

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING RURAL

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Dr. Bernard Vavrek, director of the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, presented this paper at a meeting of the North Dakota Library Association on September 20, 1984 in Williston.

The presentation considered three things: trends in rural library services; the benefits of being a rural librarian; and, the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship.

It is a particularly appropriate time to be discussing rural library services. With your permission, this speaker would like to review some of the reasons why this is true and why national attention is focusing on rural librarianship in North Dakota, West Virginia, Texas, wherever...

Without question, a major factor in the reexamination of rural libraries is that for the first time in the history of the United States more people are moving to rural areas than urban places. From the last census, a 12% population growth factor is reported in rural America but correspondingly there has been only a 9% expansion in urban places.

The data would favor rural areas even more substantially if it were not for the effect of the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA), which unfortunately aggregates an entire county population into the urban category if there is one SMSA within the county's borders. This recently happened not far from Clarion in Centre County where Penn State University is located. A new SMSA was declared in University Park, Pa., making all of Centre County, by legal definition, urban. However, outside of University Park, itself, the county continues to be decidedly rural, as a majority of towns have 2,500 or fewer people, which is the legal interpretation of rural. Incidentally, the Census Bureau's definition of SMSA is one city of 50,000 people or two adjoining cities of 25,000 people each.

Another reason for the renewed interest in rural services, stems from the fact that simply stated, "the time is right." An illustration of this can be seen by the fact that meetings similar to this one in which we are participating at Williston are occurring with some regularity throughout the United States. If it is too generous to consider the frequency of these meetings as "regular," it is fair to report that librarians throughout the country have created opportunities for discussing rural matters that,

heretofore, did not exist.

While its significance may be somewhat concealed, the arrival of the Spring, 1980, issue of Library Trends also helped to engender renewed interest in rural librarianship. This publication marked the first major effort of the library science literature to review issues pertaining to rural library services. Library Trends has had a positive impact on promoting the visibility of rural libraries and deserves to be added to our list.

Although it was a long time in coming, the American Library Association, through the Public Library Association, has finally organized a committee dealing with rural library service's. Unfortunately, the membership of ALA is dominated by individuals who work in large or medium-sized libraries, and as a consequence the huge majority of libraries -- at least public ones -- has been hidden from view. In this latter regard, it must be remembered that over 80% of the public libraries in the United States can be found in rural areas. (This figure is based on the CSRL's definition of 25,000 or fewer people constituting rural.) If one uses the Bureau of the Census' definition of 2,500 or fewer people, the number of public libraries in rural America drops to a miserly 62%. Very clearly, the growing knowledge of this

numerical superiority has been another reason in the "re-birth" of rural librarianship.

The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science has also had a salubrious effect on creating national attention for rural library services. As you know, one of NCLIS's main responsibilities is the promotion of information access in rural America. This agency has responded in a positive manner with the organization of an entity called NABRIN, i.e., National Advisory Board on Rural Information Needs. At the present time, plans are being formulated for a more permanent rubric within NCLIS. This is a particularly healthy development for those of us interested in rural services. Hopefully, NCLIS will be able to rise above any political concerns as it maximizes its leadership role.

Finally, to the list of items already mentioned, with some modesty, I should like to add the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, which has preceded Library Trends, ALA, and NCLIS, in providing an activity concerned with rural librarianship. The Center's present activities will be briefly reviewed.

My instructions were to discuss all that is positive about being a rural librarian. A more frequently followed approach, instead of emphasizing the positive, has been to

review the problems facing rural librarians, since there are so many. To talk about geographical isolation, under-staffed and under-supported libraries, all existing within a constant struggle to provide the proper information services for library clientele, only appears a natural path to follow.

In speaking to the contributions of rural librarians, it seems to me that of paramount importance is the fact that you really represent the spirit of America. The sense of resourcefulness, imagination, and struggle, which made America great, are all characteristics of the rural information provider.

Second, the rural librarian continues to practice the belief that people are still the central concern of librarianship. While this should be a natural enough comment to make in relation to any library, it seems that some librarians are today confused on this very issue. It sometimes appears that libraries are custodians of equipment and techniques rather than places for people. In rural America, of course, people centered services are derived from the fact that interpersonal communications represent the main means by which rural Americans communicate and gather information. It is part of the sociology of rural life.

The third way in which rural librarians excel is in

relation to their ability to provide the concept of the community information center at a meaningful, tangible, and personal level. While the realities of the community information center may be an illusion in some communities, rural librarians have the ability to deal with the information explosion in a direct sense. Knowledge of the community combined with bibliographic skills enable the rural librarian to provide significant control over the thousands of things which comprise most libraries. Even if it is not possible to develop a truly balanced collection of resources in a total sense, the rural librarian's insight on the "right book for the right reader," is nurtured by his or her personal knowledge of the community. No urban librarian has the same opportunity to provide this professional role.

Fourth, as a continuation of the previous item, rural librarians also help to provide insulation against a society which is at its base becoming steadily dehumanizing. Increasingly today this is being accomplished through the application of unnecessary technology. Because of the balance of information organized in the rural library, perspectives are provided in a fashion allowing for the maximization of individualized choice.

Rural librarians must be careful, however, not to follow

the lead of some in the library profession who are particularly enamored with technology, particularly microcomputers, to the point where it appears that computers have a more central role to play than people. In the rush to apply technology, in my view, it has been more helpful to the companies and vendors who provide the equipment than to our constituencies. Since microcomputers are so popular, my comments may seem particularly naive. They are offered, however, over a concern for the way in which librarianship is drifting, away from people and toward the manipulation of techniques and technologies. If we convert our libraries into wonders of technology, at the expense of our clients, what has been gained? Further, it must also be realized, that in a needless and perhaps reckless charge toward computers of all types, the essence of the library may be transformed into a paradigm that is not recognizable from any other agency or provider that has information as its central goal. In all instances, technology -- whatever kind-- must be considered only as a tool for problem solving.

I have repeated this theme, about unnecessary technology in the library, before several audiences. Sometimes my comments are interpreted as coming from someone who is not only attempting to stop progress, but who also is a classic

Luddite. My intent is quite the contrary. Librarianship has already been greatly changed by technology and no one has asked our opinion about such matters. Librarians have no alternative possible other than to learn as much as they can about the real and imagined use of technology in the library. Specifically, we must be particularly concerned about the use of microcomputers -- even in the smallest rural library.

The fifth way in which the rural librarian provides a unique contribution is by being a positive role model in the community. For many people, librarianship is a profession attempting to run away from a stereotyped historical view of itself. Because the rural librarian is well-known to the community, positive images of what it means to be a librarian can directly overcome decades of role uncertainty. Further, it can have the effect of encouraging young people into the profession.

One of the most significant effects of being a rural librarian was saved until last. It strikes at the role of the librarian himself or herself in that one is capable of remarkable success that is both visible and measurable. Most rural librarians labor in independent library entities. This opportunity for individual action is one of our strengths.

Programs, services, ideas, can all be formulated without the necessity of consulting and pleasing multi-level authorities. No one is an island, of course. But the rural librarian has a singular chance for action.

Our services and their effects are directly measurable. These same things can not be said in relation to urban areas because there are too many institutions vying for attention.

Unfortunately, for rural librarians these aspects of services and benefits are still very much in need of improvement. The Center's research has shown that rural librarians are not inclined toward community surveys, in fact 60% have not completed such a survey within the last five years. Further, we have not as yet gathered the statistical data needed to explain the library's relevance in the community on such matters as how it contributes to the town's economics or how it has helped to create a better place to live. It is absolutely essential that such matters be considered and that collateral data be collected.

It is difficult for me to imagine, after reviewing the preceding aspects of rural librarianship with you, how anyone would want to be anything else but a rural librarian. I trust that you feel the same. But please keep in mind that

what we have been discussing is the potential for success. As with many other things, they must be put into action.

For the final part of my presentation for this evening, I should like to discuss a little about the development and services of the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, which had its beginnings in 1978.

The Center not only grew out of a sensitivity to and a consequence of the rural landscape, but with the overall goal of extending the knowledge about the nature and role of rural libraries in the United States. It was an effort to do something practical. Instead of only describing librarianship in the classroom, the Center provided the opportunity of bringing about some practical benefits and to create or be a catalyst for change. Also, to be honest, it has been fun being a kind of "champion" for the neglected.

The College of Library Science, with its new identity, Clarion University of Pennsylvania, is the corporate base for the CSRL. No separate funding is allocated to the Center and it is important to understand that it is more an activity of the faculty and students than a building or separate facility. Further, at Clarion, we have to make it clear that rural librarianship is only one of our library interests, not our sole concern. While local administrative support has been

crucial to our development, the assistance provided by the H.W. Wilson Foundation has been essential to our ability to grow. The confident support offered by the Wilson Foundation has provided us with the flexibility needed to approach a relatively new dimension in library research directed towards rural institutions. Without the help provided by graduate students in the College of Library Science, however, the Center would have little chance of surviving much less of success.

Over the last few years we have attempted to provide a number of things in addition to the research mentioned a moment ago. Probably, our publication efforts have been and continue to be our most active enterprise. In addition to Rural Libraries, our semi-annual journal, we also publish occasional bibliographies dealing with various aspects of library services, selected monographs, and we have ventured into the software market with the recent publication of OUTPUTM, which is a microcomputer version of Output Measures for Public Libraries, published by the American Library Association. Parenthetically, OUTPUTM is configured for the IBM microcomputer. Other than Rural Libraries, our current best-seller is a publication entitled, Marketing Manual for Librarians, which is intended to be an introductory guide to marketing techniques.

In addition to publishing, the CSRL participates in conferences, such as this one in Williston, and hosts its own workshops and other continuing education activities. As a matter of fact, we have just concluded a two-year NEH grant with three public libraries in western Pennsylvania, during which time we hosted 15 different workshops dealing with various aspects of humanities programming in rural areas. We also organize conferences for other groups. In April of 1985, the Center conducted a two-day conference on rural services sponsored by the Rural Libraries Caucus and others in Michigan.

Along with continuing education efforts, the College of Library Science at Clarion offers graduate courses on topics dealing with rural library services. Currently, we have several such three-credit courses. Perhaps, I should take the opportunity at this point, to mention that the Center's interests in rural library services encompass all types of libraries. Our courses for academic credit reflect this perspective.

Beyond research, publishing, and continuing/formal education, the Center makes itself available in a consultative role to the library field. By that, I mean we attempt to respond to inquiries from librarians who are requesting

information or from those who are seeking our view on things. In this regard, one of the interesting things that recently happened was a request from Congressman Panetta of California for information relating to rural library statistics. These were later cited in the Congressional Record by him as he sought to positively affect the recent extension of LSCA.

The Center also maintains a service that we hope is beneficial to both employer and prospective employee. We call it "Jobline". It is a free advertising service for employers who are attempting to locate personnel for rural areas. For job-seekers, we charge a handling fee of \$1.00 for those who wish to receive this periodic list.

Finally, and most recently, the Center has attempted to organize the beginnings of a national electronic data base by establishing a mailbox entitled, Ruraline, through CLASS and the Bibliographic Center for Research in Denver. We hope that Ruraline will provide an incentive for OnTymeII users in CLASS to correspond with us on a regular basis.

In conclusion, at the present time the topic of rural librarianship is riding the crest of acceptance and interest. It is up to us to continue this.