

# **The Rural Initiative of the California State Library**

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The California State Library recently undertook a major effort to examine and address the needs of rural libraries. The official beginning of the Rural Initiative was in the fall of 1998, when Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds were committed to the project by the State Librarian of California. This is the story of how the Rural Initiative of the California State Library originated and a summary of what it accomplished.

## **Background**

I had intended to retire from the California State Library in 1998, fulfilling a commitment I had made to myself to serve twenty years in adult literacy development. Fifteen of those years would have been spent as a consultant in library development at the California State Library.

However, in 1994 Dr. Kevin Starr became State Librarian of California. He brought a new enthusiasm and sense of excitement that complemented the focus of his predecessor, Gary Strong, who had invited me to join him in establishing the California Literacy Campaign in 1984. When Dr. Starr asked me to develop the Rural Initiative of the California State Library, I agreed to stay on at the California State Library for three years.

Several rural librarians in northern California invited Dr. Starr to visit their libraries soon after his arrival in Sacramento in 1994. He visited most of the public libraries in the North State Cooperative Library System (see the map on page 18 for geographical references throughout this article) in a single trip. He saw that rural libraries were serving their communities with commitment and enthusiasm. He was also convinced that rural libraries were particularly vulnerable to further reduction of their limited funding during the devastating recession that was then occurring throughout California.

## **The Strategic Directions Initiative**

Dr. Starr returned to Sacramento determined to sponsor a "rally for the north" to help rural libraries deal with the threats they faced. The resulting project was called the "Strategic Directions Initiative" (SDI). Small grants were offered to rural northern California libraries to develop strategic plans. Consultants from the Library Development Services Bureau of the California

State Library were assigned to work with the local libraries, partly to enable the state library staff to better understand the needs of rural libraries. The prestigious consulting firm, The Institute for the Future, was contracted to provide professional expertise. Each participating library recruited local residents to help shape plans that reflected the genuine needs of the communities.

It is interesting that there is a tendency then to think of “rural California” as primarily northern California. In fact, most of California is rural. Most of the population, however, live in urbanized areas, giving people in those areas generally greater political power in Sacramento (1). During my eighteen years of flying a light plane over California on state business, I had become very aware of what a relatively small portion of the state was made up of large population clusters. That along with my personal experience living in rural Pennsylvania had led to my special interest in rural library service.

Several outside consultants were contracted to provide specialized follow-up to implement some of the key objectives identified in the planning processes. One of these consultants was Carla Campbell Lehn, an expert on volunteerism and boards of directors of non-profit organizations. She later became the principal consultant for the Rural Initiative.

The diverse plans developed by the participating libraries laid the groundwork for what would two years later become the Rural Initiative.

## **University in the Library**

I had been working with Charles Lacy, dean of extension at the University of California at Davis (2), on a number of projects related (sometimes loosely) to literacy. One of these projects was National Issues Forum, an initiative of the Kettering Foundation. Dean Lacy and the Kettering people were anxious to introduce Dr. Starr to their activities in hopes of having him continue and expand the collaborative efforts underway when he became state librarian.

National Issues Forum (NIF) is a method of public deliberation that considers a variety of valid solutions in an atmosphere of civil openness. UC Davis Extension was (and continues to be) the sponsor of NIF training in California. I had encouraged public library involvement in NIF as a means to expose adult literacy students to the broader world of public issues, particularly since Kettering prepared special easy reading versions of their issue books with adult literacy students in mind.

We arranged a meeting in early 1995 at UC Davis. While we were waiting for the Kettering representative to arrive from Ohio (Kettering's home base), Dr. Starr and Dean Lacy got into a discussion of the potential for the University of California to extend outside its local campuses to rural

California, "where the real people are. You've got the most brilliant scholars in the world, and we've got public library outlets all over the state", said Dr. Starr. "Let's pool our resources and bring the university to the people."

From that meeting came the "University in the Library." Dr. Starr presented the concept to the Council of Deans at UC Davis during the summer of 1995. The deans loved it, especially in the context of prevailing criticism by the media that the University of California was doing too much for its administration during the severe recession that was then occurring in California, and not enough for its faculty and educational mission. Chancellor Larry Vanderhoef observed that the University in the Library fit well with his concept of the "fully engaged university." The University in the Library seemed an ideal vehicle to meet objectives of both the State Library and the University of California at Davis.

The University in the Library began in November 1996 with a planning meeting that included representatives from UC Davis and the coordinators of the two participating northern California cooperative library systems, North State Cooperative Library System and Mountain Valley Library System. The original plan included use of video conferencing to reach remote geographical areas so UC Davis Distance Learning and NorCal Video Link personnel also attended.

The University in the Library was to provide presentations by the University of California to rural communities on topics of the communities' choice. Presenters were paid a modest honorarium of \$400 and their travel expenses. In addition, up to \$500 worth of materials related to the faculty presentations were acquired for the sponsoring library's collection. Selection was made through collaboration between the presenter and the library director.

The Yolo County Librarian recommended outside consultant Ann Scheuring, who had worked as a volunteer in a rural library branch. She visited three northern California rural communities in the spring of 1997 and led focus groups made up of a cross-section of local residents. They decided on topics to be addressed by visiting UC Davis faculty. Ms. Scheuring then returned to UC Davis and in collaboration with Dean Lacy found faculty who agreed to visit the rural communities and make presentations. Two presentations were made on geology at Lee Vining (3) in Mono County and at Markleyville (4) in Alpine County, and one was done on the literature of the Sierra Nevada in South Lake Tahoe (5). A field trip was offered in addition to the lecture in Mono County.

The second year of the University in the Library included some of the most remote locations in California. A presentation on community development was made in the community of Doris (6), Siskiyou County; on sustainable agriculture in Weaverville (7), Trinity County; and on alternative

and complementary medicine in Willows (8), Glenn County and in Quincy (9), Plumas County. Nevada County Library (30) participated by videoconference.

As I observed the presentations and read Ann Scheuring's reports on the process of working with the local communities in deciding on topics and publicizing the programs, I realized that this could be an unobtrusive way to encourage local rural library development. I decided to take on the developmental work myself in the next round of University in the Library activities in order to develop a better understanding of rural public library needs as well as to produce some valuable local adult programming.

In the third year of University in the Library I worked with focus groups in some of the most remote communities in California and found presenters to meet some surprising requests. Communities and presentations were as follows:

- Loyalton (10), Sierra County: welcomed an exquisite presentation on Japanese art and culture
- Hayfork (11), Trinity County: joined in with Miss Rita and her Cajun Fusiliers in a ragin' cajun musical concert in the park
- Happy Camp (12), Siskiyou county: heard an expert, himself born in China, speak on "The Other 49ers: The Chinese in Siskiyou County", a topic suggested by a Karuk Indian tribal leader
- Big Pine (13), Inyo County: discussed "Small Towns, Big Picture: Economic Renewal through Community Collaboration"
- Needles (14), San Bernardino County: frequently the cited during summer months as the hottest place in America, heard a UC Riverside expert on community development
- Burney (15), Shasta County: interacted with an expert on small-farm development, on how to develop profitable agricultural production in their unique intermountain ecological niche
- Benton (16), Mono County: just over the White Mountain range from the mysterious Area 51 of Nevada, considered UFOs
- Groveland (17), Tuolumne County: gateway to Yosemite National Park, heard about the art and literature of the Sierra Nevada Mountains
- Cedarville (18), Modoc County: focused on the hot political topic of water management in a presentation by one of the leading authorities on the subject from the California Research Bureau
- Smith River (19), Del Norte County: learned how to collect oral histories from two experts from UC Berkeley.

## **The Rural Initiative of the California State Library: Year 1, 1998-99**

The number one objective of the first year of the Rural Initiative was to find out what people in rural communities wanted from their libraries, and what rural library staff saw as the greatest needs of rural libraries. Carla Lehn was contracted to conduct focus groups in six rural communities selected to reflect the diversity of rural California. The communities where focus groups were convened were as follows:

- Los Molinos (20), in agricultural northern Tehama County
- Jackson (21), a gold-rush community in the Sierra Nevada foothills popular with retirees and tourists
- Avenal (22), an agricultural community in Kings County of the southern part of the great central valley of California
- Blythe (23), located in desert country in Riverside County, on the Arizona border
- Atascadero (24), an urbanizing community with a regional library serving surrounding agricultural areas in the central coast San Luis Obispo County
- Descanso (25), located in a rural part of the southern California county of San Diego.

A focus group was held in each community for library staff and a second focus group was held for community residents. Both library users and nonusers were included. Consulting staff worked with library directors and branch staff to assure that invitees included a representative cross-section of the community. To assure their attendance they were given a free lunch or dinner. Library staff were invited to a breakfast meeting, and in some cases, part-timers were paid to attend.

A final focus group was held in Sacramento (1) at the California State Library that included participants from each of the six community focus groups to finalize the priorities that were to be addressed in future phases of the Rural Initiative.

Carla Lehn then developed an extensive report on the needs of rural libraries that distinguished those identified by library staff and community members. The top needs were as follows, in priority order:

1. Overcome real and perceived barriers to successful grant proposal writing by rural libraries to increase the number who not only participate in the process, but who are successful in it.
2. Build the capacity of rural libraries to enhance their public image, not only through public relations capabilities, but by increasing their capacity to achieve meaningful community and volunteer relationships.
3. Enhance the technology capabilities of rural libraries with not only hardware, but with staff training, volunteer and public training models, materials and support.
4. Increase the breadth of training offerings and expand delivery methods to achieve broader participation of rural libraries in training activities.
5. Assist rural libraries with methods of determining how to maximize their available “open hours” for the benefit of their communities.
6. Assist rural libraries in addressing their need for increased library space.
7. Reduce the number of times rural libraries must re-invent the wheel by creating an electronic clearinghouse of materials and ideas that work.

Several other activities were carried out during the first year of the Rural Initiative. Carla Lehn worked in depth with two libraries whose directors had agreed to participate. She worked with them to identify ways to better position the local rural library as the information center of their communities.

In addition, Carla Lehn conducted workshops in several rural libraries on how to increase the effectiveness of volunteerism in the public library. The workshops were based on a book Carla Lehn had written in 1999. The book, titled “Volunteer Involvement in California Libraries: Best Practices” is available at no charge from the Library Development Services Bureau, California State Library, PO Box 942837, Sacramento, CA 94237.

## **Seeds Begin to Grow**

By the middle of the second year of the Rural Initiative, rural libraries began to contact the state library for assistance as local problems arose. For example, the new county superintendent of education in Mono County (16), also responsible for overall direction of the county public library, decided to close several branches with low circulation figures. Carla Lehn was sent to work in depth with local communities and administration. The result was a plan to increase library usage to a broader population and the decision of the plan to close the branches.

Carla Lehn also worked in depth with Trinity County Library (7) and Los Molinas (20) branch of Tehama County Library. She used the model of Asset Based Community Development, developed at Northwestern University by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight ("Building Communities From The Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing Community Assets" 1993 ACTA Publications, Chicago). The in-depth work continued into year three of the Rural Initiative in Los Molinas.

## **Librarybooksales.org**

The members of the System Advisory Board of the North State Cooperative Library System during the first year of the Rural Initiative came up with the idea of holding a "Book Rendezvous." It would be a library version of the old-time fur trappers' rendezvous, when they would gather to sell their furs and have a gala time at the end of the trapping season. Friends of the Library and others who raise money for their local libraries by selling donated books would rendezvous in a central place. They would pool books of greater value than the usual book sales items and sell them to booksellers, collectors and other potential buyers who would be invited to the Book Rendezvous.

An expert on valuable books, Sacramento bookseller Steve Mauer, was contracted to train local Friends of the Library and staff in how to recognize valuable books. He offered two training sessions (both of which were videoconferenced to additional sites) in Redding (26) (Shasta College) and in Mendocino County (27). More than 150 people were trained in these two sessions.

As the project progressed, the idea of holding a "virtual" book rendezvous developed. The title "Book Rendezvous" was replaced with "librarybooksales.org," a title that could be easily accessed online, as well as more easily spelled. The domain name specifically used ".org" rather than ".com" to show that proceeds were for the benefit of the library, rather than for profit. The Website is now active, offering books for sale for benefit of local libraries. It has expanded from rural California to any group supporting local libraries, in any state.

The librarybooksales.org project is now planned to receive LSTA funding in fiscal year 2001-02 with the expectation that in future years it will be self-supporting. The Website providers (Pageweavers, Inc.) will receive a percentage of book sales proceeds to provide customer service and manage the site.

## **Library Board Development Project**

As we were planning the second year of the Rural Initiative, the president of the California Association of Library Trustees and Commissioners (CALTAC) contacted me about a speakers bureau project they were considering. Our conversation led to a remarkable collaboration during the second and third years of the Rural Initiative called the “Library Board Development Project.”

Carla Lehn trained CALTAC members, recruited through a rigorous qualification system developed by an ad hoc committee created by the CALTAC board, in effective library boardsmanship. The workshop was based on the “Trustee Tool Kit for Library Leadership”, developed previously in a collaborative effort between the California State Library and CALTAC. These trained volunteers then replicated the workshop on-site to local library boards upon invitation from the local boards.

Eleven volunteers were trained in April 2000. Although the project objective was to train six local boards, more than forty workshops were scheduled during the two-year period of 2000 through 2001. These were made available to all California public libraries, although the idea was initially developed as part of the Rural Initiative.

## **Videoconferencing and the Rural Initiative**

The California State Library had for several years supported local northern California rural libraries to develop videoconferencing capability. Geographical isolation, particularly in the mountains during the winter months when deep snowfall is common, is a serious problem for rural libraries in California. “NorCal VideoLink” was a project that had placed polycom videoconferencing equipment in rural libraries across northern California. University in the Library utilized those facilities for several presentations.

A separate LSTA project that was being implemented during the second year of the Rural Initiative was entitled Video Author Visits. Dan Theobald of i2i Communications, Inc, was contracted to develop this program as well as to advise the State Library on effective use of videoconferencing in rural California. Authors were brought live to local libraries throughout California by videoconferencing. In most cases the authors were on book tours promoting their recent books. The points of origin for the videoconferences were usually in major cities, usually Los Angeles (28), but in a number of cases



other sites were used. For example, Michael Cunningham participated from Queens Borough Public Library in New York, and John Jakes spoke from his local library in Connecticut.

Although Video Author Visits was not limited to rural libraries, they were encouraged to participate, and many did. For more information on Video Author Visits, including videostreamed versions of the interviews, visit [www.videoauthorvisits.com](http://www.videoauthorvisits.com).

### **Library Practitioner Certification Development Project**

One of the most frequently cited needs in California rural libraries is staff training. A group of rural library directors approached Dr. Starr at the year 2000 annual meeting of public library directors. They told him there was a need to find creative approaches to training rural library staff to meet the changing needs of rural librarianship. Dr. Starr decided to explore the potential for offering a certification program for library employees modeled after the medical model of nurse practitioner or nurse practitioner. The intent was to add a new level of staff recognition between the recognized levels of support staff and the master of library science.

The project began as a part of the third year of the Rural Initiative. An advisory group was established to consider initial possibilities and the feasibility of the certification program. This group, composed of rural library directors from varied locations statewide as well as key library leaders, met twice in Sacramento.

The first meeting framed key issues to be explored through a survey of rural library staff. A survey of rural library staff was done statewide. The second meeting of the advisory group considered the results of the survey and recommended to Dr. Starr that he continue development of the concept, first for rural libraries where interest was extremely strong.

### **Shades of California**

Another project that was being implemented during the years of the Rural Initiative was Shades of California. The project began as a part of the celebration of California's 150th year celebration of discovery of gold in 1848 through attainment of statehood in 1850.

The Los Angeles Public Library had expanded its photographic collection during the early 1990s to include minority ethnic populations, which had been underrepresented previously. Donors' family albums were copied on-site by professional photographers. Shades of California was a statewide replication of the Shades of LA model. LSTA funds enabled trained photographers and consultants to work with local participating libraries to assure development of high-quality collections, while training the local photographers and library staff.

Rural libraries were encouraged to participate in *Shades of California*. Heyday Books of Berkeley (29), California, has published a beautiful edition called "Shades of California: The Hidden Beauty of Ordinary Life," using photographs from this project. It is a Barnes & Noble California 2001 Christmas selection.

## **Other Components of the Rural Initiative**

Other LSTA projects that were not focused primarily on rural also contributed to the development of rural libraries. Some of those are discussed below.

"History Alive!" was another collaborative effort celebrating the Sesquicentennial. The California Council for the Humanities was the collaborative partner. Scholars appeared in character in local libraries representing people who had lived about the middle of the nineteenth century in California. They spoke about their experiences during the nineteenth century, then answered questions in character. They concluded their presentations by going out of character to their current scholarly roles and answering questions from the viewpoint of their current knowledge and opinions of what had happened in the past.

The California State Library has provided assistance to rural libraries in the automation process, including installation of the Z39.50 protocol. This effort had begun prior to the start of the Rural Initiative, and has continued to be a priority as efforts are made to increase sharing of the resources of all types of libraries through the Library of California.

The introduction of new technology into rural public libraries in California has had an extraordinary impact. The California State Library has directed significant amounts of LSTA funding to technology over the past ten years or so. Together with the extraordinary contributions of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which totaled more than \$12 million, rural libraries have become technological centers of their communities. Most rural public library outlets in California now offer internet access to the public.

The League of Women Voters contacted me in 1999 to see if the California State Library would be interested in collaborating in a project that had been funded by a foundation grant. It was to develop an issue book on quality of life in California using the National Issues Forum model. Together we decided to include, as a part of the Rural Initiative, the participation of a rural library director in framing the issue book. Francisco Pinneli, director of Nevada County Library (30), graciously agreed to contribute his time to the project to assure that a rural viewpoint would be included in consideration of the issue. The Rural Initiative covered his travel expenses. A remarkably valuable issue book has been completed and distributed to all the public

libraries of California. Community forums continue to be held in communities across California in collaboration between the League of Women Voters and public libraries.

### **The Impact of the Rural Initiative of the California State Library**

What was the real impact of the Rural Initiative? First, it has focused attention on the needs of rural libraries in California. Many of those needs are not unique to rural libraries, but the environment in which those needs must be addressed is unique to each rural community. There is a sense in each community that because of their uniqueness they have not been understood by outside potential funders, including the State Library. As a result of the Rural Initiative, there is a greater sense on the part of rural library directors that the State Library is making an effort to take the needs of rural libraries seriously.

Second, a plan has been developed by the Library Development Services Bureau of the California State Library to provide systematic support to rural libraries to strengthen their role as vital assets in their communities. That plan continues to be implemented as a basic part of the work of the California State Library.

Third, a number of specific projects that have been of benefit to the residents of rural California and to the strengthening of their rural libraries have been carried out, as described in this article.

Most of all, the needs of rural Californians for excellent public library service has been recognized by the California State Librarian and his staff in a way that will continue as a basic part of the life of libraries in California.

# Public Libraries in the North State Cooperative Library System

