

DRAGON SEEDS
PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN IN RURAL LIBRARIES

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The weather was fine: intermittent clouds over miles and miles of newly harvested camel-colored fields. Now and then the sky was interrupted by the passage of sparrows or crows or a single hawk. My car radio stuttered out a distant talk show that I only half listened to. I was straining my eyes to find a town down the road called Cornell that boasted Amity Township Library. My traveling companions were a dragon, two little boys made of cloth and a paper maché librarian. I also had a set of Dewey Decimal System Finger Puppets. My friends and I were to be the main attraction at the Children's Book Week Story Hours in Cornell, Illinois.

Our library system, located in Central Illinois, serves 25 public libraries scattered throughout a geographic area of about 2,700 square miles. Twenty-three of these libraries could be considered rural as they serve populations ranging from about 800-4,000. Most of these libraries have only one or two staff members who are expected to accomplish all

aspects of library service. These demands often leave little time to do the extra things, like presenting story times for youngsters.

Most of these librarians feel that programming for children is extremely important. Not only is it an effective means for getting kids interested in books and reading, it also gets their parents into the library and offers them a half hour to an hour of browsing time. In addition, story hours provide a great opportunity for publicity. Most small town papers are eager for such features.

Because of limitations in the form of time, budget and staff expertise, our member libraries have long looked to the system for assistance in programming for children. The Corn Belt Library System has a tradition of providing materials, ideas and personnel willing to visit member libraries and present puppet shows and story times. What the system offers in the way of direct programming has now coalesced into a number of specific options for members (public, school, special and academic):

1. A monthly program.
2. A series of programs lasting four to eight weeks.
3. Assistance with part of a series put on by the local library.
4. Special programs for holidays and library observations (Children's Book Week, National Library Week).
5. Special requests such as book sales and open houses.

The staff tries to make the system-presented programs something special. The most effective programs are puppet shows. The shows are usually part of a longer program which also includes books, stories, songs, sometimes games or flannel board stories -- but the puppet shows remain the outstanding feature. Corn Belt System has a substantial puppet collection. This collection has been strongly supported by our member libraries who could never afford to purchase such resources on their own. Also, by adding to the collection gradually and by innovative means we have not spent large sums of money. Any member library is welcome to borrow any of our puppets at any time.

Some of the puppets were handmade. Perhaps our most interesting puppets were made by an inmate of the Dwight Correctional Center, a women's prison whose library the Corn Belt System administers. She used paper maché and cloth to create a fascinating collection of witches, devils and many cross-cultural puppets. For Halloween 1984 we did a puppet show called "Miss Witch America" using the witches and other fantastic looking females. Debbie Samuelson, one of our previous children's librarians, also created a number of paper maché animal puppets, including a lion, raccoon, frog, monster, pig, lamb and duck. Corn Belt System has purchased

a couple of plush puppets including a dog and a monkey, and this past year we purchased cloth puppets from Nancy Renfro Studios. Among these are a creature from outer space, a superhero, a clown, a flower and three tiny mice that fit on fingers.

The library system owns a portable, table-top stage that is very simple and easy to use, yet large enough to provide cover for two people, if necessary, and plenty of room for laying out puppets.

One problem librarians have encountered is in finding puppet show scripts. Several of our children's librarians have written shows. Sometimes scripts are borrowed from other puppeteers. Often stories are adapted from familiar fairy tales, folk tales and nursery rhymes or a children's book. The collection of scripts also circulates.

I usually write my own scripts to suit the occasion or theme. Actually, I don't very often work from scripts at all, but rather from outlines. The story can be adapted for various ages of children or programs requiring different lengths of time. It is easier to work from a basic plot line supplemented here and there with catchy lines or notations for movement and gestures. This is also more interesting for me since I don't ever repeat myself exactly no matter how many

times I do the show. Try to work with something you like, get to "know" the puppets, and give them consistent personalities.

For Children's Book Week 1984 I did "Dragon for Rent" in many public and school libraries. The show involved two little boys who had to find some way of paying for a flower pot they broke while playing soccer. They decide to enter an unusual pet contest, but need a pet. They see an ad in the paper for 'Dragon for Rent'. One of the boys talks to the dragon who agrees to be in the pet show if, afterwards, the boy will help him find his way home. The dragon and boy win the pet show and the dragon then tells the boy that he used to live in a library book, but that one day he stepped out to see the world and now can't get back in. The boy tries several things that don't succeed and finally seeks the help of his librarian who tells him to read the dragon a book about dragons. If he gets interested enough, the librarian says, he should slip right back in. And so it is. The little boy is sad about losing his friend, but the librarian assures him that he can come in and visit the dragon in the book any time and that he can even check him out and take him home. Everyone lives happily ever after.

Occasionally, I do an audience participation puppet show

in which the children get to hold the puppets and say simple lines. This obviously works best with small groups. The book Giraffe Hat was adapted for a show. Giraffe finds a hat in the jungle but then loses it. He goes through the jungle asking his friends if they have seen the hat. One child works the searching giraffe and the others use different animals who reply, "No," when asked if they've seen the hat, and then suggest another animal to try.

Besides doing the puppet shows, Corn Belt System librarians also offer training in puppetry. We will either travel to the member library to show the librarian the ins and outs of puppetry or else the librarian may come to system headquarters to view the collections and talk about ways to perform. Last year the system sponsored a day-long puppet workshop together with three other library systems, but mostly it is individual training. Usually the librarian is shown all the materials available, some tricks about manipulating and changing puppets, doing voices, characterization and adapting books for scripts. The different things that puppets can be used for, like explaining library services, good manners or a lesson to students are demonstrated. We also suggest ways in which puppets, props and a performance area can be created. Every member librarian who visits the system is invited to see

the puppet collection or some puppets in action and to learn a little more about the art of puppetry in the library.

Puppets are not all the Corn Belt System offers by way of programming aids. There is a collection of flannel board sets for circulation and a monthly flannel board subscription service in which the library sends out one or two seasonal flannel board stories and figures per month to member libraries. This has been a very popular program and more and more libraries are using flannel boards.

Stories with special props, like pictures on a glove, are yet another story hour aid that circulate. A collection of story hour books that we have found especially useful also circulates. The staff makes suggestions for give-aways for children which have included patterns for Christmas and Easter coloring books, special bookmarks and finger puppets.

My most successful finger puppets are my Dewey Decimal System finger puppets. They consist of ten characters (a dinosaur, pegasus, a space man, a marionette, and 6 others) each with its call number printed on it and a wrap around band to fit around a child's finger. With the puppets comes a sheet outlining and explaining what types of books can be found in the various number areas so that children learn 1) what the Dewey System is and who invented it; 2) why it is necessary and

3) how it is organized. We have an old man puppet (one of the ones from Dwight) that we have christened Melvil Dewey and he usually introduces the finger puppets.

Almost all of our member libraries now offer some kind of story time presentation, at least once in a while. The impact of story hours can be measured in increased attendance, increased circulation and in the increase of interest expressed by parents and teachers. What really can't be measured is the increase in imagination and the better understanding of life that books presented in this manner provide for children.

As I drove home from Cornell that November evening, I felt satisfied. The forty or so kids that had come to the library program had been attentive and many had stayed after to talk to me, look at the puppets and check out books. Hopefully they will remember that dragons live in books and lots of other wonderful, magical things besides. I watched as the setting sun spread a bronze patina over the fallow fields. I knew that the dragon seeds I had sown would yield a special harvest, one as intangible, perhaps, as the sunset, but no less real.

PUPPETS AND PUPPETRY
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This bibliography was supplied by the editor of Rural Libraries.
The following is a list of sources for supplies and inspiration:

Nancy Renfro Studios
1117 W. 9th St.
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Puppeteers of America
(Newsletter)
14 Eaton Way
Mill Valley, CA 94941