CHALLENGES OF THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT:
IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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OVERVIEW

Rural libraries have been a vital and intrinsic element in rural communities since the inception of the concept of travelling libraries (rural) by Melvil Dewey, New York, in the 1890s. History supports that nothing has changed in that regard as we have reviewed the current and historic literature as basis for the paper. Other states soon followed this innovative model (Fair, 13) and by 1909, in California, county library systems produced one of the first unifying elements in rural areas (Humble, 3). Lisa De Gruyther's article on the history and development of rural public libraries provided us with an excellent overview of this aspect of rural libraries up through 1976 (80, 513-323). Moreover, the seminal work of Charles V. Galpin, a significant founding father of the rural sociology discipline--our discipline--on the influence of social forces upon farm life, was made possible because of the support provided by the librarian of Belleville, New York. The librarian provided roadway

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maps of the area, selected socio-demographic information about the families of the area, and information about the various social agencies operating in the vicinity (Humble, 1). We still turn to libraries for similar and expanded sources of information for such studies.

PURPOSE

Early librarians had to ask "What is the purpose of a rural library?" (Humble, 51). They found that rural people were essentially interested in libraries as sources of amusement and information (Fair, 59). We are prompted to ask "How or have these early purposes changed?" Your predecessors had to determine their clientele. Who are the rural people? What are their strengths, their limitations? (Fair, 61-77). Once the socio-demographic characteristics of this population are determined, "How does one select appropriate materials?" (Humble, 61-69). How does a rural library capitalize on its strengths while obtaining materials to help overcome its weaknesses? (Fair, 79-105). How does one promote a rural library in such manner as to gain additional support from "friends of the library" while providing detractors with answers that turn them into supporters? Then, as now, libraries had both types of persons among their clienteles. Currently, a petition started by Cumberland County property owners has asked that voters in November, 1987, have the chance to repeal the levy to assess monies for the libraries won in May, 1987. If successful, library officials say it would be disastrous for the county's seven member libraries.

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The libraries have asked for court intervention to set aside the taxpayers' petition and keep the issue off the ballot on a legal technicality (Centre Daily Times, September). The outcome has been determined, but we have not heard the results. Contrariwise, Rockland, Massachusetts, voters overrode the state's tax top imposed by Proposition 2 1/2 and added $1 million to double the space of the 1903 Carnegie Library Building (Library Journal, 21).

What campaigns and strategies are appropriate for rural libraries? (Fair, 106-137). Obviously, campaigns and strategies for any purpose must be formulated against an appropriate backdrop. Ours is a rural backdrop. Let us begin examining the challenges of the rural environment by first looking at some selected socio-demographic characteristics of the rural population.

RURAL PEOPLE

Nationally--What Happened To the Movement of People

A significant event called "the population turnaround" occurred in the late 1960s. It became most evident and measurable in 1972. For the first time in more than 160 years, the population growth rate was higher in rural than in urban areas, despite a decline in the national birth rate (Beale). The reasons for that phenomenon are still being debated by demographers. The population turnaround in the 1960s did result in a rural population growth of 4.4 percent. Between 1970 and 1980, this growth rate had climbed to 15.4 percent, with a rural population increase of 8.4 million (Office of Rural Development).

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This growth, however, was not uniform across the United States. Four factors seem to have influenced this unevenness most. These were the growth of the extractive industries, expansion of the resort industries, the relocation of persons of retirement age, and/or the location of a four-year college or university.

If these were the trends during the 60s and early 70s, what are the current trends? Richter reports that nonmetro growth has slowed considerably while metro growth increased; thus, ending the urban to rural population turnaround. He further notes, however, that amenities and recreational characteristics of nonmetro counties contrived to attract migrants. He asserts that preferences for rural areas remain as an important reason for moving. Murdock et al and Lichter et al indicate that noneconomic factors have become increasingly important mediators of age-specific migration and that nonmetro population growth during the 1970s is largely in rural, not urban areas. Furthermore, the USDA/ERS Study, Rural Economic Development in the 1980s: Preparing for the Future stated "Rural population trends during the 1980s have returned to the generalized declines of the 1950s and 1960s. Almost half of all nonmetro counties (1,160) lost population during 1983-85. During 1985-86, rural areas experienced a net out-migration of 632,000 people."

Nationally--What Happened to the Composition of People

Population change in size and geographic distribution is but one aspect for consideration by persons providing

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services to rural areas. Another significant aspect is the nature and structure of this population. Today, one in every four Americans (or 57 million people) lives in nonmetropolitan areas (Office of Rural Development). Twenty-eight percent of the American population 18 years of age and under lives in rural areas (Stern) as does one-third (11 million) of the nation's total elderly (Herbert & Wilkinson). Rural persons continue to lag behind urban persons in years of formal education. High dropout rates are higher in rural areas. Finally, out-migration was heavy for high school graduates and for persons with four or more years of college in nonmetro areas.

Pennsylvania's Population

The overall population number remained relatively the same for the 1970-80 decade at about 11,900,000 persons for Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania has the largest rural population in the nation (about 3,600,000). In addition, it has a continually aging population. Those 65 years of age and older increased by 2.1 percent between 1970 and 1980 (Census Update, 1). Of particular impact to rural libraries is the fact that Pennsylvania ranks fourth nationally in illiteracy rates according to the State Secretary of Education, Thomas Gilholl (The Daily Collegian, 6). While speaking at Penn State he stated, "Literacy in Pennsylvania is far from what it should be and programs throughout the state and [Penn State] University are being implemented to help this problem"

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(Ibid). He should add and at Clarion University of Pennsylvania. According to the 1980 Census, 61 percent of the population is 25 years of age and over: more than two and a half million Pennsylvania residents (35 percent vs. 58 percent for the nation) 25 and over have not completed high school and of that population, 52 percent (1,331,659) have completed 8 years or less of formal education (Department of Education). Furthermore, the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, Penn State University, estimates that about one-third of the population in Pennsylvania is functionally illiterate (Askov). Vavrek (1980) reports that nearly one and a quarter million rural residents in Pennsylvania were served by fledgling or substandard libraries or were unserved by any library. Approximately another 93,000 were served by libraries with service populations under 5,000 (565). Certainly, these factors highlight the absolutely critical role of rural libraries in trying to reconcile the need for rural education with the level of current services.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO RURAL COMMUNITIES?

Nationally

While growth and economic vitality were the dominant rural themes in the 1970s, structural change and economic dislocation have become the overriding rural issues in the 1980s. A "rural areas shift" from heavy dependence on natural resource based industries to more reliance on manufacturing and service industries (many are low-wage, low-skill jobs) left areas open to rapid shifts in production technology

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and reduced their competitive position nationally. Moreover, in many rural communities, the problems caused by adverse economic conditions are not new phenomena. Growth of non-agricultural jobs never caught up with the increase in the number of individuals displaced from agriculture or mining in the post-war era. Even before the economic crisis of the 1980s, poverty, unemployment, substandard housing and unsanitary living conditions had become a way of life for many rural residents. The USDA/ERS study entitled, "Rural Economic Development in the 1980s: Preparing for the Future" found that since 1979 the number of urban jobs was increased by 13 percent vs 4 percent in rural areas. High rural unemployment is concentrated in, among other areas, the mining and energy counties of Appalachia.

By comparison with urban residents, the gap in average per capita income narrowed slightly in 1965-73, but it widened during 1979-1984.

A greater number of people falling below the poverty line live in rural areas than in the United States as a whole (14 percent vs. 11 percent) and more are "the working poor." In 1985, the rural poverty rate was 18.3 percent vs 12.7 percent for metro areas. The metro rate has fallen since the last recession, while the nonmetro rate has not (USDA/ES). Furthermore, statistics gathered in 1979 placed 21 percent of all nonmetropolitan individuals over the age of 65 below the poverty level. Only 13 percent of metropolitan residents in that age group suffered a similar fate.

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The urban-rural gap pervades all aspects of a rural resident's life. Across America, researchers have found higher infant and maternal mortality rates in rural areas. In addition, 39 percent of all substandard housing can be found in these parts of the country, which contain only 34 percent of the nation's population. Rural elderly occupy a disproportionate share of the nation's substandard housing. Ten percent of all nonmetro counties (242) are categorized by the federal government as persistent poverty counties (Lawrence, 3).

Furthermore, public service demands do not remain static once programs are established. Evolutionary changes in national and regional economies, coupled with recent economic shocks to select industries, pose many new service challenges to governments. Three of those service challenges with the greatest potential impact on communities will relate to education, health care, and social services.

In a speech last year, Iowa State University Professor Neil Harl said "Rural education in this country is entering an era of enormous opportunity in terms of educational needs of individuals, both youth and adult." He predicted that "one of the most significant shifts in the demand for education in rural areas over the next five years" would be to adult education. We have pointed out earlier that Pennsylvania's population lags the nation in years of formal education and in median age--a very significant consideration for rural libraries. Harl concluded that rural educators face "a task of herculean proportions: reconciling unprecendented demands for educational services and carrying out programs

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in an environment of diminished local capacity to support established levels of educational service" (Lawrence, 7).

Pennsylvania Challenges

If one looks at the patterns of community growth and decline during the 1970-80 decade, the western half and the "hard coal" areas of the state had a decline of the productive age cohorts (18-64 years of age) and an increase in the 65 years of age and over cohorts. This was due to declines in labor needs in heavy and energy industries. In growth communities, demands for community services and facilities, including library services, are unable to keep pace with the consumer demands. Conversely, in growth deficit communities, the challenge is the maintenance of the established intrafrastructure in light of declining revenue sources. Even in population growth-stable communities, consumer demands are ever-changing in these regards in the direction of more, not less, services and facilities. How do the rural libraries meet these challenges from the rural environment? Let us begin with a general overview of rural-urban differences in library resources and services, add some "cases" from across the country and from Pennsylvania, and end with a series of questions and examples for implications for rural libraries in light of the rural environment-generated challenges.

WHITHER THE LIBRARY IN RURAL COMMUNITIES?

Appropriately for the overview, we turn to a long-time friend and colleague from this institution--Dr. Bernard

Vavrek. Vavrek (1983) states:

> By whatever definition, the rural library has led
> a closeted existence. Sixty-five percent of all public
> libraries in the United States serve populations of
> 10,000 or fewer people (266).

Moreover, a recent study of public libraries in Illinois indicated that rural libraries tend to have significantly fewer books, loans, and expenditures. On a per capita basis, however, they differed significantly from nonrural libraries only in operating expenditures. For 306 rural libraries, the mean operating expenditure per capita was $9.88, the median, $8.86; for 80 nonrural libraries, the figures were $30.24 and $14.53 respectively (American Libraries, 323).

Vavrek (1983) continues that beyond geographical isolation, the major problem lies in the lack of academically prepared librarians. In his sample, about 50 percent held baccalaureate or masters degrees in library science. Rural libraries average three full-time worker equivalents. Volunteers comprise about 25 percent of this service force (267). It is doubtful whether any other institution in our society depends upon the untrained person as much as the rural public library (286). In addition to the limitations set fourth by Vavrek, Buckland and Hindle outlined several problems in library decision making. These are: (1) Director does not have lateral decision making privileges, but must involve others in the process such as paid and volunteer staffs, advisory boards, local governments, and others in policy and operational decisions; (2) logically ensuing from this process, most decisions favor the users rather than the

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staff because of the differential proportions of "groups" involved in the process; and (3) decisions are made for a number of heterogeneous groups with conflicting interests which further compound the problems of a rural library. Moreover, all decisions stem from two quite difference concepts. To wit: quality (how good is the service?) and value (how much good does it do?) (45). The "staffers" might be expected to concentrate on the first concept while the clientele concentrate on the latter concept or both concepts.

Despite all of the handicaps, adversities, and limitiations, rural libraries [are] in the spotlight according to Kyren (Library Journal, 20). He headlines, "A mushrooming concern for rural library services mirrors swift and sweeping economic change," (Ibid). A part of this "concern" was generated by the 1982 "Joint Congressional Hearing on the Changing Information Needs of Rural America: The Role of Libraries and Information Technology." Let us turn to some case examples which help illustrate the concern for rural library services vis-a-vis today's resources vs. needs.

SOME CURRENT EXAMPLES OF RURAL LIBRARIES MEETING THE NEED

If rural information needs are so great, what is being done to meet those needs? National, state, and local programs, while not documented as great in number, certainly are attempting to meet the rural information demand. The following is a summary of some selected programs, new and old, which are helping supply information to rural citizens.

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National

On the national level, the Cooperative Extension Service and National Agricultural Library have recently joined forces to form the national USDA Rural Information Center (RIC). RIC is designed to combine the resources of the largest agricultural library in the free world with the subject matter expertise of Extension's educational network which crosses the nation.

The primary goal of RIC is to provide information to local government officials who research, develop, support, and implement rural development programs. Local officials should be able to access RIC through a computer telephone network linking county and state extension offices with RIC's headquarters at the National Agricultural Library in Beltsville, Maryland. National full-scale operation is scheduled for January, 1988.

RIC provides information in four main areas of rural revitalization: economics, services, leadership, and the natural resources base in relation to quality of life.

RIC offers four different services to local governments. RIC provides information and referral providing a hard copy of information from one of several databases. Then, if cited publications are needed, they can be obtained through interlibrary loan from regional or local libraries. Subject matter consultation is available from extension. An annotated bibliography series is being published and a monitoring and analysis service to track and describe future trends in rural areas will be available (RIC, 1987).

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Inter-State

In the western states of Colorado, Utah, Montana, and Wyoming, a project called "The Intermountain Community Learning and Information Services Project" (ICLIS) is being implemented with support from the Western Rural Development Center and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. This project began in 1979 by assessing rural informational and educational needs in the intermountain states. This study found that of the rural residents surveyed, nearly one-third of them had to leave their hometown to get needed information (in the West this is often equated to a three-hour drive). In addition, more than 65 percent of the respondents participated in some organized educational program during the past year (which also means considerable travel) (Joint Congressional Hearing, 13).

As a result of this assessment, the ICLIS project began developing services in relation to the following mission statement:

> To deliver educational and informational services to rural residents through application of telecommunications and information technologies in the rural public library" (1987 ICLIS Annual Report).

This project is striving to provide new information resources and improve education and training opportunities for rural residents.

State

In New York, the New York State Legislative Commission on Rural Resources has established a rural information library

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and a newsletter entitled Rural Futures. If you are not on the mailing list and want to be, you may want to contact the editor. In addition, one of nine action strategies outlined by the commission for improving human services and community life calls for the development of three areas of interest to rural libraries. They are:

1. Become a clearinghouse for information, research, and technical assistance to rural local governments including the development of inter-municipal cooperative arrangements.

2. Provide comprehensive information for rural areas on existing public and private rural development programs.

3. Provide a competitive grants program to explore the concept of interactive instructional networking through distance learning (Lawrence).

In Pennsylvania, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania has plans to provide competitive grants for study in areas of rural development. The grants are for studies on rural people and communities, community services, educational outreach, and rural values and social change. These represent possible study areas for people with interests in rural libraries. Persons in the state system of higher educational and land grant university system are eligible for these grants. Representative Wright from this legislative district was the prime sponsor of this legislation and the first board meeting called by him is scheduled for November 19,

1987, in Harrisburg. Information concerning proposal guidelines will be forthcoming shortly thereafter.

Regional

The South Central Minnesota Interlibrary Exchange (SMILE) serves a nine-county area in Minnesota. The function of SMILE is to link the region's school, special, public, and academic libraries with the broader information and library sphere. In addition, SMILE works to develop local libraries, identify and share resources, and improve professional competence of the area's rural library staff.

The SMILE system serves over 120 public, academic, school and special libraries. These libraries have access to inter-library loan and a regional reference service. According to Barbara Sheldon Monie, Coordinator of SMILE, "The rural resident has the needed resources of the region, state, and often the nation at his or her fingertips within a few days of the request."

In addition to providing information to rural residents, SMILE provides a professional forum (and exchange of information) through a monthly newsletter and discussion group. Technological advances in providing information are manageable because of the spirit of camaraderie shown by the people working in the member libraries who work to make them part of a larger whole--SMILE (Joint Congressional Hearing, 28-31).

Local

Jason Hardman of Elsinore, Utah, took matters into his own hands in his community. When only ten years old, Jason started his own library in a unused room in the basement of a building serving as a town hall. He got his library started with some old books from the Elsinore Literacy Club and donations of old books from community members. Even a neighboring city library donated their duplicate books, and within two months Jason had collected 4,000 books. He was the only librarian, and he kept the library open from 4 to 6 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Testifying at the Joint Congressional Hearing on the Changing Information Needs of Rural America, Jason reviewed his assessment of this small rural town's library needs. He stated, "I was not alone in needing a library. Other people besides me needed information or recreational reading or help in preparing school assignments. Everyone seemed to want information about many subjects, it was just not available in Elsinore" (Joint Congressional Hearing, 10-12). [Dr. Vavrek testified at the Joint Congressional Hearings and was called in to consult with the National Ag Library (RIC) initiative. He is a recognized expert on rural libraries.]

Illiteracy Programs

With the increased naitonal focus on illiteracy rates nationwide, a brief mention of two types of illiteracy programs is appropriate here.

Regional libraries are typically the recipients of literacy grants in Kentucky, but recently a Development District was awarded $15,000 to start a volunteer tutoring program. The district undertook this initiative because it "sees the literacy problem as critical to business and industrial development" (News and Notes, 1).

Prisoner-run literacy programs are becoming popular since Camp Hill State Prison near Harrisburg set up the first program in 1981. Since then, Ohio, Maryland, Virginia, and Louisiana have started programs, and Indiana and Wisconsin are considering such programs.

A guide book is being written by the inmates on Huntingdon State Prison's Literacy Council. This guidebook will contain information on organizational dynamics, selection and training of tutors, student-tutor relationships, maintaining tutor interest, selecting supplementary materials and teaching survival skills.

It is estimated that between 40 and 60 percent of the nation's inmates have problems reading. Studies show that inmates who receive educational training are less likely to become repeat offenders. The inmate-run programs help the tutors along with the students, according to prison educations (Centre Daily Times, September).

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

It seems to us that rural librarians should take full advantage of the current concern over illiteracy, poverty, the growing gap between urban and rural areas in employment

opportunities, provision of community facilities and services, the increase in growth in rural elderly populations, lack of rural leadership, and when possible, voter attitudes favorable to expansion of library services in rural areas to mention a few. We have no magic solutions for accomplishing this onerous task, but some of your colleagues do.

Buckland and Hindle (57-58) suggest: (1) decentralization of main libraries through bookmobiles (Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship), satellite uplinks/downlinks dishes (DeJohn), and rural schools (Hortin, Kurtz, and Hause); and (2) Automation of existing systems to facilitate the first suggestion. They caution, however, that while automation of the service system will reduce searching costs for materials, it will increase queuing or sequencing costs for locating and delivering these materials. Decisions will have to be made as to the "mix" of automation.

Welch (80) suggests the need to establish universal definitions for rural and rural library services. Once defined guidelines or standards for rural library services need to be developed, adopted, and used. Current minimal guidelines are inadequate to assure quality services (599-617).

We suggest continuous strategies aimed at making all clientele aware of, interested in, supportive of, and users of the existing services and wanting and willing to pay for additional and appropriate services.

More specifically, we suggest that you look at your own communities and determine what challenges the rural environment present to you. What has happened to your population--increased,

decreased, remained stable? What are the prospects for such a scenario to continue or to change? What has happened to the location of the population--remained in relatively the same location or moved within your community service area? Has the population age profile changed or remained the same? If changed, how?

The Bradford County, Pennsylvania, library system undertook a needs assessment in order to address these questions as the basis for a long-range planning effort in order to try and make the services as user-friendly as possible. In Aaronsburg, Pennsylvania, an area of increasing age cohorts, the community library is located in the sanctuary of a former church and a museum of local history, including pictures and artifacts, is located in the basement of the same building in order to take advante of the legacy of a truly historic borough. Since this is an area of local quilters, the library walls and ceilings also are adorned with their products in order to reflect the flavor of the area. Volunteers help staff the library and elusively staff the museum. We think this is an appropriate way to link the past and present with the future.

If the age profile has increased dramatically with the senior citizen cohort, then perhaps instead of another book-mobile, a van to take citizens from a different geographic location each day to the "library" is in order. Older persons, especially when younger family members move elsewhere for economic reasons, need a social support system. Where better to help foster such a support system than at the local library?

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While they are there, why not use them as foster grandparents for school children? A spin-off on this idea was initiated in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania, by a retired elementary school teacher and other interested persons. They developed and produced a History of Boalsburg. Second and third graders in the local elementary school are taken on a field trip to relive the history of the community. How many rural communities are rich in history, but no one is saving it? The community library in Hamburg, Pennsylvania (a 1903 Carnegie model) has let the local history lapse since the nation's bicentennial in 1976. What a wonderful way to update it using long-time residents. As volunteers they feel useful, respected, and have a pool of friends. Their labors can help the library function within budget.

We are sure you can think of all kinds of ways in which rural libraries can meet the challenges of rural environments--from people challenges to community challenges. In fact, we would argue that the future of rural libraries, and the critical role for them in rural communities are limited only by the lack of creativity, vision, and leadership abilities in people like you and us. Conversely, the large amounts of these attributes available at this conference will provide a continuing and solid base for library service in the present, and for the future, as it has done in the past. God speed you on this essential and enormous task.

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