

What Small Town Public Libraries Mean to Their Communities:  
A Consultant's Perspective

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Much as rural communities are widely divergent, small town public libraries also have their own unique characteristics. Not only may the quality of collections and services vary from community to community, but the meaning of the library to its community may also be very different from one town to another, and even from one group to another within a community.

As professionally-trained librarians, library consultants have the tendency to look at libraries solely in terms of library functions. They look at a library's collection, its staff, and the services it provides, and judge the library's value to its constituency in these terms alone. However, if they want to help the library to develop, they must first come to see the library as its community, its board, and its staff see it. The first question the consultant should ask, then, is not: "How good is this library?" It should be: "What does this library mean to this community?"

The Meanings of Small Town Libraries

The small town library may have a wide variety of meanings for people in its community. Some of these fit into the traditional "functional" purpose of providing informational, educational, recreational and cultural materials and services to the public. Other meanings have to do with small town society, and others may be as a

not even be seen as a department of the city government, and only token amounts of money may be given toward the library's budget: in some cases so little that the council does not even expect an accounting for the funds.

The long range goal of the library consultant in this situation should be to help the club and the community see the library as a legally established public agency, whose services are dictated by the needs of the entire community rather than a relatively small group of women. To accomplish this goal, the consultant must begin, however, with the library as it is. Because the library may be the only institution in the community controlled by women, it can be difficult for the women's club to share the control of the library with men. It is not unusual to hear of ambivalence among club members about the library's relationship to the city government. They may want more funding from the city council, but they are reluctant to seek it if they feel that the council will demand more control.

The consultant must continue to point out the advantages of expanding the power base for the library, while at the same time working to alleviate the fears, some of which may be justified, about city council interference with the workings of the library. Perhaps the best place to start, once the confidence of the club has been gained, is to clarify the legal status of the library. State law may require that the library have been established by city ordinance, for example, but such an ordinance may not exist. In such a case, getting the club to ask the city council to legally establish the library brings the library to the council's attention in a relatively non-

threatening way, while at the same time pointing out to both the council and the women's club the legal requirements for running a public library.

The Grant-Created Library Paradigm. In the early part of this century, numerous public library buildings were erected with the help of grants from charitable persons or foundations. The most famous of these, of course, are the Carnegie libraries. Beginning in 1886 Andrew Carnegie donated money to 1412 communities to erect public library buildings.<sup>2</sup> Most of these communities were small towns, as 78% of them constructed buildings costing less than \$20,000.<sup>3</sup> Carnegie, however, was not the only benefactor of public libraries. Other towns received substantial funds from local sources; in a few cases communities were even given farms or other money making resources to support their public library. More recently some small town public libraries have been able to acquire new buildings using LSCA Title II funds

The infusion of a large amount of money into a library frequently changed the course of the library's history. Carnegie grants and LSCA funds have required local matching funds. To raise this money, community support has had to be built. In many cases this has been done by the town's business community, who then have had a greater stake in the development of the library. In the cases where gifts came with no strings attached, the large amount of money available to the library gave it added importance in the eyes of the community.

To put it bluntly, when a relatively large amount of money came into a town's public library so did the interest of the town's male population, and this interest has

tended to remain. I have worked with six communities that built Carnegie libraries between 1903 and 1915. They serve communities whose population range from less than 1,000 to over 12,000. Although at least one of them began its existence as a women's club library, and most have been supported by women's club activities throughout their history, none of them is now dominated by a women's club, and all of them currently have men serving on their boards. In two other instances, I have worked with women's club library efforts that sought LSCA Title II funds. In both cases men were soon actively serving on the library boards.

Grant-created libraries tend to be better funded than other kinds of small town public libraries. Their separate library building gives them a greater visibility in their communities, and their broader board representation, including at times members of the male power elite, tends to give them greater clout with their funding agencies.

In addition to the functional meaning, older grant-created libraries tend to take on the cultural fortress and the memorial meanings. Board members often are the community's intellectual leaders, and these people may see the library's role to provide "cultural uplift" for the rest of the community. The cultural fortress meaning also fits well into the Carnegie concept of library service. The buildings tend to look like fortresses, and the numerous steps certainly play into the idea of lifting oneself up. So the cultural fortress concept may have a good deal of historical and even architectural significance in some communities.

It is important for the consultant working with a library with a heavy cultural fortress meaning to help the board and staff understand the changes that have occurred in library service, but at the same time to be sympathetic to the community's viewpoint. I once attended a board meeting where the issue of charging fees for videos was being discussed. One board member expressed her feeling that videos were a frill, and not an essential library service. I pointed out that at one time some board members around the country had felt the same way about adult fiction and children's services. I then expressed how important videos can be in helping us to gain an understanding of the world. I suggested that a video of the movie Gandhi, for example, will probably have more lasting cultural value than many bestselling books. In discussing the history of library service and pointing to the cultural value of some videos, I tried to address her desire for the library to serve the purpose of cultural uplift.

The library buildings built with grant funds seem to have even a more important role to play in creating a memorial meaning for the grant-created library. Many Carnegie buildings have been put on historical registers, and moving the library out of its Carnegie building or a building connected with some prominent name in the town's history can become a serious problem. It is not uncommon for towns to spend more money renovating an older building than they would spend on erecting a new one, even though the older building will continue to present problems with handicapped accessibility and the numerous other difficulties that come from buildings that were created for another era.

In working with libraries that are considering leaving their old building behind, it is important that the consultant be aware of the potential problems of renovating an older building. Buildings erected fifty years ago or more will need to have extensive remodelling in order to meet the electrical needs of our computer and telephone based information system. Because there was a greater emphasis on using resources within the library rather than checking them out, buildings were frequently built with small rooms that create difficulties for library security. Handicapped accessibility is another important issue. These practical issues, however, may be less important than the sentiment attached to the old building. Here, the consultant can perform a real service by suggesting new uses for the old building. Saving the old building can be one of the most important points of community resistance to a new library building. Thus, finding possible uses for the historic building that guarantee its continued existence can be the most vital step in the process of obtaining a new building.

Board traditions for grant libraries may at times also make these libraries open to both the school library substitute meaning and the progressive symbol meaning. If, for example, it has been traditional to have a large number of educators on the library board, they may push the library needs of the schools to the detriment of other public library functions. Similarly, the library board may traditionally be made up of younger professional people, who may see it as a place to begin to promote their ideas for community development.

Since grant-created library boards and staff tend to be more representative of their communities than women's club libraries or personal project libraries, it may be less important for the consultant to make them aware of community needs and interests, although this is always an important function for a rural library consultant. Instead, it may be more important for the consultant to concentrate on helping the board and staff develop a broader view of public library service than they hold. This could be particularly important in libraries which are tending toward the school library substitute meaning. The ultimate goal for the consultant working with this kind of small town library, then, may be to help the board and staff expand their knowledge about the functions of public libraries.

School-Public Library Paradigm Since its inception the public library has been identified as an educational institution. In many states, therefore, schools and public libraries have been closely allied. In some states, e.g. Idaho, Michigan, and Missouri, local school boards were granted the authority to provide public library service. In some communities, public library branches have been located in schools; in many others it has been considered desirable to locate new public library buildings near schools. In some cases, school boards have donated the land on which to build a public library so it would be near to a school.

Public libraries that have had a strong historical tie to a particular school or school system are the most likely to take on a strong school library substitute meaning in their communities. Broadening the purpose of the public library in this situation can be very difficult, because there will be strong elements within the

community that will be opposed to such a change, and these elements also are likely to be the strongest library supporters. If improving adult services, for example, means cutting children's services that are supporting a part of the school curriculum, complaints are likely to be heard from educators, students and parents.

The goal of a consultant working with this kind of library should be to help the board and staff develop a perspective of the library as a community resource, rather than just a school resource. When board or staff members feel the need for change themselves, they must also be taught how to build community support. Funding options, such as a contract for providing services to the school, should also be explored, as well as service options that will make the library more attractive to adults.

The Personal Project Library Paradigm. In 1983, Jason Hardman, a thirteen year old boy, was given a certificate of achievement and appreciation by the National Council on Libraries and Information Science, for starting a public library in Elsinore, Utah (population 680).<sup>4</sup> While this boy's age made his effort to create a library a news event, it is not that unusual for one person in a small town to create or maintain a public library.

Personal project libraries may swing between personal projects and women's clubs projects or community projects. For example, a library may have been started by a women's club, but then was taken over by an individual. It is often hard to distinguish this kind of library from the one dominated by the women's club library, if some help continues to come from the club. In general, the personal project library



is distinguished because a single individual carries the work forward or is the obvious and continuous motivator for the library.

The library whose history is dominated by a single individual is, of course, most likely to carry the meaning of a personal project, but it also may carry either a memorial meaning or a community symbol meaning or even a school library substitute meaning, if the individual involved is concerned about the school.

Unlike the women's club library that carries some level of community support, the library consultant encountering a personal project library must first determine whether working with this library is worth the time. This is especially true if the library is new and the chances of better support are marginal. Undoubtedly, many personal project libraries die aborning; others may hold on for awhile, but never can provide adequate service. If the consultant is invited early into such a project, it is best to describe other options and to encourage support for one of these alternatives.

If the library does look potentially viable, however, the consultant's goal must be to help the library broaden its support. This may require the consultant to educate the dominant person about what good library service is by describing it in detail or by taking her or him on tours of successful libraries. If the individual is truly interested in good library service, as most are, she or he will soon see the need for wider support for the library. It should be emphasized that in a small town, the interest that she or he has already shown in the library will almost certainly guarantee some leadership role, either as a board member or librarian.

The Community Project Library Paradigm. A community project library is one which is begun by several groups within a small town without outside funding. This type of library is small, is started with donated books, and has little or no funding. Typically, this library carries the primary meaning of a community symbol, although it may also carry a meaning as a school library substitute, a progressive symbol or a personal project. To many of those who start the library, the functional meaning may have relatively little importance. For them the library is a symbol of community pride.

In recent years, this kind of library has been prevalent in communities that are struggling to maintain their identity. Often, such towns may be too small and too poor to adequately support their own public library. From a functional point of view, it would be better for such a town to contract with another library for service or to obtain a bookmobile stop. Neither of these options, however, meet the real need that is expressed by the establishment of the library. The real purpose of the community project library is to serve as a symbol of the continued vitality of the community.

The community project library presents a dilemma for the library consultant. The library is not likely to ever provide adequate library service, yet at the same time it may be the only library service available to the community. If other options are available, and it is early enough in the process, the consultant, of course, should suggest the better alternatives. If the library is a going concern, the consultant should first determine if there is enough interest in the functional aspects of the library to warrant any consultant services. If it is clear that there is little interest

in the library beyond its symbolism, it probably is a waste of time to work within the situation, although periodic contacts should be made in case things change.

If, on the other hand, there does appear to be real interest in providing adequate library services, the consultant may want to help the library board develop a mission statement and plan, and to view the possible options that could provide some kind of permanent presence in the community while still linking the community to the larger library world. A book station, supported through a library system or regional library, for example, may provide this kind of solution to the problem.

#### Conclusion

A public library's meaning within any community is never pure. Although one meaning may predominate, there will always be others also at work. Different groups within the community will see the library differently. Any given individual may also assign several different meanings for the library. In stating that small town libraries may have many different meanings to their communities, I am in no way implying that small town people are not interested in quality library services. I am saying, however, that the support for libraries (whether rural or metropolitan) usually comes from many different motivations in addition to the desire for good library service. Similarly, resistance to change may have little or nothing to do with the functional purpose of the library.

Libraries are, after all, institutions that are created by human beings, and human motivations are never pure and simple. Ultimately, library consultants must

remember that the libraries with which we work are not "our" libraries. They belong to the communities that built them and support them, and in the end they will be the libraries that those communities want them to be.

Rural library consultants who treat the improvement of library services as merely a technical problem, therefore, will soon become frustrated. Rather than cursing the mixed motives of rural library supporters, we need to find ways to create good library services while still accommodating these human needs. Helping to develop high quality libraries in these contexts requires creativity and a sense of reality. It is not work for the faint hearted; there will be times of frustration when progress will seem to be impossible. When success comes, however, it can provide the library consultant with a great sense of accomplishment and moments of real joy.

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1. Blair, Karen J. Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Defined, 1868-1914. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980), p. 101.
2. Bobinski, George S. Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1969), p. vii - 3.
3. Ibid., p. 16.
4. 1984 ALA Yearbook of Library and Information Science. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1984), p. 205.

symbol of the community itself. It is not unusual for these "non-functional" purpose to be more important to the community than the functional.

The Functional Meaning. The function of the public library is to provide its community with books and other media to meet the community's informational, educational, cultural, and recreational needs. No matter what other meanings the library may have, generally at least lip service will be given to this meaning for the library, and for some people in every community, the functional meaning of the library will be its most important meaning.

Within this meaning small town libraries tend to emphasize the recreational and educational functions. In many towns the library is seen as a place for women to get novels and schoolchildren to get resources for their studies. Reference services are usually provided at a very basic level, because higher levels would require the purchase of expensive materials and more highly trained personnel. Information services, then, tend to center around information for daily living. The emphasis placed on cultural materials will often depend on the library's history, and the other meanings the library may have for the community.

The School Library Substitute. In this meaning for the public library, one of its functions is overemphasized to the point of distortion. In hard pressed rural communities, enterprising school administrators and teachers sometimes seek to make the public library a substitute for school library services. Typically, this occurs when the library is close to the school. Administrators or teachers send students to the library on a regular basis, often monopolizing the library's daytime hours for this

purpose alone. They may also put pressure on the library to use its budget primarily for materials to support the school's curriculum. Such libraries are fairly easy to identify, as they will have very strong children's areas, will have a regular (often weekly) schedule of classes attending the library, and normally will have little adult use. The library board for this kind of library may be dominated by teachers or other school personnel.

The Women's Club Project. Many small town libraries were begun as a project for a women's literary club. If the library has continued to be the special province of its founding club, it takes on a meaning very different from its purported function. In this situation library functions become secondary to the power and purposes of the club. For example, the library boards may refuse to recommend anyone to serve as a board member who does not belong to the club. Since in many small towns, the library board tends to be self-perpetuating, this effectively eliminates non-members from having any meaningful input on library decision making. The board may also be reluctant to ask for funding from the city or county, as it sees that such funding may weaken the club's control over the library. Library staff may be hired because they are club members, not because they are the best qualified candidates for the job.

Because women's club type libraries by their nature restrict the kind of board members who serve, they frequently overemphasize materials and services that are of interest to the club's members. They may have comparatively strong cookbook and handicraft sections, for example, while having little on auto mechanics or sports. In fiction there may be a large romance collection, but few westerns or other materials

for men. The collection may also be affected by the typical age of the club member. If the club is made up of younger women, for example, the library may have a strong children's section, while a library controlled by a club made up of older women might be weaker in children's services.

The Personal Project. Occasionally, a small town library may be strongly dominated by either an individual board member or the librarian. When this occurs the functions of the library can become secondary to the ego needs of this person. A strong board president may be so deeply involved in the library, for example, that the librarian becomes little more than a clerk. Or a librarian may operate a library virtually without a board. In a few instances a legally appointed board may not even exist. More typically in this situation, however, the board exists but operates only to ratify the decisions already made and implemented by the librarian.

It is important to realize that this meaning is not just held by the individual who has the library as her or his personal project. The community by and large has also accepted this view of the library. Thus, the way that community members will feel about the library will reflect the way that they feel about the person. If the person has influence within the community, the needs of the library are likely to be met; if the individual has little power, the library's needs will be given relatively little priority.

This kind of library can sometimes be difficult to identify if a board exists. In general, when no decision is ever made without deferring to the judgment of a single person, it is a fairly safe assumption that the library is of this kind.



The Cultural Fortress. The library takes on the meaning of the cultural fortress when the board or the librarian views the primary purpose of the library to be to "uplift" the community standards of art and literature. This meaning usually has few community adherents, but frequently these adherents are appointed to the board. Typically, these board members will not eliminate popular services that already exist, but they fight a rear guard battle to keep the library's "standards" from being further "eroded."

The issue often surfaces when popular new media come to the fore. Libraries may refuse to carry, or at least purchase, paperbacks, for example. They may be slow to get into video, arguing that this may contribute to "illiteracy." Or they may accept new media only as non-essential library services, for which fees can be charged.

This meaning can have very important implications for the community, even if it is not the focus of the library itself. If community members view the library as a cultural fortress, they may feel that the library has nothing that will interest them. Needless to say this can have very negative results for library usage and support.

The Progressive Symbol. In some small communities, there is a strong cultural split between the older, "native" residents, and the younger people who typically come into the community to provide professional services. The younger group may include such people as teachers, ministers, bankers, younger businessman, lawyers, doctors and the spouses of these professionals. When this situation occurs, the "new people" may see themselves as the champions of change. They may strongly support school

reform, for example, and it is not unusual for them to take a particular interest in the public library. Frequently, they will seek seats on the library board. They may either become the dominant force on the board, or they may bring conflict to the board as a "progressive" minority that pushes change while the older board members resist it.

This situation makes the library into a symbol for the progressive group's ambitions. It can have either very negative or very positive effects on library services, depending on whether this group can develop any power in the community. For example, if the city council is made up of the conservative element and the library board is dominated by the progressives, the library's budget may suffer because the library is seen as one of the progressive group's challenges to the status quo. If the progressive group gains power, however, the library may be enhanced.

Although the consultant may feel a strong affinity for the ambitions of the progressives, it is important that relationships with both groups be maintained, particularly if both groups are represented on the board and staff. To side too strongly with the progressives may make it impossible for the consultant to work with the "old guard" who may still control the library or the library's funding source.

The Memorial. The town that is stagnating or even dying often creates symbols of its more prosperous past. The library, especially if it has an attractive older building, may take on this meaning. When this occurs the library building can take on an exaggerated importance. The board may give up vital current services for unnecessary remodelling, or they may stay in an inappropriate building for fear that

it will be torn down if empty. The library may also serve as a personal memorial. It is not uncommon for a library to be named after a benefactor, for example. Even if a library has not been given a benefactor's name, it may serve as a personal memorial to some family or families in the community. Someone from the family may have been a long-time board member or librarian, for example, and this makes the library an important institution to the family, even if they never use it.

People who view the library as a memorial may be very resistant to any change in its building or services. If a powerful family in the community views the library in this way, it may be much more difficult to bring about meaningful innovation.

The Community Symbol. The community symbol meaning is very much like the memorial meaning of the library. Unlike the memorial meaning that celebrates the community's past, however, the library as community symbol is designed to show that the community has a future. The library as community symbol is a library that is started as a response to the community decline. The community, for example, may lose its high school to consolidation, so it starts a library.

Frequently, such libraries are established with little view to the real cost of adequate library service. There may, in fact, be much better alternatives for delivering library service to the community. But the functions of the library may not be particularly important to the community in this situation; it is the library's symbolic value that the community is interested in.

Since the library as a community symbol is typically a new library, it may be less difficult to bring about change than when the library is viewed as a memorial.

The problem in this situation is one of raising resources for something that the community may not see as especially important, particularly when the community's resources are in decline. The symbolic value of the library will exist as long as there is a building and a sign, so the community may have to be sold on the idea that quality library services are also important.

#### The Analysis of Power Through a Library's History

What is clear from the brief listing of meanings above is that many of the meanings of the public library have more to do with social and political power than they do with information and books. Moreover, the library may have many different meanings to different groups within the community. A women's club may see it as their project; a family may see it as a monument to their grandmother; young progressives, some of whom may be members of the women's club, may see it as an opportunity to make needed changes in the community; older professionals may see it as a cultural fortress, and so on.

The consultant may not have to deal in any depth with some of these meanings, because the meanings are not backed by a significant power base. For example, if the family that sees the library as a monument to their grandmother is not active in community affairs, and if it has relatively little influence on its neighbors, this meaning may have little or no influence on the decision making

process for the library. The consultant may have to deal with this family's concerns on an individual basis, but their feelings will not be likely to affect the potential for change.

If, on the other hand, the family is powerful in the community and is represented on the library board or on the staff, this meaning will have much more influence on the rate of change or even the possibility of change for the library.

The analysis of the power of the different community meanings for the library, then, will be a constant concern for the rural library consultant. One of the best places to begin with such an analysis is with the history of the library.

#### Five Historical Paradigms

Although each library's history will have many unique features based on the history of the community and the personalities involved, in my experience, there seem to be at least five distinct historical paradigms for the establishment of rural libraries.

The Women's Club Paradigm. During the late 1800's and early 1900's, women's clubs were an important part of the movement for social and political reform. Advocating progressive causes ranging from women's suffrage to prohibition to school reform, these clubs provided cultural leadership in many small towns across America.

One major project of many such clubs was the establishment of public libraries, and the unsung heroines of the American public library movement were the women

who made up the numerous women's clubs that began public libraries in their communities. According to one source, the American Library Association estimated that fully three quarters of American libraries operating in 1933 were begun in this manner.<sup>1</sup>

Libraries which were established by women's clubs and which continue to be dominated by women's clubs are certain to have a strong "club project" meaning. The consultant in this situation will need to establish a good working relationship with the club and will need to understand the library from the club's point of view if changes are to be made. What kind of women does the club represent? Is a club made up primarily of older women who have been in the community for a long time? If so, it is likely to look at the library very differently than a club made up of younger women who have recently moved into the community.

While both clubs may see the library as "the club's library" they may have very different conceptions of what a good library is. The older club may see the library as a cultural fortress or as a memorial, while the club made up of younger women might see the library as a school library substitute or a progressive symbol.

In any case, the major problem with the women's club library is that historically it has been seen as a library primarily for women and perhaps children. Men have taken little interest in it, and because men normally control the government decision making structure of small towns, library services are likely to suffer. Typically, small town libraries that have not been able to shed their women's club image have difficulty being taken seriously by the city council. The library may