

THREE TYPES OF LIBRARIES SERVE RURAL PATRONS

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We are all sitting in a waiting room about to witness the birth of rural library service as a viable and important member of the library family. The child, Rural Library Service, that is to be born will face a world with a harsh and sometimes hostile environment. The realities that confront the newly born are problems of definition, organization, needs assessment, social forces and the library establishment.

Abandoning the medical metaphors let us examine each of these rural realities beginning with defining rural.

Rural can be defined in three major ways: by location, by vocation and by culture.

As a location, rural is frequently defined in terms of a community with a population no greater than a specific limit. However, the size of this limit differs significantly. The U.S. Census Bureau limits rural to communities of 2,500. The Library Services & Construction Act (LSCA) uses 10,000; The Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship uses 25,000; the National Rural Center, 50,000 and some agencies use the non-metro 100,000 population as a cut off point.

In defining rural in terms of vocation Encyclopedia Britannica states that field activities require relatively high ratio of land per person.¹ A population that is engaged in such activities as the production of foods, fibers and raw materials can be considered rural.

The Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA)

Culturally, rural is best described as "you can take him out of the country but you can't take the country out of him." This rural identity leads to "rural library" problems in the Appalachian-settled neighborhoods of such urban giants as Cincinnati and Chicago.

The library community, in order to identify and meet rural needs, must come to a clearer and better understanding of the dimensions and scope of rural library problems. The American Library Association, perceiving rural issues to be simply a public library problem, has delegated rural library concerns under the heading of Public Library Association's Small and Medium Sized Library Section's Rural Library Service Committee (PLA/SMLS). However, rural library service is not simply restricted to public libraries in small American cities. It is also a concern of schools, colleges and universities, and special libraries worldwide.

There are three types of rural libraries simply referred to here as RL 1, RL 2, and RL 3. RL 1's are public libraries located in small rural communities. This kind of town that was humorously described in the Des Moines Register on January 29, 1979. The Iowa newspaper ran a contest in which readers were to respond to the phrase, "you can tell you're in a small Iowa town when..." Winners responses included, "...when you don't need to use your car's turn signals because everyone knows where you're going"; "...you're born on June 13th and receive prizes from the merchants for being the second baby of the year"; "...3rd street is on the edge of town".

RL 2's are libraries other than public libraries set in rural areas. These include schools, colleges, and special libraries.

RL 3's are agencies that support the work of the local rural library and also serve patrons primarily through bookmobile and mail-a-book programs, interlibrary loan and backup reference service and special collections. Examples of RL 3's are county, regional and state libraries.

The recent interest in rural libraries has centered on RL 1's. The Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship in Clarion, PA has been one of the leading forces in the rural library movement. Through grants, such as those from the Wilson Foundation, the Center conducts workshops, publishes the journal Rural Libraries, and conducts research particularly in the area of information and reference services.

PLA/SMLS Rural Library Service Committee, during its 3 years of existence, has focused primarily on RL 1 libraries. At the 1982 ALA annual conference the committee approved a 5-year plan with heavy emphasis on research, education and a mission to represent rural interests within the library community.

NCLIS has sponsored studies on the information gathering patterns of farmers, sponsored an exhibit of a "tomorrow" rural library at an International Futurist Conference and have explored ways for rural libraries and extension offices to work together. In its 3rd year the Rural Library Service Newsletter published at the Northwest Regional Library, Sioux City, Iowa covers rural news, information, and tips pertinent to library services and operations.

Little attention has been given by the library community to the problems of RL 2 libraries until recently. Two examples are: "Law Library Services to Rural Lawyers: The Saskatchewan Approach" Douglas T. MacEllven, Law Library Journal, Summer, 1980, pgs. 611-624; and "Delivery of Health-Related

Information to Rural Practioners." Ann W. Kabler, Bulletin Medical Library Association, Oct. 81, pgs. 382-386.

RL 3 or the support agencies may be the most vulnerable of the rural libraries because of their frequent dependency on federal funds. A major concern to them and the local library is: what contingency plans are being developed and conceived at the national, state, and regional levels to continue services to rural communities in the event that federal or state support is greatly reduced or even eliminated?

While the differences in rural libraries are clearly overlooked by the library community, even less is known about the information needs of the rural patron. Frequently when conversing with urban librarians about rural libraries they inevitably will ask, "Isn't the extension office handling that?"

While Extension does provide useful and helpful services in farm management, soil testing, home economics and other farm and home related programs, the Extension Office is not the end all or be all in information delivery to the rural community. The Extension Office is known for its agri-related services. However, the farmer which they serve represents only one-sixth of the total rural population.

To provide effective library service, one must know the information needs of its community. In "Library and Information Service Needs of the Geographic Remote," authors Ann Hayes Dennon and Anne Shelby wrote: "Significant differences exist between urban and rural areas in life styles, attitudes, and values." They enumerate twenty-three distinct economical, political and sociological areas that shape the information needs of the rural patron.

circulation. Training efforts have usually been 1 hour, 1 day or 1 week seminars on basic library skills. Some seminars have the strange twist of having teachers, the facilities and even the meals graded while the students' knowledge goes untested.

Furthermore once the federal and state support is withdrawn these programs frequently die. In 1963 some seven years after the implementation of LSA, the staff of the Library Services Branch, U.S.O.E., wrote ...when federal funds have been withdrawn, it has not been uncommon to find that the quality of service as measured by materials added, personnel skills available, and physical facilities has declined still further.⁴

Recently a state with a large rural population completed a \$500,000 three-year LSCA automation project. The pilot project allowed selective rural libraries to experiment with OCLC's interlibrary loan and cataloging systems. One wonders what the impact may have been on that state's rural libraries if the monies instead had been used in providing \$5,000 college scholarships to 100 rural librarians.

Jesse Shera in Foundations of the Public Library observed that libraries are distinctly an urban phenomenon. Thus it should be no surprise when rural libraries fail against the yard sticks of the urban library. Libraries may fail in rural areas but there is a need for rural library service to flourish. What that service is to be is dependent on competent personnel and knowledge of the information needs of the rural patron. Turning to Shera again, paraphrasing the concluding paragraph of his book: only when the rural library practitioner understands the goals of the rural community can rural library service be precisely defined. Then the rural patron will be properly served.⁵

FOOTNOTES

1. Encyclopedia Britannica. 1975 ed., Vol. 16: 25.
2. Ralph Dunbar. College & Research Libraries, July 1947.
3. Hayes, and Drennan, Library & Information
Service Needs: 184.
4. "Library Services Act: Progress Report," Bowker Annual 1963: 122.
5. Jesse Shera. Foundations of the Public Library.