial development and remarkable social change; those of the 1930s almost invariably included art depicting the revolution in transportation technology — those wonderful panels that show the automobile racing with the train beneath the airplane, with radio waves, power transmission lines and equipment that was transforming the world in which we lived. For more than a decade, futurists have told us that we are on the edge of an information revolution. In 1992 we feel it on almost every side. Each morning, we see in the papers and on TV the latest bulletins on the restructuring that is taking place in the U.S. workforce because of the international economy. The change today's technology is causing in corporations, govern-

ments, and society will reach even more deeply into our lives. These changes are causing administrators of every public and private sector operation to re-examine their function and future. Like those other administrators, we must look anew at the role, the mission and the future of our public library.

ROLE ITERATIONS

Academicians have extrapolated roles, mission and objectives from library history, and over the last 50 years ALA has stated and restated them in various declarations of public library standards. Robert Leigh, Director of the Public Library Inquiry, spoke of goals and objectives as serving "some ritualistic purpose in our society" (Leigh, 1950, p. 24). Some 50 years ago, people spoke of the objectives of the public library as education, information, aesthetic appreciation, research, and recreation (Committee on Post-War Planning of the America Library Association. 1943). In subsequent iterations, role statements embraced functions, focussed on materials, emphasized programs and means of serving people, and defined clientele. We have seen that ALA statements mean relatively little to the public library in North Collins, New York; or Circleville, Ohio; or Elko, Nevada until a librarian, trustees and members of the community sit down to frame their own statement of why they are operating, supporting and using their library. That phenomenon is behind encouraging local decision makers to examine their community and library in the "public library planning process" which helps them define their mission within eight roles (McClure, et al., 1987):

- Community activities center
- Community information center
- Formal education support center
- Independent learning center
- Popular materials library
- Preschooler's door to learning
- Reference library
- Research center

Many libraries, of course, operate for decades without a statement of mission. Some take pride in not having a statement of mission, a plan or written

policies. Many of these are the people who say — in an interesting combination of denial and admission — that not much has changed in our community, except that most of the stores have closed, people have gotten a lot older, and most of the college graduates have gone off to other places. In New York State, 51 percent of the public libraries report that they have long range plans in place; 83 percent report they have written policies that have been approved by the library trustees; and 87 percent report the trustees operate under formal bylaws (New York State Library Division of Library Development, 1991, p. 86). Those numbers have increased rapidly in the last three years because of a 1987-88 public library standards project and the leadership library systems are giving in helping members develop policies.

THE STATE AND LOCAL CONNECTION

Government, education and business leaders at local and state levels are concerned about the strength of the rural community, and they must be concerned: census data released last week indicate the extent of poverty, paucity of education resources, and other factors which determine the quality of rural life. Yet, aggregate state-level data obscure the differences among rural communities. Economic development and education strategists recognize three types of rural communities: rural poor, traditional middle America, and communities in transition, each with different values, socio-economic characteristics, and locus of political structure (Nachtigal, 1980, p. 39). State offices or departments of planning, economic development, education, social services, telecommunications, and transportation all have an interest in rural development.

Local people have a great deal to do in determining what kind of community in which they will live. The library director and board who do not have a keen sense of mission for their own library and a plan for improving library service to their community are not prepared to be a part of community revitalization, economic development or infrastructure rebuilding.

The library — and the network of libraries that brings information resources into the community — too often is not recognized as an important part of the infrastructure. Too often it gets a superficial acknowledgment, or is entirely un-noticed, in the plans and reports of governments and the consult-

ing bodies they engage. The librarian, trustee or public official who has in hand a clear statement of the library's mission, objectives and program is prepared to do the political work that is needed to get that recognition. Even if the report has been published without mention of the library, the librarian and trustee with a sound and persuasive plan can go to the authors and decision makers ready to show what the library is doing and can do, with additional resources and as a player in the team that is strengthening the community.

THE COMMUNITY

An ALA mission statement, or even one adopted by a much-admired library, probably is insufficient for my community. Leading experts on rural education point out that rural areas differ from one another; each rural community is unique because it reflects its own culture and forces; and local control and decision making must be a part of effective solutions for rural community problems.

Bernard Vavrek, (1991) in a briefing paper for the New York Governor's Conference on Library and Information Services in 1990, placed these principles in a library context. He pointed out staffing and planning problems facing professionals interested in rural libraries and outlined a political strategy focusing on trustee education, resource allocation and a new "standard" of professional staffing.

THE INFORMATION AND ECONOMIC REVOLUTION

A leading expert on rural education in 1988 identified 14 economic, social and political developments that impact on rural life and schooling (Stephens, 1988, p. 15). The first three are changes in the world economy, the industrial restructuring underway in rural regions, and the continued high unemployment patterns in rural areas. Four others of particular significance to library planners are the changing demographics of rural areas, the continuance of the rural personal income lag, the persistence of underdeveloped human resources, and the continuing financial crisis in agriculture. He pointed out that these factors do not have the same influence on all rural regions, and they produce differing consequences because of the diversity of rural areas.

Rural communities that can tap into the information infrastructure through telecommunications have a greater possibility of making the transition to stronger communities and dealing with the seven factors drawn from Stephens' list. One of the strategies that our Department of Economic Development (DED) uses to help small business people compete successfully for government contracts is to make government specifications available to them. They do this efficiently by engaging the State Library to expedite the sending of that information — a DED subvention to the State Library of less than \$9,000 last year helped small businesses land more than \$21 million in government contracts.

Illiteracy is perhaps the most pervasive sign of "underdeveloped rural human resources." Some small libraries have provided outstanding literacy services, particularly in the area of family literacy, which is a key factor in strengthening family and community structure. Library cooperation with education agencies and volunteer literacy organizations in publicizing learning opportunities, providing materials and follow-up to help new readers keep learning can be attractive to a community development planner. The library's potential is attractive because the planner seeks to develop an integrated program that addresses the needs of rural people who may not feel comfortable in school buildings. Economic development policy today emphasizes the quality of the workforce and recognizes the implications of a shift to an international economy in which we no longer rely on the classic U.S. assets of "labor, capital, organization, and natural resources that were appropriate from four decades following World War II" (Kraushaar and Beverly, 1990, p. 165)

In our 1987 public library standards project, many "defenders" of rural libraries (or perhaps defenders of the status quo) ridiculed the idea of expecting a small library to have a photocopier, phone, modem, and microcomputer. Yet by the end of 1990, 78 percent of our libraries had microcomputers, and more than half (54 percent) had modems. When 570 libraries last month indicated an interest in "getting connected" to NREN and NYSERNet, both public and school libraries in rural areas were well represented in that number.

ACCESS AND EQUITY

Information resources, good schools, and continuing learning opportunities for people of all ages are important components of equity and opportunity. But, in too many cases, rural people cannot access information to the same extent as people in urban and suburban areas (New York State Library Division of Library Development, 1991). Rural students generally attend smaller schools, often without the library materials and staff resources to support the school's learning program effectively. The public library and its resource sharing connections becomes important to both teachers and students. In New York, the public library systems provide consulting and support services, expertise of system staffs and the economies of scale rural libraries need to achieve equity. But more rural libraries need to develop their ability to tap local economic and human resources.

Despite paucity of resources, even some of the smallest rural libraries have found ways of providing dynamic library service by tapping the various resources in and around their community, using library system services well and applying for grants. The Dutton S. Peterson Memorial Library in Odessa in Schuyler County, NY with a population of 613, is open 34 hours each week, having extended their service by 14 hours each week through using a combination of paid staff and volunteer helpers. Like urban and suburban libraries, some rural libraries find that volunteers are valuable for more than their hours of service — they become ambassadors and effective boosters and political supporters of the library.

At the start, I spoke about an omission from Rose's description. That omission is the connection between rural and other political interests in support of libraries. There was a time when legislatures were divided into rural and urban factions. Often one house reflected rural interests more sharply, while the other reflected urban interests. Today, in many states, it is the suburban communities that have become a dominant political faction. Significant coinciding of rural and urban interests may develop — both rural and urban areas have major problems with poverty, types of neighborhood isolation and government resources. In New York, for instance, the chairs of the Assembly library subcommittee, the education committee, the higher educa-

tion committee and the speaker are all from New York City. In the Senate, their counterparts, respectively, represent suburban/rural, rural, suburban, and suburban districts.

How do the library aid interests of rural libraries and urban libraries intersect politically? Through the State's priorities for education, literacy, employment, health policy, and economic development. The rural library advocate may find that legislators from the city who are interested in libraries may relate better to the information and education needs of rural young and old than they think. And, in any case, rural advocates must make a convincing case to leaders who are elected from suburban and urban districts.

THE LEADERSHIP NEEDED FOR PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE TODAY

To improve rural library services we need leadership in articulating the role of the public library within the community and in State policy. Because public libraries are locally controlled, it must be the responsibility of local people — librarian, trustees and community members — who have the primary responsibility for doing that. We know it can be done and you can recount the examples:

- ♦ The librarian who is convinced that the library can be different and can be dynamic, and who enlists the board in changing that library.
- ♦ The trustee who returns from her first workshop ready to revitalize the library and secure a new building.
- ♦ The parent, the county judge, or the business person who helps mobilize the public support for the library.

That kind of leadership begins with a vision, develops with teamwork, and moves into action with a clear sense of mission and plans. The teamwork includes political work, salesmanship, fund raising, and community contacts.

From the state library agency, leadership is required for the trustee education programs, the fostering of community librarian education, legislation, and the library system or network development that ensures that the rural public library can draw upon wider and electronic resources.

Leadership, of course, is more than defining the role of the public library. When that role is defined and agreed to by the library and the community, it will be possible to relate to infrastructure and economic development. Plans for improving library service can also be empty — and are empty if they do not guide action, budgets, resource allocation and service decisions. They can be the means by which rural libraries play a greater role in their communities.

There is no one model for rural libraries. We should not attempt to reshape them in an urban or suburban mold — the roles a rural library selects can provide the means for access and equity, and make it a vital part of its community in an electronic information society. As the librarian, trustees and community set out to do so, it may be worthwhile to think about the advice the Business Council of New York State gave to Governor Cuomo and the Legislature early this year (1991):

Hard times these are, but hard times can serve as a crucible for making change. They can force us to recognize, as Abraham Lincoln said in the face of far greater challenges, that “we must think anew and act anew.” To think anew means to abandon the tired old idea that lies at the heart of our political gridlock that “it can’t be done.” We “can’t” provide quality government services; we “can’t” keep the state afloat without ever-increasing taxes; we “can’t” build a better future for poor and minority children; we “can’t” build a better business climate. To act anew, means to understand that we can do those things and more...Just do it!

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