

## THE REALITIES OF COLLECTION BUILDING IN THE RURAL PUBLIC LIBRARY

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Rural libraries of my experience, both in the West (Montana) and the East (Massachusetts) have a number of common concerns. Whether they serve ranchers or hill town farmers, rural libraries all deal with the same basic problems. They lack an adequate tax base for the type of service they are trying to give, and most of them are supervised by people who look for more than financial reward. To say that many rural librarians work because they enjoy performing a community service may sound trite, but those who make a living wage are scarce indeed.

As a federation or a regional librarian I ran many workshops in basic library skills. We tried to deal with the pressing problems of rural library service and the difficulty of maintaining an adequate collection. Inevitably we talked a great deal about weeding. There was a lot of interest but there was also a wariness on their part that took me a while to understand.

We could agree in principle on the reasons to weed: the need for space, the need for an attractive collection that would draw patrons; the need to establish public trust in the reliability and timeliness of the collection--above all the need to know the collection, a necessity that only daily caretaking can keep sharp. To weed our collections,

book by book, shelf by shelf is to learn its strengths and weaknesses. The great difference however, was that they did not give weeding the same importance that I did. They did not always see it as part of the ongoing process of collection building.

Each workshop I fielded their objections. Most often they pleaded time. With only 10 or 15, or 20 hours paid time each week to keep the library together, how could they weed? They inevitably complained about the lack of an adequate book budget. There was no way they could replace many of the books they needed to throw out. Wasn't it better to have something outdated on a subject than nothing at all? They also pleaded about the value of the books. Most librarians know that old books are not necessarily valuable books, but that information has not always spread into the community. They also pointed out that many of their books had been presented by local supporters and to discard the gift might entail discarding the support. No library can afford to do that.

How indeed does a rural librarian with commitments to preschoolers, the local school and to adult patrons find the time among his/her few paid hours of service to weed? The rural librarian is the director of a major community service, a social as well as a business position. He/she is the reference librarian, very often the secretary of the library board, the acquisitions librarian, the local book reviewer and circulation clerk, and unfortunately, too often the library janitor.

The distressing thing is trying to deal with weeding in the rural library is that the real reason for skirting the issue is rarely acknowledged. We both know, that if the basic concepts of weeding were applied to most rural collections using guidelines such as the number of times a book has circulated in the past five years, its age, its condition, its relevance to present concerns: if we used the CREW handbook or followed the guidelines so clearly laid down by ALA, we would probably discard 75% of the collection. Years of underfunding inevitably drain all the real good from any collection. We both know that such a solution is not acceptable. The community simply would not tolerate a librarian who discarded a major part of the library collection which had been supported with tax dollars for many years; a collection which had probably watched generations of children grow up.

A rural library, in a more personal sense than a larger library is in direct contact with its patrons. The patrons and librarian know each other on a first name basis and have since childhood. Many of the patrons know how much money is in the book budget and what books are being purchased. If they disagree with a purchase--at \$25.00 a shot, they feel unhappy and many of them complain, not just to the librarian, but to the board members, over the phone, over a coffee, over the back fence.

Many rural librarians do not even buy the books for their collections. They make suggestions, but buying is often the prerogative of the board who feel that a day at the

nearest bookstore or jobber is the "fun" part of being a board member. They buy the titles on the list that they can find and spend the rest of the money on titles that are available. Rural communities are very tightly knit, and the liaison librarian who brings advice from the federation or regional office is essentially an outsider, with ideas that are often foreign to the rural community.

Regional and federation administrators often complain that the rural librarian is interested only in workshops that deal with mending. Rural librarians sit patiently and politely through workshops on administration, reference and dealing with trustees, but it is the mending workshops that bring out everyone in the local library community with an enthusiastic gleam in their eye. There is a very pragmatic reason for this. Mending lengthens the life of a book. It is a thrifty way to proceed and in a rural community, a thrifty librarian is a good one.

Rural librarians know that much of their collections are outdated and unattractive. They know, if their trustees do not, that books like pencils wear out and must be discarded. They understand the difference between a classic and a best seller, and which can be weeded after a few years with no problem. Sometimes, we the advisors push them to do more. Weed for shelf space, for attractiveness, we say--you can always get a copy of any title you will need from the regional headquarters. They believe us. Five years later--for all librarians' memories are long--they send an interlibrary loan for the title you have suggested they weed. They expect

it from the headquarters library within the week. In the course of time the book does arrive, but it is from a library they have never heard of and it is due back in just a few days because the mails are slow. Where, they ask, is the headquarters copy? Well, of course, it was weeded too, because weeding principles apply equally to headquarters libraries who not only need the space but have an example to set. At this point, the visiting librarian can lose credibility, and weeding is abandoned.

Winning the trust of rural librarians so that you can get them to make their much loved and undersupported libraries conform to the guidelines of the eighties is a hard business. They do not have the budget to buy all the books their patrons want, much less the ones you feel they should have. There is no way they can replace their encyclopedia(s) every five years, or buy many of the best sellers, or get a science reference book that is up-to-date. However, given the right motivation they will make a start. Rural librarians are wonderful cooperators. Several of them can band together with a wish list and decide which books on the list they can each afford to buy so there will be valuable material available in a district, if not in one library. One group of 12 rural libraries in my experience compiled a union list of serials for their area. Each library had a copy of the list which they used to refer patrons. They kept the list up-to-date.

Sometimes you can convince them that their lovely antique set of famous thinkers should be shelved in Dewey order

rather than in untouched solemnity along the tops of the stacks. Rarely can you convince them to weed the set all together, because the grandchildren of the donor still support the library. However, those grandchildren can be asked for an appropriate update of their ancestor's gift, and they may be proud to give it.

It is harder to convince the rural librarian to discard a long run of almanacs, Readers Digest novels, collections of religion from the local church library, outdated travel and medical books and long back runs of US News for which there is no index. The rural librarian knows what is wrong with keeping these collections but it is a matter of survival. Where do you find the money to replace them with acceptable material? How do you explain to your sceptical board that all of this material is not worthwhile. A weeding workshop to which board members are invited can work wonders. Bring along a sample shelf of discards and treat them to a handsome experience. They will quickly learn that good condition isn't everything.

Another interesting point is the disposal of weeded material. The majority of weeded books can not be sold from a table in the library because interest in the type of book being discarded is not high. Also if a book sells locally, it will probably return in due course to the library. Weeded books can not be taken to the dump unless the covers are pulled off because some irate garbage picker will haul them back, point out the library ownership and scream about waste of taxpayer's money. They can be carried to another communities'

dump (which is a dirty trick that works), recycled, if you have a volunteer to do the necessary preparation, or put carefully into the basement and left to the ravages of time and mould. All of these solutions have obvious drawbacks, but they all get rid of the material permanently.

Being a regional librarian in daily contact with the life and problems of rural communities is a very rewarding job. Success can come at the least expected moment and make up for months of what seemed fruitless effort. However, the professional librarian who goes out into rural communities, in whatever capacity, must bring along a measure of common sense and a tolerance for what can be accomplished, and what can not. There are rural libraries that could be used as examples of excellence, their collections are so up-to-date and well cared for. It is no coincidence that these libraries are usually found in affluent, fairly well educated and involved communities. Most rural librarians are hard working and thrifty keepers of their communities's books. They work alone in the full glare of public opinion. The visiting librarian must remember that a summer garden which takes up a great deal of the rural librarian's time is just as important and usually a whole lot more lucrative than the library. It is just a matter of perspective.