

## THE FUTURE OF RURAL LIBRARIES

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In this paper, I shall comment on the outlook for growth and development within rural libraries in the United States. Although questions have been raised in several sectors regarding the ability of the rural library to survive in the present society and economy, I think there is some evidence to suggest not only continuation of rural library service but also expansion of program capabilities.

Four themes will be developed to extend the paper's title and objective: the meaning of "rural"; population changes that are occurring in rural areas; special problems facing rural librarians; and an educated prediction regarding the future status of the rural library.

The word "rural" can be defined through the use of a dictionary, but it is better interpreted in a context. The U.S. Bureau of the Census' definition considers a population base of 2,500 or fewer individuals to be rural, although the term "rural" is also categorized conveniently as "non-metropolitan."<sup>1</sup> Other elaborations or nuances of definition-seeking permit individual semantic structuring, e.g., the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship identifies 25,000 people as rural; a rural library must be an independent unit as opposed to being part of a branch system in order to qualify for study by the Center.<sup>2</sup> While definitions may need changing and firming in the future, colleagues in the Cooperative Extension Service at

Pennsylvania State University indicate that the manner of defining "rural" at present has been approached as a literal free-for-all. Rural sociologists, also from the Pennsylvania State University, have indicated that it is not uncommon to find a population of 100,000 being used as a way of describing rural.

In addition to the census definition of rural, there are some additional aspects of rurality that provide meaningful interpretation. First, although not everyone in a small town is friendly to the same degree, usually it's simpler to get to know your neighbors; personal greetings, such as, "Good Morning," take on individual significance and satisfaction. Second, it's easier (after a break-in/waiting period reserved for outsiders) to become known in a community because of one's participation in social and/or civic activities; this, of course, can work to one's disadvantage because rumors and impressions spread faster than the proverbial wildfire. Third, while my judgements are obviously biased, it does seem that rural areas have a higher proportion than the city of individuals who are willing to volunteer their time for the good of the community; this may be witnessed in activities ranging from the Little League to the United Way. Fourth, as another aspect of rural living, it's natural (no pun intended) to have a vegetable garden in the summer; in fact, it may be almost an expected behavior; but, it's just as common to have the local farmers bring trucks filled with corn to sell to town residents (70,000 ears of corn were sold in this manner in Clarion by one farmer during the past summer). Fifth, for television-watchers, cable TV is a condition of rural living because stations are usually too far away to produce usable signals. Sixth, although this author admits to never making a scientific

study, on a per capita basis there are more pick-up trucks and recreational vehicles in rural towns than in cities; further, prominently visible in these vehicles are racks holding rifles or shotguns (or fishing rods) with a National Rifle Association decal on the window or bumper. Seventh, rural is also a place where the daily New York Times can't be purchased, and the absence of bookstores is a usual condition. Eighth, rural towns were "created" for mail-order stores around the United States; otherwise it's very difficult to obtain a size and color that fits. Ninth, another contemporary aspect of rural is the shopping mall, a characteristic of suburban living that is now creeping into small towns. While it's possible to continue to define rural in other ways, an interesting example happened recently following dinner at the Fryburg Hotel<sup>3</sup>, when the waitress not only signed her name on the back of the check but also added, "Smile, God Loves You." Maybe she thought my outlook needed boosting; nevertheless, I recognized the experience as the quintessence of rural living.

Realistically there are many rurals, all of which are altered by geography and socio-economic conditions. Problems which affect the mid-western states, such as the MX missile system and large scale agroeconomics, are not the same issues confronting the sun-belt states, which are experiencing unprecedented population growth in rural towns. While it is convenient to consider only two types of rural, i.e., the town or area that is expanding because of population growth and the rural town that is dying because of a lack of people and a non-existent economic base, clearly one must consider the rural phenomenon on a linear scale with these two examples at either ends of the measure.<sup>4</sup> It's more pleasant to consider the developmental aspects of rural areas particularly because these are the

ones which immediately confront the rural librarian. Symptomatic of "boom town" rural is the fact that for the first time in the history of the United States people are leaving metropolitan areas to settle (live) in non-metropolitan regions. Demographers indicate that unless some totally disruptive event were to occur, e.g., the total absence of gasoline for automobile driving, this out-migration from American cities is going to continue.<sup>5</sup> It is beyond my interest to speculate on all of the reasons for this population shift; presumably it has something to do with seeking a better life. It's my belief that living in a small town has become the chic thing to do; but whether it is fashionable or not to live in rural areas, increasing numbers of people are doing it, and not always to the delight of the current inhabitants of these towns which are doubling in size because of this current demographic trend.

Serious challenges are developing for librarians who now must face the demands of citizens who have previously lived in metropolitan areas and have come to expect a greater variety of alternative informational packages from which to choose. Somehow it has been convenient to think of the rural library as being insulated (with a pun intended) from such things as on-line data bases, etc., but the new wave of rural people may indeed be those who have already experienced some of the latest technological achievements in disseminating information and will simply expect the same services to be available in their new community. This situation must not be perceived pessimistically, however, but seen rather to be one way of promoting new dimensions or incentives for library service. First, of course, some effort must be made to ensure that all libraries have

telephones before systems of telecommunications are contemplated. But this is somewhat ahead of the current discussion.

The third element that I set out to discuss relates to the special problems confronting rural librarians. An appropriate question to ask is, "What is different about rural librarianship, i.e., how is it distinctive from any other type?" Clearly there are similarities, but for one who lives in a rural community and attempts to provide total library services, the previous question is easily answered.

First, "rural", notwithstanding population shifts, is characterized by geographical remoteness which provides the librarian with few other cultural and/or informational centers from which to draw support. This situation is considerably different in a metropolitan area where one has frequent access to a multiple of resources which may be pursued until a satisfactory answer is found. In many rural communities, there is no additional source of information to augment the public and school library's roles. Further, as a consequence of this geographical remoteness, tremendous strain is placed upon both the spirit and reality of library cooperation. For example, in research conducted by the Center among rural public libraries in Pennsylvania, it was found that on an average nine times as many books were requested through interlibrary loan than were actually loaned.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this is not a surprising revelation when it was learned that the average book collection was approximately 19,500 volumes. While the disparity between requests and loans may seem a casual matter, consider the time interval that is inevitably a corollary of even the most efficient interlibrary cooperation.

Another aspect of collection inadequacy can be interpreted from the Center's national investigation of reference services in small public libraries. Librarians were asked to identify the reasons that they were unable to answer some reference questions. The answer given most frequently to this question was "lack of specialized reference materials."<sup>7</sup> In case there should be some uncertainty over the meaning of "specialized" (since the reader knows perfectly well that all collections have limitations), it is characterized by the absence of such basic things as the Biography Index or the Statistical Abstract of the United States, not just the highly specialized Chemical Abstracts. Back-up reference service, whether it's provided by a district library or a consortium, is vital to the ability of the rural librarian to maintain a viable role in the community, but only if answers to reference questions are provided immediately. A librarian can not develop confidence among his constituents by telling them to wait several days for the answer to a question such as, "What is Minnesota Fats' real name?" This may not strike the reader as a crucial question, but students who are enrolled in L.S. 500, Basic Reference, at Clarion State College, continue to be taught that every reference question is of equal value to the questioner.

Another characteristic of rural librarianship may be illustrated by the differences in per capita support among rural public libraries in Pennsylvania, which was found to average \$3.15, while the per capita average in Pittsburgh was \$6.75 and Philadelphia's average was \$7.38.

Especially crucial among rural libraries, using Pennsylvania again as the model,<sup>8</sup> is the fact that the academically trained librarian is a rarity. It was discovered that Pennsylvania rural libraries, on average,

have less than one full-time trained person available. "Trained" in this context means a background including at least two years of college and nine credits of library science. While the situation in Pennsylvania is conspicuously bad, it is even worse in some other states. Clearly, without the assistance provided by volunteers, many libraries would not be open at all. Further, there is little doubt in my mind that the most significant factor for improving library service in rural areas is to upgrade the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of the librarian who more frequently than not must struggle daily to provide service without the assistance of any other agency.

Originally, it was my intention to conclude my discussion here. But a reading assignment for my students reminded me that, indeed, another "definition" of rural librarianship needs to be made. It generally relates to the mentality that considers rural libraries as either non-entities or undesirable or outcasts. The particular reading to which I am referring may not be typical but it nevertheless provides an attitude with which one must deal. In exploring the role of an administrator in a small library, the author (of this reading) explained that a fresh-from-library-school-graduate need not feel disappointed or deprived by working in a small library.<sup>9</sup> Even if it wasn't intended to be condescending, it presents the position that any self-respecting person would really choose to work in a large library. Certainly, the issue is a lack of understanding and sensitivity of the dimensions of the small library. Symptomatic of the problem, also, is a question that was asked by a "highly placed ALA person" who inquired of me whether reference service exists in the small (rural) public library. This is incredible, particularly when

one is reminded that 82 percent of all the public libraries in the United States can be found in population bases of 25,000 or fewer people.<sup>10</sup>

While it's possible to continue citing the characteristics of rural librarianship, the previous discussion should be adequate to convey the fact that there are sufficient nuances to distinguish nonmetropolitan library services from those of metropolitan areas.

The remainder of this paper relates to the future of rural libraries. And it is here where I am forced to deal largely with impressions of the way things are developing and the ways in which events will possibly occur.

1. The growth of small towns will continue and probably accelerate. As a consequence greater attention than ever before will be focused on rural libraries.
2. More effort will be invested in improving cooperative library services, especially as they relate to information services. This will happen unevenly, of course, because some states are more advanced in their cooperative ways than others. To be effective, however, library response time will have to be on-line and immediate. Readers' confidences will not be enhanced by waiting for days to have their questions answered regardless of where the library is located.
3. At the same time rural libraries will augment their in-library sources of information by beginning to employ on-line data bases and to develop unique files of local



community information. This will be possible because of the availability of microcomputers, such as the Radio Shack TRS-80, that undoubtedly will continue to be offered at an attractive price and will probably become cheaper in the near future.<sup>11</sup> In fact the immediate scene will probably yield tremendous developments in microcomputer technology that will affect us all. One recent journal article states:

It is difficult to predict just where the microcomputer will take library automation or what the next question of information technology will bring, but it is clear that if the current direction is any indication, it will substantially enhance the local option and<sup>12</sup> lessen dependence on consortia and networks.

Not many years ago I was among those individuals who scoffed at the idea of computers being utilized in small libraries. If there were to be changes, so my logic concluded, the institution least susceptible to computerization was the small rural library. That was before I heard of or attempted to use a microcomputer. The above confession is not easy to make. But after some practical experimentation with a TRS-80 and commercially available software, I find it relatively easy to build a file of reference books, community information resources, a library directory, circulation file, etc. Truthfully, my expertise is limited to reading the technical manuals, but it's a revealing

experience seeing what an amateur can accomplish without a technical background and with virtually no knowledge of computer programming. A computer is not the library any more than is a card catalog, charging system, or latest edition of an encyclopedia. Because of the personal nature of the rural library, it would be hoped that the frenzied attraction to technology that is overcoming many librarians would be viewed in the proper perspective.

4. The future of rural libraries is inextricably caught up in the same technology that confronts virtually all of American society -- video-cassette recorders, Voyager spacecrafts, cable television, high resolution television, COM catalogs, microprocessors, printing by laser, CRTS, etc. Marshall McLuhan was correct, of course, when he reminded us that we are immersed in electronic information and can't really understand what this technology is doing to us. Now that information seems to be everyone's business it is difficult sometimes to perceive the library's true role.
5. My sincere belief is that the consciousness level among rural librarians across the United States will continue to increase and become a basis for the consideration of mutually inclusive problems. It is not unthinkable that a Rural Library Association will emerge, without the trappings and bureaucracy witnessed in other na-

tional organizations, however. If a national organization doesn't develop, it will be likely that state groups of rural libraries will organize, perhaps separately or as parts of existing organizations. But the emphasis will be the same, i.e., to demand equal attention to the problem. Rural librarianship has been confined to a closeted existence for the last fifty years, but America has now changed and so must recognition for rural libraries.

6. I indicated earlier that the key to improving rural library services is the need to augment the training of rural librarians. This semester students attending the School of Library Science at Clarion from Ohio, Wyoming, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Delaware and Vermont have indicated their particular penchant for the issues and problems relating to rural library services. This is a positive signal that training needs for rural library service are being recognized. One may not be able totally to perceive or even recognize the future, but there is considerable reason for optimism.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. This can be observed in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's publication entitled, Rural Development Perspectives. Also, the U. S. Statistical Abstract provides for the population categories of "metropolitan" and "nonmetropolitan" in counting noses.
2. Readers interested further in activities of the Center are encouraged to contact the Coordinator, Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, School of Library Science, Clarion State College, Clarion, PA 16214.
3. For those who are consulting their Baedecker, be advised that this is a watering hole in the vicinity of Clarion.
4. See: Tom Stites, "Rural Areas Grow Again But the Day of Mitchell, Kansas Will Never Return." New York Times, 12 May 1981, p. A12.
5. An interesting discussion relating to this can be found in: George Sternlieb and James W. Hughes, "The Changing Demography of the Central City." Scientific American 243, No. 2 (August, 1980): 48-53.
6. This research was reported in: "Information Service and the Rural Library," Library Trends 28, No. 3 (Spring, 1980): 563-578.
7. Through a grant made available from the H.W. Wilson Foundation, the Center has been surveying public libraries serving populations under 25,000 people. Some initial survey results will be appearing soon in the library literature.
8. As of the 1970 Census, Pennsylvania's rural population was the largest in the United States at 3,363,499 out of a state population of 11,793,909.
9. Dorothy Sinclair, Administration of the Small Public Library. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1979), p. 4.
10. W. Vance Grant and Leo J. Eiden, Digest of Education Statistics, 1980. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1980), p. 219.
11. My obvious bias toward the Tandy Corporation is the result of the loan of equipment to the Center which has enabled us to develop a Microcomputer Lab for small libraries.
12. John Berry, "The Local Option," Library Journal 106, No. 15 (September 1, 1981): 1583.