

Libraries and Rural Latin America: The Work of Mennonite Central Committee in Bolivia and Guatemala

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Libraries in developing countries face many obstacles: high levels of illiteracy, lack of money, lack of materials, oral traditions rather than an emphasis on written language, cultures unaccustomed to using libraries, and so forth. Most of rural Latin America has faced or is facing these problems and they have been compounded by social, political, and economic turmoil in the twentieth century. A public education and literacy movement throughout Latin America began in the 1960s but was slowed by the economic crisis of the 1980s, low teacher salaries, lack of supplies, and high seasonal absenteeism because of agriculture. Falling GNP and crippling foreign debt during this time meant decreased spending for social programs and the large gap between rich and poor in these countries became even larger. Rural Latin Americans fared the worst and in 1997 there were 25,000 rural primary schools in which children could not progress beyond the third grade (Arrove 280).

Simultaneously, the U.S. government was keeping an eye on any country or government in the western hemisphere that even remotely appeared to be sympathetic to communist causes. "In 1949, the CIA reported 'two areas of instability' in Latin America, Bolivia and Guatemala, both threatened by regimes that showed concern for the overwhelming majority of their populations" (Harbury 4). Since then, the U.S. has been involved in both countries for political and economic reasons as well as to combat the production and trafficking of illegal drugs. The resultant money entering these countries have too often empowered unjust governments and bred political instability and economic hardship.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is a relief organization whose mission is "to demonstrate God's love by working among people suffering from poverty, conflict, oppression and natural disaster" ("MCC Fact Sheet, 2001/02"). MCC workers have been involved in the establishment and support of libraries in rural Bolivia and Guatemala. In both locales, the population being served is primarily indigenous and at the low end of the socio-economic ladder. The work in Bolivia, however, has been of a much larger and more organized scale than that in Guatemala. A library program in

Bolivia has helped to establish and support more than twenty libraries in both urban and rural settings. MCC has no such program in Guatemala so the library studied for this research has been more isolated than its Bolivian counterparts, both in terms of professional support and also in terms of geography and physical infrastructure. What role does a library play in settings such as these? What are the needs of rural communities in Bolivia and Guatemala and can a library address these needs or are libraries irrelevant to these communities? This paper attempts to find some answers to these questions through the experiences of librarians, MCC workers, and community members in these areas.

Bolivia: Background and Description

As is the case throughout Latin America, the people of Bolivia have inherited a culture profoundly influenced by colonization following the European discovery of the New World. A land tenure system constructed by the Spanish forced most of the indigenous population to work in exchange for the provision of only the most basic necessities. In addition to a loss of personal and corporate freedoms, the system stripped the native population of a sense of self-respect and personal motivation. "This system imposed a mentality of servitude and inferiority, and has created a lingering attitude of looking to some overlord such as government, a boss at work or a labor union as the supplier of necessities and services. As a result of the patronage system personal responsibility and initiative to supply these services were almost eliminated" (Glick 10). Following the revolution of 1952, an agrarian reform law was passed in 1953, ending the traditional land-tenure system. A simultaneous law absolved debtor-workers of all financial and work obligations but the attitudes that developed over hundreds of years have not easily been replaced. There still exists a divide between Camba and Kolla. Camba are the lowlanders, both rich and poor, mostly mestizo (a combination of Indian, European, and possibly African). The Kolla are Indians from the western, highland region of the country.

About two thirds of Bolivia is comprised of the lowlands that were relatively unknown until well into the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1950s the government and others began to see the lowland region as a potential resource for agriculture, forestry and oil, which encouraged foreign interest and investment in Bolivia. As roads were created and towns formed, Bolivian highlanders began migrating to the area, drawn by agricultural prospects, economic opportunity, and better social and environmental conditions. The migration has brought Camba and Kolla into close proximity but two distinct groups remain. The Kolla tend to keep themselves removed from the Camba, in part to preserve their culture and way of life. Following agrarian reform and the opening of the lowlands for agricultural purposes there was an increase in coca production because it was a cost-effective crop. The drug trade brought wealth to Santa Cruz which spurred

continued migration to the city although most migrants have not benefited from the increased wealth due to drugs and business ventures. Tim Penner, former MCC country representative in Bolivia, said in his 1990 worker activity report, "Although the economic situation has improved greatly over the last five years, the majority remain poor with few resources to alleviate their needs. MCC has chosen to side with the marginalized, in an attempt to bring about ... a more just world."

The current estimated rate of illiteracy among Bolivia's adult population is 16.9 percent (*Europa World Year Book* 741). While this is the official figure, a large percentage of the population is "functionally illiterate." Helen Liechty Glick estimates the figure at more than 60 percent in Spiritsong (12). Undoubtedly the figure has decreased since then, but it is a marked difference from the official adult illiteracy rate of 23 percent in 1990. Illiteracy is much greater in rural areas, especially among the large indigenous population, and within these communities women typically are the least literate. Primary education is compulsory and free, with enrollment at a healthy 91 percent, but the figure drops to only 29 percent for secondary schools (*Europa World Year Book* 741). As in other parts of the world, Bolivian parents desire a better life for their children and they see education as a way to make this happen. "The disadvantages of being illiterate seemed to be strongly felt among the migrants, and the schooling of their children was of primary importance in their lives" (Stearman 96).

MCC's Libraries Program in Santa Cruz

Santa Cruz is the largest city in Bolivia's lowland area and it was there that MCC formally began the Libraries Program by helping to start a library of only fifty books in one of the suburbs. At least two factors contributed to the start of the Libraries Program and both were educational in nature. One was MCC's involvement in adult literacy training from the 1960s and 1970s. MCC workers also realized that some children were struggling with reading in part because of a lack of available books or other reading material, so some workers handed out books from their backpacks to children that needed them (López interview). The mission statement that has emerged now reads, "The Library Program seeks to strengthen the educational level in marginal urban neighborhoods and rural communities of Santa Cruz through its support for establishing local popular libraries and through encouraging more reading" (Jantzi et al, 37).

By 1987, two more libraries had been started and a "roving library" was developed with a bicycle used to transport books. The program became more clearly defined and developed in 1991 when the first full-time director, Carolyn Schan, was hired to work with the five libraries that existed. Bolivians have been involved with the program from its beginning but in the 1990s there was a more pronounced shift toward placing nationals in positions

of responsibility. The present director is Bolivian and most of the program's reports since 1993 are written in Spanish, indicating the increased involvement of non-North Americans. The mid-1990s also saw a shift from urban to rural library involvement for the growing Libraries Program with the start of two rural libraries in 1995. This shift reflected the greater need of those communities that did not have access to services that urban settings and governments could provide. Since most of the library personnel were living in the city at that time a problem emerged of how best to assist the rural libraries, so the program looked at the possibility of permanently placing volunteers in rural areas. The "bookmobile bicycle" service was apparently abandoned because in 1996 Ana Carlina Zorrilla Esther, library worker, suggests, "The Libraries Program could take up again the idea of a mobile library. In the rural areas this could work with somebody going certain days from community to community with a set of books to work with the children. It would be hard work, but pleasing and varying" (Worker Activity Reports, Bolivia). A major evaluation of MCC's work in Bolivia was undertaken in 2000 which encouraged more participation in rural settings:

...libraries have been able to serve as catalysts for other community service programs. In other words, the role of libraries in rural areas tends to be more integral and less specialized. This is not the case in urban areas. There libraries tend to limit themselves to a more narrow technical focus. This is due in part to the lack of a sense of community in urban areas where these libraries generally operate. A weak sense of community can be attributed mainly to the migratory and transitory nature of people who migrate first to the outlying and poorer areas of the city, then eventually move to more stable areas. (Jantzi 38)

By the end of 2000, twenty-three libraries had been established and five of those were still being supported by the program. Eleven libraries were begun between 1995 and 1998 and in 1997 more than half of the libraries receiving support from the program were rural. Since then, the growth rate has dropped and presently there are only three libraries participating in the program, one urban and two rural, but requests for new libraries continue to be made.

MCC's role has not been to choose a community, organize and initiate library services, and continue to operate the library. Instead libraries are started in response to requests by communities that see a need for such a service, and communities must assume responsibility for the continued operation of the library. MCC provides matching funds for books and materials and the Libraries Program is involved with subsequent training of the librarians and members of library committees but after three years of support from the Libraries Program, a library is to become independent. The emphasis on self-sufficiency for traditionally marginalized people runs counter to the values of the colonial system of patronage and must be addressed.

Libraries are encouraged to create income-generating projects to meet their ongoing financial needs. The most common method of fund-raising is by selling library cards for one or two Bolivianos (about 30 cents U.S.) per year. One library in 1992 reported five hundred registered children and up to one hundred visits per day (Worker Activity Reports, Bolivia). Other ideas have included selling stationery or food; one library had a photocopier, and others have organized sports tournaments or received donations from community members. Churches have also helped by allowing several libraries to be located in their buildings. Molly Brandt, worker in the Libraries Program, acknowledges the limitations of such activities. "Most of the fund-raising projects are short term, but they do help the community become aware of the library, and create a sense of ownership within the community. It's not an especially stable way of generating income, and because of that it's sometimes hard to keep librarians...." (Brandt email)

Gaining support from local communities is vital to the life of these libraries. Rural libraries typically are better able than those in urban settings to work with local governments for funding. In addition to the weak sense of community found in the city, urban libraries must compete with already-existing libraries for any available government funding. Jorge López, director of the program, describes the situation in three areas in and around Santa Cruz: the city, the valley (south of the city), and the northern zone. Because of the realities of urban life in Santa Cruz, city libraries depend on sales of library cards and support from other organizations, such as churches and schools, for funding. The success of each library depends on the organization of the community in which it is located and the leaders of the library must have strong commitment to the library. Community support and commitment are equally important in the other two areas, however there are factors there not present in the city. In the valley are many old, established communities with traditions and strong family ties. López likens library work there to working in a large family, with mutual support, but also conflict because of such close connections. The northern area has great interest in community organization and, as such, is the strongest of the three areas in terms of accommodation to the Libraries Program and its goals. Base organizations such as unions and other associations exist and when these support library initiatives, the library is successful. There tends to be good communication between librarians, who share experiences and have the desire for training. The strong sense of organization is perhaps due partly to the greater availability of resources of land and products and the desire to tap into these for development purposes (López interview).

López sees the program's role as one of accompaniment, or "being with" the libraries and the teams that run them. This occurs through regular visits to the participating libraries and through training workshops. Technical training, such as simple instruction of management and cataloging principles, is done by members of the Library Team (Libraries Program staff). The librarians are typically youth or young adults, many of whom are part of a national volunteer program called PROJUSE. Carolyn Schan reported in 1992 that each library closed for a half day each week to give the librarians uninterrupted time for cataloging and inventory activities (Worker Activity Reports, Bolivia). López refers to the content of other workshops as "integral training" that is more holistic. These educational workshops are often conducted by professionals from outside the Libraries Program and cover such themes as interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, sexuality, and ecological concerns. One such presenter has been Gaby Vallejo de Bolivar, a Bolivian author and reading promoter. Librarians can use what they learn in these workshops to initiate relevant programs in their own libraries. The Library Team itself meets twice each year for ongoing training.

Typically, libraries will have from 600 to 1,000 books. One library, housed in a jail, has 4,000 books. In spite of their size, López sees the libraries as important because they provide children with an opportunity to learn and increase their knowledge of the world. Carolyn Schan offers a similar sentiment, "By some standards, our little libraries and few books would be nothing, but for us, and especially for the children and young people who get an opportunity to read and enjoy learning, they are grand indeed" (Worker Activity Reports, Bolivia). The libraries clearly do not function simply as a place to store and check out books. There have been story hours, arts and crafts for children, videos and discussion, mathematics assistance for students, health promotion, and activities for adults. In 1998, ecological and women's support groups were formed out of the Libraries Program. Also initiated were "library encounters," meetings to which each library brings five or six children who present skits based on stories, some of which were created by the groups.

While many children have eagerly started using the libraries, the same can not be said for the adults in the communities. One of López's goals is to find ways to encourage adults to use books from the libraries. Children have a natural connection of learning in school and learning in the library. The program has not been able to find such a connection for the adult population who either do not have time for the library or who see it as irrelevant to their lives. Many of the libraries have been able to successfully operate since opening but at least two have closed permanently. One library closed in 1996 because the community was "unable to maintain its library committee, and the library, with lack of attention, [was] underused" (Worker Activity Reports, Bolivia). Another library closed at least temporarily in 1997 because it was located in a school that kept its gates locked most of the time; essentially the

only use it received was from students at the school. Nevertheless interest in the libraries has generally been strong. According to a survey, 3,026 students visited 15 libraries in July, 1998 (Worker Activity Reports, Bolivia).

Because the focus of the Libraries Program seems to be shifting away from starting many new libraries and toward the support of libraries already established, the 2000 evaluation recommended that the program,

View the library as a facilitator of the discovery of new worlds; [act as] an agent of transformation, a force for community empowerment; a source of creativity, initiative and self-determination. This means being open to start other programs that will arise from this new way of view[ing] a library's role (Jantzi 39).

Among the other recommendations was the suggestion that rural locations with weak community initiative be chosen for the establishment of new libraries. This essentially means that libraries should go where most needed and where they can work directly with community members rather than with power interests in the community. Whether these recommendations will be implemented and whether they are effective remains to be seen.

Guatemala: Background and Description

As in Bolivia, a great divide exists in Guatemala between the powerful and the peasant, the Latinos (Spanish-speakers) and the indigenous peoples. The official rate of adult illiteracy stands at 32.7 percent (Europa World Year Book 1810), yet some estimates of illiteracy among the highland population have been as high as 90-95 percent (Perera 43). Primary education is compulsory and the enrollment is nearly 75 percent, while dropping to 35 percent for secondary education (Europa World Year Book 1810). The Guatemalan constitution mandates that indigenous communities are to be taught in their own language but this does not always happen. A mission school successfully raised the literacy rate in San Juan Cotzal, but it was at the expense of the children's native languages (Perera 91). In addition the indigenous people are faced with the reality that Spanish is the language of the powerful in Guatemala and unfamiliarity with it has led to abuses of the poor by unscrupulous government officials and business persons. The multiplicity of regional native languages also complicates any attempts that might be made among indigenous groups to come together, work in solidarity, and speak as a united people.

For Guatemalans, the 20th century was one of conflict, revolution, civil war, and attempted peace. For indigenous Guatemalans it was a century of oppression, hopes, and unspeakable horror. The centuries-old issue of land ownership was at the heart of the struggle and the first attempt to return land to the native population occurred after the revolution of 1944 when a dictatorship was overthrown and the new president brought with him a desire

for social and agrarian reform. A U.S.-supported coup ended this attempt in 1954, when some 8,000 peasants—many of whom were union organizers and village leaders—were killed in two months. Since then, it is estimated that more than 200,000 have been killed or “disappeared” (Chomsky 15, 21). Oppression of the Guatemalan poor was certainly not unique to the 20th century, but as foreign business interests grew and as Guatemalan peasants became restless and took up arms, the conflict and the oppression grew in the 1900s and climaxed in the 1980s. International trade, agribusiness, and private investors found the repressive climate amenable to their desires for cheap labor and little or no workplace safety regulations in factories and pesticide and fertilizer plants. Noam Chomsky describes the resulting atmosphere as a “culture of fear” and compares the actions of the Guatemalan government to those of Heinrich Himmler, Joseph Mengele, and the German *Gestapo* (Chomsky 2-6). Much of the fear resulted from the expectation that anyone could be kidnapped, tortured, or killed, particularly if they were native or if they were working with the indigenous peoples:

The army unleashed its campaign of terror against all those seeking social change, whether armed revolutionaries or civilians attempting reforms through peaceful and legal means. Mayan civil rights workers died in the Spanish Embassy, cooperatives were destroyed, and rural health and literacy promoters disappeared, never to be seen again ... Hardest hit of all were the Mayan villages of the highlands, which the army suspected of supporting the guerrilla movement (Harbury 34).

Finally in 1995, a peace accord was reached and signed, putting an end to the civil war. The peace accords promised respect for indigenous peoples, abolition of paramilitary groups, improvement in social services, and respect for human rights. Many of the old problems remain however. The gap between rich and poor is still large, 70 percent of the arable land owned by less than 3 percent of the population, and the military still maintains a great deal of power.

MCC's Work in La Esmeralda

The war created many refugees, some of whom fled to Mexico and lived either in refugee camps or with Mexican families. The refugees were from various areas of Guatemala, all rural, and they were primarily indigenous. In 1995, when the fighting ended a commission was formed to find land and funding for willing refugees to return to Guatemala. About 200 families, representing at least nine ethnic groups, decided to join a group that formed an entirely new town in the Peten; the town was named La Esmeralda (Green Emerald Valley). The Peten is the northern-most state in Guatemala and La Esmeralda is located in the eastern lowland rainforest. Moving to the Peten was not a move home for the returning refugees since they were originally from the highlands to the south. This meant that settlers of La Esmeralda had

to adjust not only to a new life but also to an unfamiliar climate and environment.

There are now about 150 families, or 700-800 individuals living in La Esmeralda. Some of the initial settlers moved on to their original home areas while others became disillusioned because of conflict and hardships and moved back to Mexico; this accounts for the drop in numbers from 1995 to the present. To reach the nearest market town and bus route requires driving 18 miles on a dirt road for about two hours. There is no electricity or telephone service although a limited amount of electricity can be generated by solar panels on several buildings. There is also gravity-powered, running water in the town. While some families have left, many others, tired of the constant flight and migration caused by the war, are eager to put down roots and build a strong community. MCC's involvement has been primarily support for health and education programs and, most fundamentally, to accompany and build relationships with the people of La Esmeralda as they work toward their goals.

An interesting byproduct of the war was the exposure that some refugees received to the larger world. Those living in the Mexican camps came in contact with foreign aid workers who conducted workshops on skills such as carpentry and baking. Aid workers also taught adult literacy classes (in Spanish) and exposed the refugees to information about human rights and justice issues. The result of this experience is that the literacy rate of La Esmeralda is higher than that of neighboring towns; Longenecker (interview) estimates the literacy of La Esmeralda to be about 60 percent, higher than in neighboring towns, but still below the national average. "Compared with surrounding communities, La Esmeralda is more organized, more aggressive and assertive in soliciting help, and more aware of their rights" (Longenecker, "Program Plans") These factors have likely also contributed to the interest in starting and maintaining a library in the community.

The idea of starting a library originated with an anthropologist who lived in and studied the community of La Esmeralda. MCC approached him for suggestions on how best to use a sum of unused money in the budget. His suggestion of starting a community library was accepted and the money put in a bank account for that purpose. Unfortunately, the anthropologist left the community and nothing further happened until Lynn and Laurie Longenecker, MCC workers, came to La Esmeralda and were asked by community members what had happened to the funds. The money was retrieved and preparations were made to go to Guatemala City—a 12-hour bus trip away—to buy books for what was to become the library. Before leaving, they received suggestions from the community as to what would be of most interest. These included books with educational content; books on history and Marxism; "how-to" books on bicycle repair, plumbing, carpentry, and guitar; books on soccer; and Mayan language dictionaries. In Guatemala City, they received information and assistance from the director of PRODESSA, an aid organization that has

worked with fledgling libraries in the highlands. With his guidance about 150 books were purchased on a variety of topics and the La Esmeralda library was born in 1998.

The library now holds more than 300 books, including more than 80 children's books, as well as games, puzzles, charts, and maps. The library has received many informational pamphlets from community members who received them from aid workers in the refugee camps, and from NGOs (non-governmental workers) in Guatemala. The collection has also grown through the purchase of books with library funds and through donations from visitors to the community. At the recommendation of PRODESSA, none of the books circulate except to teachers, and patrons are supposed to wash their hands before handling the materials. Because of the inconvenience to the library workers of ensuring that water always be available, the practice of hand-washing has essentially been discontinued. Initially, the library was governed by a volunteer library committee of about six people, mostly youth and women. When that group felt they had served long enough replacement volunteers were sought without success. Volunteers have been difficult to procure mostly because of a lack of time and commitment. This is somewhat puzzling, as many survey respondents (see appendix) indicated some willingness to volunteer in the library. The decision was made to give the teachers responsibility for the library in 2000, an arrangement that has worked well because students have been the most active users of the small library. The Longeneckers also suggested some of the library work could be done by students as a sort of practicum to help them learn responsibility and other skills.

The core of the library's mission is to encourage people to read. As in Bolivia, encouraging adults to read has been much more of a challenge than introducing children to the world of books. Even the teachers did not realize the spectrum of possibilities presented by the library and its resources. The Longeneckers wrote in 1999 about the struggle of introducing a library into this setting, "One of the things we've learned from working with the library is that you can't just drop a library into a community and expect teachers to know how to make use of it! Despite numerous attempts to give ideas for how to incorporate books into the classroom and expound on the virtues of reading to children, the number of books signed out by the teachers this year was still discouragingly small" (*Worker Activity Reports, Guatemala*). Lynn then decided to visit classrooms and read stories to the children himself. Students and teachers alike were delighted by this and the hope is that other teachers will continue the story time that has begun. Picture books are also very popular, especially among those who recognize scenes in or around the homes they left behind when fleeing to Mexico. This is a point of connection for community members, even for those who cannot read. The non-book

materials in the library are also popular. A highlight was a chess tournament sponsored by the library to coincide with the annual festival celebrating the community's arrival in the Peten.

Review of the Library Survey

In order to better understand the library's role in La Esmeralda and community attitudes about the library, a survey was prepared by the author and distributed to students and teachers in the town school. Forty surveys were distributed; thirty-four were completed and returned. It was loosely adapted from a survey that was conducted by Dr. Bernard Vavrek and the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship at Clarion University, Clarion, Pa., which attempted to assess the information needs of rural Americans (United States residents) and the role of the public library in meeting those needs (Vavrek 21-48). The survey of La Esmeralda has some severe limitations because of sample size; time, distance, and language barriers; and the inexperience of its author in such undertakings. As such any data comparisons between the two surveys have a great potential to be misleading and should be viewed as a starting point only. The greatest limitation of the survey is that the sample included only those persons who are most likely to use the library. Further research should address the needs of those persons who seldom or never use the library.

In spite of the fact that the library is a new establishment in the community, it has gained strong support among the teachers and students. When asked the importance of the library to the well-being of the community, 22 respondents (65 percent) answered that the library is critically important, and 10 (29 percent) viewed the library as "very important." Only two people saw the library as only "somewhat important." In the Vavrek survey, 32.1 percent viewed the library as "critically important" and 48 percent viewed it as "highly important." Library patrons in North America (hereafter referred to as "NA") and La Esmeralda (hereafter referred to as "LE") also agreed that the primary goal of the library should be to provide information (44 percent for LE, 61.6 percent for NA). Second to the provision of information was support for students and the school in LE; the ties between school and library are evident in answers to other questions as well. Eighteen respondents indicated that they usually use the library "because of school assignments" and an equal number said they usually go to "look for information" (multiple answers were accepted and recorded). In NA, only 2.5 percent of library visitors indicated that they were there because of school assignments and 15.1 percent said that they were at the library for information or reference reasons. The LE respondents clearly valued the library and its services but one respondent expressed the frustration that it is not being used more by persons other than students.

The limitations of such a small library were evident in the responses to the question, “Can you usually find what you need at the library?” Only four people answered yes; three, no; and 27 (nearly 80 percent) answered “sometimes.” This compares to more than 90 percent of NA library patrons successfully finding what they needed during their visit. LE survey participants were also asked what they wished that the library would have that it does not have. The greatest deficit that emerged was the library’s lack of books. Most respondents desired more books in specific or in general and some answered that more children’s books were needed because the children have already read all of the books the library currently has. Another common theme was the desire for either improvements to the present building or the need for an entirely new one. The comments focused on the need for furniture, especially tables and chairs, as well as electricity and lighting. It is interesting to note that when NA patrons were asked what they would change about the library, building-related desires were also very prominent; the top response was for a larger building (22.1 percent). That the LE library addresses the recreational needs of the community was evident in the requests of two respondents for more chess sets. Additionally the queen of chess—apparently missing from one set—garnered five votes herself.

Most LE and NA respondents indicated that they go to the library once or twice weekly, but the similarities between patrons end there. While in NA, 72.8 percent of the respondents were female, the library users in LE were much more evenly divided: eighteen male, fourteen female, and one non-respondent. The average age of the NA respondents was 44.7; for LE it was 20.5. Fifty-three percent of LE respondents listed seventh or eighth grade as their highest level of schooling; in NA the same group represented only 2 percent of the total. To the question of where patrons regularly get information, other than the library, the primary answer among NA respondents was from their own books, magazines, etc.; the second-place answer was from newspapers. (Surprisingly, enough people did not mention the Internet to warrant giving it its own category; certainly this has changed since the time of the survey.) LE respondents, in contrast, obtain information predominantly from other persons, mostly inside the immediate community. Theirs is an oral tradition. Despite the fact that the LE respondents represent the most literate segment of the community, the numbers of books read in the previous three months was well below that of their NA counterparts. Twelve respondents indicated that they had read one to five books, eight had read six to 10, and 14 had read more than 10. The average for NA respondents during a three-month span was approximately 20 books. (Vavrek’s survey actually asked how many books were read in the previous six months. In the hope of greater accuracy, it was decided to shorten that span to three months for the LE survey. The NA figure has been halved in order to accommodate this difference.) The number of books LE respondents said they had in their homes was curiously high: 10 reported having no books, but five people reported having 21 to 50 books, and

two reported having more than 50. It is likely that the term "book" is used rather loosely. Some of the respondents may have included in their figure pamphlets (such as those received from foreign aid workers) or other items that would not typically be considered to be books by North Americans (Longenecker interview). Unfortunately, this question was not included in the NA survey. Also surprising was the number of LE respondents (21 or 62 percent) who indicated that they read periodicals or newspapers once or twice each week since no formal postal or newspaper delivery service exists into the town. In comparison, 81.9 percent of NA respondents indicated that they read magazines on a regular basis.

Libraries, Literacy, and Rural Development: Some Conclusions

Librarians and literacy advocates have often viewed their work as the foundation on which development projects can be built in rural areas or in developing nations. Adakole Ochai, speaking about the dichotomy between developed and developing countries, says, "The often prescribed panacea for this ailment by developing countries is through the process of 'catching up' by the provision of developmental information particularly, at the grassroots level for rural transformation ... Information is seen by librarians as the pivot around which development revolves, and the library, its vehicle" (Ochai 164). While it is true that the library plays an important role in the process of community development, a shaky premise often accompanying this view is that when information is injected into a rural setting, good things naturally result. This can only occur when there is respect for and input from the intended beneficiaries.

Elaine Kempson has developed some guidelines for organizing and evaluating what she terms "rural community information services." At the core of her suggestions is a participatory philosophy of development. Services must be developed by people who are known, respected, or chosen by the community, sensitive to the community's needs, and present in the community. The services should also be managed and controlled by the community and be built on existing services. Another suggestion is that a range of information formats should be made available. "An information service intended for direct use by rural people cannot be based on printed materials alone. It should build on traditional patterns of information seeking, and this will mean using oral communications reinforced by poster, charts, photographs, slides, films, audio tapes and realia" (Kempson 437). This has happened to a certain extent at the library in La Esmeralda, although the lack of electricity of course prevents the use of films, tapes, etc. Charts such as those of the various human biological systems have been popular. On the other hand maps have not received much use because they do not hold much meaning for community members, whose conceptualization of geography has traditionally been very different from that of a North American or of a cartographer (Longenecker interview).

In a participatory approach librarians or information workers would not only acquire modern materials in modern formats, but would also be responsible for recording traditional knowledge as well. This is a view echoed by Ochai, who envisions the library not as a physical structure but as something akin to the community square—a place where community problems are identified and addressed. “In this set-up the ‘library’ plays the role of an information and referral centre. After all, the library is not necessarily the best source of information. In the village, the elders, clan meetings, age groups, dance groups, the town crier are all sources of information” (Ochai 168). In this setting the function of a librarian would obviously diverge from traditional roles.

In this new role the librarian is an information consultant, a counselor, a broker and link—all rolled into one. His duties would include helping to motivate the rural populace to articulate their problems and helping to connect them with sources of information or refer them to sources that would be useful in providing the necessary information. Rather than surround himself with books (which would largely be for his references, anyway) the librarian would maintain records of files of a myriad of information (data bank) obtained from a variety of sources, print, non-print, oral traditions, etc. on identified needs of the community (Ochai 169).

While the MCC-initiated libraries in Bolivia and Guatemala do not reflect this mode of operation, such things as teacher involvement in La Esmeralda and the goals of library self-sufficiency and community involvement in Bolivia do represent a participatory approach to library work in these areas. In both countries the challenge is to increase involvement by those not presently using the library, and Ochai provides a vision for the library that could help this happen. One of the hindrances to greater participation is the attitude that has been cultivated of the peasant as incapable of effective participation; this can be either an external or an internal perception.

Just as a successful library in a developing country involves more than simply placing a library in a rural community, so literacy involves more than simply depositing words into illiterates. Even the necessity of literacy is questioned in some instances. MCC workers in Bolivia struggled with training people to read who do not read on a regular basis and who would have no books, newspapers, or magazines to read even if they became literate. In spite of this, continuing requests from campesinos led the workers to assist those interested in learning to read. They found that results were much better for those who were motivated by a desire to read something specific such as the Bible (Glick 61). The libraries that have been born out of the Libraries Program now provide reading material to those living nearby.

If literacy is the primary goal of library services in developing countries, the other needs of the community may not be adequately addressed. Ochai summarizes the problem this way, "Since ours is not a functionally literate society, a rural library concept based largely on the print media has no relevance to the illiterate masses at the grassroots." He goes on to say, "Since this type of library provision is literacy based, its failure is analyzed in terms of the literacy level of the peasants rather than its relevance to needs and aspirations of the peasants at the grassroots level" (Ochai 165). A Brazilian peasant pointed out that "to be illiterate you need to live where there are letters and you don't know them" (Freire 14). Paulo Freire, Brazilian teacher, philosopher, and activist, advocated for literacy that was relevant to the peasants and which could transform the world. This type of literacy training does not ask the student to mechanically repeat words and syllables but is grounded in the human need for expression and develops the student's critical view of the world. "Literacy then becomes a global task involving illiterate learners in their relationships with the world and with others" (Freire 14). Those learning can then become active participants in the world and see their situation for what it is. Freire sees this as transformative literacy, one that is social, political, and humanizing, rather than simply pedagogical.

Repression of the poor in Latin America has been enabled by their high rate of illiteracy. Rigoberta Menchú, an indigenous Guatemalan woman who never attended school, speaks about the need for the educated to assist the poor, "In Guatemala, this is what happens with the poor, especially Indians, because they can't speak Spanish. The Indian can't speak up for what he wants" (Menchú 102). In the forward to her autobiography, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray writes, "Rigoberta learned the language of her oppressors in order to use it against them. For her, appropriating the Spanish language is an act which can change the course of history because it is the result of a decision: Spanish was a language which was forced upon her, but it has become a weapon in her struggle. She decided to speak in order to tell of the oppression her people have been suffering for almost five hundred years..." (Menchú xii). Literacy can help fulfill the human desire for self-expression and the desire to be heard. The telling of stories has the power to transform the oppressed from statistics into real people. A native Guatemalan woman, telling her story in Europe, demonstrates this beautifully,

I have looked in the eyes of the soldier who raped and stabbed my aunt and killed her unborn child, and I know he is a child of the Mayas who lives in Christ, as I am. Is it for me to pass judgment on him? Is it not for the soldier, driven by his superiors to commit these senseless atrocities, to seek forgiveness? What would happen to my soul if I had lifted a stone to kill this soldier; would I not have become the same as he? Would not the violence instilled in him have won over me as well? These are the questions I ask myself. You know as well as I do how

important it is that we tell the story of our people, so that the army officers who ordered the massacres will not have the final say (Perera xv).

The people in La Esmeralda are likely more aware of the power associated with literacy than those in neighboring villages because of their experiences in the refugee camps of Mexico and their exposure to the world of print. Some in the town also desire to learn English, either for the purpose of moving to the city where English knowledge is valuable in the workplace, becoming guides at a tourist location, or because of dreams of someday going to the United States. Since most of the library patrons in both La Esmeralda and Bolivia are children and youth, their immediate interests are likely not to tell their stories and transform the world, but with literacy and the wider world view afforded by their modest libraries, they are given tools for the future. There may never be widespread acceptance of the library and its resources until the children and youth who are presently being exposed to libraries become adults themselves. Ten or 20 years from now we will know the answer to this question. What is presently clear is that, far from being irrelevant, the libraries are perceived by children, teachers, and librarians as being very valuable to their communities. If the enthusiasm out of which the libraries were born can be sustained, they will continue to play an important role in addressing the educational, informational, and recreational needs in their communities.

Appendix: Library Survey for La Esmeralda, Peten, Guatemala

1. What do you think should be the most important goal of the library?

| | <i>Frequency</i> |
|------------------------------|------------------|
| Provide books/information | 15 |
| Support the school/students | 5 |
| Support the community | 3 |
| Improve literacy | 2 |
| Provide children's materials | 1 |
| Provide recreation | 1 |
| Other | 1 |
| No response | 6 |

Most respondents provided more than one answer.
Only their first answers have been recorded and categorized.

2. How often do you visit the library?

| | <i>Frequency</i> |
|--------------------------|------------------|
| a. Every day | 6 |
| b. Once or twice a week | 23 |
| c. Once or twice a month | 3 |
| d. Once or twice a year | 2 |
| e. Never | 0 |

3. What is the reason you usually go to the library?

| | <i>Frequency</i> |
|----------------------------------|------------------|
| a. To read stories | 10 |
| b. Because of school assignments | 18 |
| c. For puzzles or games | 3 |
| d. To look for information | 18 |
| e. Other | 3 |

Numerous respondents selected more than one option; all have been recorded.

4. Can you usually find what you need at the library?

| | <i>Frequency</i> |
|--------------|------------------|
| a. Yes | 4 |
| b. No | 3 |
| c. Sometimes | 27 |

5. Would you be willing to pay a fee to use the library?

| | <i>Frequency</i> |
|-------------|------------------|
| a. Yes | 7 |
| b. No | 7 |
| c. Maybe | 19 |
| No response | 1 |

6. Would you be willing to help in the library in some way? (Volunteer)

| | <i>Frequency</i> |
|----------|------------------|
| a. Yes | 22 |
| b. No | 1 |
| c. Maybe | 11 |

7. What do you wish the library would have that it does not have?

| | <i>Frequency</i> |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| More books | 19 |
| Furniture | 11 |
| Electricity/lighting | 9 |
| Queen of chess set | 5 |
| More books for research | 4 |
| Different building | 4 |
| More children's books | 3 |
| More chess sets | 2 |
| Charts | 2 |
| Science books | 2 |

The following were each mentioned once: more puzzles, blackboards, books on methodology, math books, geography books, songs to learn with guitar, an updated education encyclopedia, water for washing hands, notebooks and pencils, daily open hours, an English-Spanish dictionary, and decorations. Many respondents provided several answers; all have been recorded.

8. If you wanted to change something about the library (such as the building or open hours), what would it be?

| | <i>Frequency</i> |
|----------------------|------------------|
| Building/location | 19 |
| Add furniture | 6 |
| New children's books | 2 |
| More books | 2 |
| Schedule | 2 |
| More supplies | 1 |
| Install electricity | 1 |
| Should be quieter | 1 |
| Other | 7 |
| No response | 2 |

Many respondents provided several answers; all have been recorded.

9. How important is the library to the well-being of your community?

| | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| a. Not important | 0 |
| b. Somewhat important | 2 |
| c. Important | 0 |
| d. Very important | 10 |
| e. Without question, the community needs the library | 22 |

10. Aside from the library, where else do you obtain information that you need?

| | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| a. Ask someone else in the community | 19 |
| b. Ask someone else from another community | 8 |
| c. Newspaper | 6 |
| d. Radio | 5 |
| e. Other | 4 |

Several respondents selected more than one option; all have been recorded.

11. During the past three months, how many books have you read?

| | Frequency |
|-----------------|-----------|
| a. None | 12 |
| b. 1-5 | 8 |
| c. 6-10 | 14 |
| d. More than 10 | |

12. How many books do you have in your home? (approximately)

| | Frequency |
|-------------|-----------|
| None | 10 |
| 1-5 | 4 |
| 6-10 | 3 |
| 11-20 | 6 |
| 21-50 | 5 |
| 51+ | 2 |
| No response | 4 |

13. How often do you read periodicals or newspapers?

| | Frequency |
|--------------------------|-----------|
| a. Every day | 7 |
| b. Once or twice a week | 21 |
| c. Once or twice a month | 5 |
| d. Once or twice a year | 1 |
| e. Never | 0 |

14. My age is:

Mean = 20.5
Youngest = 13
Oldest = 38

15. My gender is:

| | <i>Frequency</i> |
|-------------|------------------|
| a. Male | 18 |
| b. Female | 14 |
| No response | 2 |

16. My highest level of schooling is:

| | <i>Frequency</i> |
|---|------------------|
| 7th grade | 8 |
| 8th grade | 9 |
| Middle school level (not specified) | 1 |
| 9th grade | 6 |
| High school graduate (likely a teacher) | 1 |
| Teacher | 7 |
| No response | 2 |

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