

SMALL/RURAL LIBRARIES: THE CHALLENGE OF AUTOMATION AND RESOURCE SHARING

INTRODUCTION

Eric S. Anderson in an April 1987 *American Libraries* article states that:

...it should come as no surprise that small (rural) libraries have been neglected by the designers of automated systems, since they usually find themselves out of the mainstream of any library development.

According to *Library Service to the People of New York State; a Long-Range Program*, 63% of the public and association libraries in New York State are considered small libraries, serving populations of 7,500 or less.

This paper will explore the opportunities which are becoming available to small/rural libraries as they start to gain confidence in their abilities to be a viable part of the information explosion and all its ramifications. (For purposes of clarification, in this paper small/rural refers to a population served of 7,500 or less. While almost all rural libraries are small, not all small libraries are in rural areas.)

Cataloging and classification are just one component of library automation, albeit an important and essential part, as more and more small/rural libraries join forces to cooperatively build databases of their holdings. Part I of this paper will briefly describe trends and the

general direction in which small/rural libraries may be heading in the area of automation, while Part II will focus on a local project for regional bibliographic control that is currently in operation in Wayne and Ontario Counties in Western New York State.

PART I — TRENDS

Why automate? Any library manager must justify the decision to automate whether he/she oversees a large or small library. Don Beagle (1986) in an article entitled "Decision Points in Small Scale Automation" describes those justifications in two ways: problem solving and service enhancement. Problem solving aspects of automating for the small/rural library might include handling overdue snarls or clearing up a backlog of uncataloged books or materials. Service enhancement aspects might be in the areas of streamlining ordering or circulation procedures. Because of the expense involved with any level of automation, Beagle cautions the manager of a small/rural public library not to view initial decisions as being easily correctable or reversible. On the other hand he states that "to be too concerned may lead to what might be termed the surfer's syndrome: he who waits for the perfect wave can spend life treading water."

The microcomputer is a piece of equipment which has revolutionized the library world. While the cost of a mainframe or minicomputer would be prohibitively expensive, a microcomputer is within the budget parameters of many small/rural libraries. Just what could that micro do for the small/rural library particularly in the area of cataloging?

Many small/rural libraries are staffed with volunteers and/or people who have an interest in books and reading, but are not necessarily staffed with a professionally trained librarian. As a result of "tradition," cataloging in small libraries is quite often less than standard. With the introduction of a microcomputer and a suitable card catalog

software program, the staff would be able to enter data from the CIP with a resulting standard AACR2 record produced. Those who work in small libraries need to become comfortable with their micros, developing their skills with word processors, spreadsheets and databases, so that better records and more complete information is available about the holdings of that library.

Even retrospective conversion is a possibility for the small library. For example, some companies, such as Library Corporation which produces *Bibliofile*, are making bibliographic databases available for a price. Purchase of the records allows a library to match titles against their own holdings thus insuring correct and complete bibliographic records.

Bernard Vavrek, Coordinator of the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship at Clarion University, has questioned whether the use of automation and online services will eventually result in local library collections becoming obsolete. His conclusions, published in *Catholic Library World* were that "maintaining the availability of the local public library's collection of resources is strengthened rather than negated by the existence of electronic libraries" (1986). Among his reasons for maintaining local collections are the following:

1. libraries are inexpensive when compared with most online data charges,
2. access by all to local public libraries is guaranteed and protected because libraries are nonprofit organizations,
3. libraries, by means of interlibrary cooperation, locate desired material for any patron,
4. local collections permit the opportunity to creatively consider the interrelationships of resources at one's own pace, and finally,

5. the presence of a community library provides a "dimension of service that is impossible to recreate at some remote electronic level" (Vavrek, 1986).

Vavrek sees the small/rural public library as an important institution that enables a society to survive.

PART II

In order to appreciate the impact that automation and resource sharing can have on the small/rural library, I will describe a successful project currently in operation in Wayne and Ontario Counties. There are 24 public libraries in the two counties, with 18 of those identified as small libraries. There are also two academic libraries, one at the Community College of the Finger Lakes (CCFL) and the other at Hobart and William Smith College.

In 1981 five libraries in these two counties (Geneva Free Library, Newark Public Library, Wood Library, CCFL Library, and Hobart and William Smith Library) joined together to propose the funding of a study to determine the feasibility of acquiring and operating cooperatively an automated circulation control system. The study was funded by the Rochester Area Resources Exchange (RARE). RMC Consultants, Inc. (RMCCI) of Chicago, Illinois was hired to conduct the feasibility study. RMCCI determined that this shared venture was not only technically feasible, but cost effective as well.

The RMCCI study concluded that in order to implement an online circulation system, a large portion of the libraries' titles would need to be in machine readable form before public use of the system could commence. Additional funding from RARE in Spring 1982 allowed retrospective conversion of bibliographic records and library holding data to begin at four of the five participating libraries. MARC records were able to be produced from the retrospective conversion of

OCLC records since all five libraries were, in some way, OCLC participants.

By 1985 Regional Automation funds had been used to produce a COM Union Catalog in microfiche format. The COM Catalog contained entries for each item by author, title, added and subject entry. Each entry also included full bibliographic citation, the location of each holding and a call number for a total of 785,244 entries.

Seventy-five copies of the COM Catalog were distributed to each public and high school library in the two counties. In addition, 35 microfiche readers were purchased and distributed to those libraries that did not own a reader. This Regional Automation funding enabled every library in the counties — public, school or academic — to have access to a major portion of the holdings of the five largest libraries in Wayne and Ontario Counties.

When additional funds became available in 1986, a decision was made to cumulate the Union Catalog in CD-ROM format and to purchase CD-ROM players for the eight highest use sites, permitting more rapid searching of the database than is possible with the fiche format. The Regional Automation grants were also being used to convert the holdings of the smaller public libraries to a machine readable form and adding these records to the database.

At this time all 11 of the public libraries in Ontario County and eight of the public libraries in Wayne County have had the majority of their holdings converted. The goal is to cumulate the Union Catalog every six months in microfiche and CD-ROM formats, adding titles to and deleting titles from the database. The distribution of the Union Catalog has made a significant contribution to resource sharing in the two counties, and has generated a considerable amount of Interlibrary Loan (ILL) activity among the libraries. None of the libraries alone

could have ever funded a project of this magnitude. Cooperative ventures such as this are an example of what can be accomplished when small libraries work together.

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