

RURAL LIBRARIANSHIP: A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

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When Preston Levi (of the Shawnee Library System) and I began discussing a theme for today, one suggestion that we considered was for me to talk about the state-of-the-art of rural librarianship. Preston thought this a good idea and as we concluded our telephone conversation, this then I saw as my task. It became clear to me, however, in attempting to put this goal into written form, that it was more than just immodest to think that this could be done particularly when rural librarianship, as an identifiable concept, is only now emerging. Further, this speaker's specializations in Rural Sociology, Community Development, and Agriculture Extension Service, are less than introductory. So with your permission, this morning one would like to do two things: provide some personal impressions about rural librarianship; and to talk a little about the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship.

Several weeks ago this speaker was reviewing the cartoons in a newly arrived issue of the New Yorker; there was one cartoon that seemed fitting to share with you. It showed a group of people involved in what could be construed as a cocktail party with two women in the group looking from the window of the room out into the driveway, and the caption read, "You can take the boy out of the country but not the country out of the boy. So Herb decided we needed a pickup truck."

This speech was presented June 14, 1979, at the Summer Library Institute, McKendree College, Lebanon, Illinois.

Well, Clarion, that garden-spot of Pennsylvania, has a lot of pickup trucks, and recreational vehicles and Jeep Wagoneers. And it also has its share of privately owned helicopters that are used by the local coal strippers to survey their enterprises. In fact there is considerable concern that when all of the coal has been surface mined in Clarion County, of which Clarion is the county seat, that little industry will be left. Clarion also has a small but admirable public library, a large share of civic minded individuals who volunteer their time to the League of Women Voters, the J.C.s, the United Way, the volunteer fire company, and the American Legion Auxiliary. And with this last group, incidentally, as I read our twice weekly newspaper, I keep confusing its initials with that of the American Library Association, i.e., ALA.

But, unfortunately, Clarion is also a place where it is impossible to purchase a daily copy of the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal. Further, in fact, the waiting list for purchasing a copy from the local newsstand of the Sunday Times is so discretionary, I'm told, that the option is now being willed from generation to generation. Also, while we have what are known euphemistically as theaters, the selections take so long to get to Clarion that they are shown only slightly ahead of the television performance. While the rumor is not true that the original version of Gone with the Wind is being shown for the first time, it sometimes seems like it. Also my town is not a place where the public library is perceived as a community information center. But after all what should be expected with \$2.73 as operating per capita support?

Happily, Pennsylvania is not typical of every state's attitude and willingness to support public library service. In comparison, e.g., the great state of Illinois provides per capita support amounting to \$7.63, Iowa's is \$6.12, and Ohio provides \$7.04 per capita, while Pennsylvania only spends \$4.37. Further, although Pennsylvania does have both a county as well as a decentralized/hierarchical system of libraries, with four of our largest libraries as resource centers, it is also a state where it is estimated by our acting state librarian

that approximately a million and a half individuals are disenfranchised from library service. And because of the rurality of Pennsylvania, the vast majority of these "unserved" reside in rural areas. Before leaving this point one would like to add that based only on an elementary view of the system approach to library service shown in Illinois, that this student of libraries stands in awe. Pennsylvania has nothing to compare.

As the audience undoubtedly recognizes, defining the word "rural" is in itself no easy task. To some it is a word that conjures up the images of smallness, pastoral settings, clean air, and a less hurried existence than that encountered in the city. To others, indeed, it may represent the pickup truck mentioned earlier. And while rural jokes are not uncommon, there is nevertheless a fair amount of envy associated with living in rural America even by the jokesters. Demographically, the U.S. Bureau of the Census defines a rural area to comprise 2,500 or below populations, although in other instances and uses by other governmental agencies, rural is defined to suit the situation and so it is not uncommon that 50,000 or 100,000 population characteristics are used. In other cases the whole thing is fudged by simply referring to "metro" and "non-metro" areas.

After some consideration the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship adopted the population base of 25,000 or less to define its rural dimension. A second corollary of the definition is that a library be out of the sphere of influence of a metropolitan library unit. For example, this criterion would eliminate the suburban branch of a large, urban-based public library from investigation even though it was located in a city of under 25,000. But insofar as type of library, the Center is concerned with all varieties and systems that fall within the definitions. It might be of some interest to note here that by using the 25,000 population definition, 480 out of Pennsylvania's 650 public libraries can be classified as rural. And from only a cursory examination of the publication entitled Illinois Public Library Statistics, it appears that a vast majority of public libraries in this state would also fall under 25,000.

It might also be of some interest to note that based on the 1970 census, Pennsylvania led the country with a rural population of 3,363,000, followed by populations in the states of North Carolina, New York, Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois, which is recorded as having a rural population of 1,884,000.

The title of this presentation suggests that rural librarianship is awakening to a new consciousness. Perhaps at this point we might explore or suggest some reasons for this happening. First, it seems to me that as a phenomenon of library service, even though rural libraries have always existed, its time has simply come. As an illustration of this, it was not long after the Center was established that we received letters of good wishes and suggestions of help from throughout the United States including American Samoa and the Mariana Islands. In fact a colleague from American Samoa added that he (in this instance) hoped that at some point a Samoan might come to Clarion to study. If one examines the distance between Clarion, Pennsylvania, and American Samoa, however, one must conclude that there was already some favorable mental set toward rural library services rather than singly the beauty of Pennsylvania's forests and mountains attracting a Samoan librarian. As other examples of this "time is right" concept, one should add the fact that we are speaking today on this subject and that next year for the first time an issue of Library Trends will be published dealing with rural librarianship. Certainly these are modest examples to prove a point, but it is my belief that they are indicative.

A second reason for rural librarianship emerging is the complexity of our society and the likewise complexity of providing library service today. Librarianship does not and in fact never did mean a single thing and librarians are becoming more facile at articulating the uniqueness of their constituencies. It would seem this articulation springs from several causes, not the least of which is an altruistic view of what library service means at a practical level. But it also emerges because library services in rural America have existed quietly and have at the same time been overshadowed by

American librarianship's preoccupation with the large, metropolitan library model. Rural librarianship has been forgotten for the last twenty years. Also it is unfortunately clear that a national consciousness of librarianship has excluded the rural and small library from active consideration. Further, it is clear that the realities of providing library service at a local or regional level must exclude a dependency upon any national agency or organization to provide leadership.

Third, and most important, is the fact that there is appreciation of an emerging, distinct rural librarianship which has as its service characteristics small population units, relatively modest financial support, a dearth of professional staff with which to provide service--all of which operate in an environment of geographical remoteness.

And, finally, the changes in the stereotype of rural life as singly a farm economy and the new pressures created by the arrival of individuals who previously lived in the city and now expect the same services as those to which they were formerly accustomed, are additional factors which have caused rural librarianship to come out of the closet. Whether or not, however, the metropolitan exodus will continue in the light of the ever increasing gasoline costs and the constant inflationary spiral must be judged later. But in any event we cannot escape the changes that have occurred and that will occur in rural libraries.

It seems somewhat obvious, however, that rural librarianship will mean different things in different states. While there are similarities of circumstances, it is somewhat apparent that rural libraries in American Samoa or New Mexico or North Carolina or Illinois or Pennsylvania are affected differently by attitudes, imagination, and financial support within each state. As this speaker indicated earlier, Pennsylvania has no analogs to the imaginative, effective systems of library service which exist here in Illinois. But, also, it never has really been an issue of debate, i.e., in Pennsylvania of whether or not the very rurality of Pennsylvania libraries has

been a major obstacle to library financial support and development. It is interesting to speculate, nevertheless, and it is also of interest to note that per capita support for public libraries in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh is approximately \$3.00 or more above the state's per capita average of \$4.37.

As an example of state differences, and with the audience's tolerance, I should like to review some of the data that has resulted from the Center's first research effort. This study while ostensibly aimed at the information services of rural libraries in Pennsylvania, also generated data about the general conditions under which library service is provided. Your patience is sought since this research dealt only with Pennsylvania. Perhaps, however, we may be able to compare and contrast circumstances in Illinois and Pennsylvania.

In October of 1978 eighty questionnaires were mailed to the widest geographic sampling of rural public libraries possible, i.e., to at least one library in each of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. After a reminder by telephone and then a written follow-up to those who had not responded, thirty-five questionnaires were returned. Parenthetically, since at the start no directory of rural libraries existed, per se, it was first necessary to determine the population for all of the towns and cities in Pennsylvania supporting a public library and to identify those that met the definition of 25,000 or less. Also it seems from the disheartening 44 percent return, that the use of the mailed questionnaire as a central technique of data gathering is subject to considerable scrutiny.

But based on the 35 libraries responding, the following data were compiled. First, the average population of the towns surveyed was 4,418 but the average population served was actually 10,500. Per capita support was only \$3.15--a dollar under the state average. One library incidentally had a per capita expenditure of only \$1.08. And while the libraries surveyed were open an average of 39.5 hours/week, there were only 9.3 professional librarians (MLS) available among the 35 libraries to provide service. As additional staff there were 11.1 provisional librarians (in the Pennsylvania scheme this is someone

who has four years of college and has completed 12 credits of library science) and 10.1 library assistants (someone who has completed two years of college and nine credits of library science) among the 35 libraries. An average of the professional, provisional, and library assistants was .87 person/library. Were it not for the 5.2 volunteers and clerks available in each library, there is no doubt that these libraries would remain closed.

The average book collection was 19,405 items, but each library heavily relied on the interlibrary loan channel by borrowing nine times as many books as were lent. Interestingly, the state average shows only an 18 percent difference between borrows and loans.

Since the survey was ultimately aimed at a library's reference service, the remaining data reflect that. For example, as a starter, 60 percent of the libraries said that they did not keep a record of questions asked. So based on estimates or on records kept, the responding libraries indicated that on an average they answered approximately 6 questions per hour during a work week. These six represented all types of questions asked. While this is a small number of questions, perhaps it is not too surprising in the light of the staff available. On the question of the degree to which the libraries provided either individual or group instruction, however, the data indicated that less than .5 contact is made per hour, a rather depressing figure.

Regarding the subject nature of the questions asked, the data show that a majority reflect school assignments, history, genealogy, and how-to questions. Those questions which the librarians had the greatest difficulty answering, as one might guess, were in the scientific, technical, and business areas. And finally, as reasons to explain difficulties in providing reference service, the survey illustrated that a lack of specialized reference sources and the technical nature of the question asked, as being the two major areas of concern.

The preceding discussion, of course, was only a summary view of the research but was meant at least to suggest something about

rural librarianship in Pennsylvania. Not just by coincidence I brought copies of the questionnaire used in the survey along this morning with the hope that enough of you in the audience, after examining it, might be willing to have the Center mail out copies so that a comparison might be done between Illinois and Pennsylvania. It seems to me that this is the kind of practical cooperation that would benefit all of us.

What are some additional areas in which we can cooperate? It seems to me that there are three.

First, we can build on the momentum of interest in rural librarianship through workshops, conferences, and institutes similar to the Summer Library Institute at McKendree. Second, we can perform the research necessary to illustrate the similarities and the differences of rural librarianship with other aspects of library service. Third, we can signal our library organizations and associations and those who are given a responsibility to represent American librarianship that the needs of those served by the small and medium sized libraries have been neglected and must be made a part of a new creative consciousness to benefit all Americans.