

MANAGING THE DISTRICT LIBRARY:
AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN FERGUSON

Elisabeth S. Fulmer, Librarian
Clarion Historical Society

Mrs. Jean Ferguson, formerly the Director of Libraries, Lower Merion Township, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, is now the Consultant Librarian, Clarion District Library Association. The following interview took place on June 11, 1980.

ESF: Mrs. Ferguson, since you recently returned to this part of the state after working in the suburban Philadelphia area, what adjustments did you find you had to make in your philosophy of library service from that suburban area to a rural area?

Mrs. Ferguson: I would say no change in basic philosophy is required because when you go into the field of library science, you go into it with the idea that you are going to give the best quality of library service to all the people in the community you serve. So as far as philosophy is concerned, it is the very same philosophy here that it was in the suburban area. I would say the basic change, though, has been in the approach to giving this

service or making available this service to the people.

There are the geographic barriers that exist because of the nature of an area where the population is scattered or in small clusters, i.e., small towns. The geographic situation is different, so the approach is different. You don't have at your fingertips the transportation available to share the services as easily as you did in the suburban area. For example, there's no delivery service between Clarion and Brookville except through the District Office when the consultant librarian is traveling that direction.

I find that financial support, funding, is far different here. Looking at the overall funding, I find that the per capita cost in the rural situation is greater than it would be in an urban area for the reason that you've got to take into consideration a scattered population rather than a concentrated population.

I find that the life-style of this area is different. The demands for library service are similar but the life-style is different. This is one of the reasons we moved back here. The values are different. This points up the fact that the

approach to supplying library service, or making library service available, is different--not a great adjustment, but an adjustment nevertheless.

ESF:

While the quantity of service in this area is limited to some extent by small budgets, how do you think the quality of service compares to that in the other parts of the state?

Mrs. Ferguson:

Comparing it with the Lower Merion area, I would say that the resources here are inadequate as far as research and reference are concerned, and certainly strength needs to be built in that area. This will be a major concern of my program. I think as far as the dedication of the people involved in libraries--the staff working within libraries and library trustees--the dedication to doing the best they can with the resources they have in the Clarion District is concerned, this is the greatest resource: the people and the dedication they have. I think the overall attitude of the people in this particular rural area is somewhat different from an isolated area where people have had less exposure to education. Maybe I should rephrase that and say that the educational level is higher here than in some of the very, very

isolated areas, so that expectations about library service and what it can do for an individual are here.

ESF: The expectations?

Mrs. Ferguson: The expectations are that the libraries are there to be used, and they have something positive to offer to each individual. Budgets are small, as I said previously; appropriations from the funding sources have not kept pace with the rate of inflation which has been chipping away at the materials budget. While resources are inadequate for research and reference purposes, recreational reading materials are as high in quality as in other areas of the state.

ESF: Other than research materials, do you see any other gaps in service, for instance, to specific age groups or to those with special needs?

Mrs. Ferguson: Perhaps in the young adult area service may be termed inadequate, but this is prevalent throughout the profession. This is one area that needs to be worked upon; something needs to be done to reach this young adult area. We provide good programming for children; we're doing more and more for senior citizens and for the group that falls in between, the adults from age 21 up

to the senior citizens. But the young adults are one group that needs to have some concentrated effort made so that we don't lose them completely as library users. Children's services need to be strengthened throughout the district, and Clarion County has applied for an LSCA grant with which we can begin to strengthen that area; plans are being developed in Jefferson County also to see what can be done there within the next several years to upgrade children's services.

ESF: Have you had any specific training in dealing with problems faced by isolated rural communities? If not, what kind of special training do you think would be valuable to librarians in such communities?

Mrs. Ferguson: No, I haven't had any special training. I think basic training to be a librarian is the same for urban and suburban as well as rural areas. I think perhaps if we are going to do anything more positive toward helping rural libraries, we librarians are going to have to look to the computer and to what the computer can do to bring services to the people in rural areas. I think library education schools should begin offering such courses. Any person going into library work who wants to go

into rural librarianship should learn all he can about computers. For instance, suppose someone needed census data, i.e., a small business man; at the present time there is no central point where he can go to gather that information. If we had one central location with a computer base, OCLC or PALINET, to be a contact for this person, he could call that central point and through computers the information could then be relayed to this person. I think that's one way to reach out into these more isolated areas.

ESF: Then you see this as one solution to the shortage of research material?

Mrs. Ferguson: Yes. I think library education should emphasize sharing among all types of libraries. The idea that this is "my" library, and I don't want "my" books taken out by you who are in another library is no longer viable. I think academic, school, special, and public libraries have got to band together in a stronger sense of sharing than they are now doing. We've come a long way, but we've got a long way to go to get the idea across that there needs to be a greater concentrated effort toward sharing. We've got to develop a more positive attitude for sharing.

When I was in library school I did not receive training involving techniques for doing community analysis. I think this needs to be emphasized because change is coming faster in this period of time than it did twenty-five or thirty years ago. Librarians have to be trained to be cognizant of more and faster changes in community structure and attitude.

One of the ideas that came out of the Library Services Act of 1956, which was set up to help rural libraries, was bookmobile service. Such service did a great deal of good in those early years, but today bookmobile service is not the full answer to reaching out into the more isolated areas. The bookmobile is parked in the garage more than it is out on the road. With the idea today of conserving energy, the costs involved in even driving a bookmobile have proved to be prohibitive. So I think the library schools are going to have to encourage other ideas--I mentioned computers. Perhaps outpost libraries might be another answer. Baltimore County is accomplishing needed service through temporary buildings, kiosks, with small rotating collections. People get accustomed to using such fixed centers rather than the bookmobile.

ESF: In view of the problem of adapting to different economic situations, what changes, if any, do you think should be made in state and federal support for libraries?

Mrs. Ferguson: I think there should be change. The state aid we get now is based on a per capita allotment. There had been for many years quite a shift in population from the rural into the urban areas, and as that population change came about, greater amounts were spent in the urban areas. So what happened to the rural areas? They got less. Now we see a gradual shift back to the rural; I think all the statistics point to that. But it's not to the extent that it's going to mean any great increase in aid if we still continue to base it on per capita. Perhaps per capita could still be used but also have a differential based on "need" put in, since the per capita cost of rural library service is greater by the very nature of the situation. The tax base is not available in the rural areas as in urban-suburban areas, and that fact needs to be taken into consideration. I'm talking basically about state support. If the National Library Act comes into reality, I hope that there will be something written into the act

that will take into consideration greater financial help for the rural areas.

ESF: In Ohio there is a special tax on securities for state aid to libraries. Do you think there's any place in the scheme of things in Pennsylvania for special funds to be used only for libraries like the lottery which was established for senior citizens' programs?

Mrs. Ferguson: If we had a special fund only for library services, it would alleviate the need for lobbying the legislators for appropriations from the general fund. But where the tax would come from at this point I don't know. Certainly gasoline is taxed to the utmost. And I can't see the state setting up a lottery for libraries.

ESF: Do you think there is a place for in-kind contributions to libraries by either private or governmental agencies to cope with these increasing costs? For instance, the New Bethlehem Library receives long distance telephone calling as a gift from the telephone company.

Mrs. Ferguson: Yes, I think there can be. Perhaps trustees, who represent the community, could ferret out these areas and see if something couldn't be done. Volunteers contribute effectively but you can't

depend on volunteer staff to provide the total staffing that you need. If an industry could underwrite one staff person, that would be a tremendous contribution. Or if the businessmen's association could underwrite a part-time person, that would be helpful. If we had some businesses to come in and help with the design of public relations materials, that would assist our search for in-kind support.

ESF: If the local government body, borough council or city council, were to provide whatever services--water, garbage pick-up, electricity--that the city controls, would that be considered a contribution by the local government in applying for state aid?

Mrs. Ferguson: Yes, it would. The CETA or Manpower or Green Thumb staff members that we have working in libraries are called "in-kind," and are counted toward local effort. The telephone costs that are received in New Bethlehem are counted as part of the local effort toward state aid.

ESF: I should think there would be an advantage on both sides because of the library's being a non-profit agency. It just requires a little creative thinking about who has what services that could be provided.

Mrs. Ferguson: Consider Gulf Oil which has just contributed two million dollars to the Cancer Society for the study of interferon. If Gulf Oil could see fit to contribute to a non-profit organization, to this cultural agency that sits in the communities, the library, just think what it would do for rural library service!

ESF: Even in a small community, if there is a local paper, there might be printing services available.

Mrs. Ferguson: That's one resource that has yet to be explored.

ESF: Costs are such an overriding concern we often think in terms of dollars instead of in trade. We may get back to a barter society with this kind of approach.

Mrs. Ferguson: Yes. In many situations you'll find the dollar isn't the answer to everything. We think more money, more money, more money. Well, sometimes there are other things that may mean as much, maybe more, particularly with the dollar being inflated so that we get less and less for those dollars we have.

ESF: I agree you get less for the dollars, and the services would mean so much more.

Mrs. Ferguson: One thing that counts significantly in our library materials budgets are the memorials, contributions that come in for memorials, or for those honoring someone. These amounts raise the materials budget tremendously and are considered as local effort.

ESF: What do you see as special contributions to community culture made by the public library in a small community?

Mrs. Ferguson: I think the library is the focal point for the community, and it is no different here from suburban Bryn Mawr or Wynnewood or Ardmore. It offers continuing education, lifelong learning, through its resources. It is an information center, a referral center for different groups and organizations that operate in the community; it can be a central gathering place for this kind of information. As for programming, I think the library can play a unique position for different kinds of programming: for children, for homemakers, for senior citizens, and for other types of continuing education.

ESF: Do you have any specific goals that you would like to accomplish as District Library Consultant?

Mrs. Ferguson: Yes, I would first like to see better funding. As a consultant I'm in a different kind of position from that of head of a specific library in a specific community. But I think there are things that I can help to do toward better funding; part of what I mean by better funding is better salaries for the people who work in libraries. That is the area needing greatest attention. The loyalty that our staff people have, the concern for providing excellent library service is a real dedication that should be rewarded. I think that presents the major challenge of this position.

A second challenge is to do as much as possible for public relations programs, something I feel is greatly needed. We must get the word out to the townships which lie outside the general cluster of population that here is a public library which has something for you. We need citizen support, but we return that support many times over in service to the residents. To change attitudes toward the true role of the library is a challenge. I call it a public relations program because we have to convince people not only that we need financial support, but also that we need support through usage.

ESF: You were talking earlier about sharing among different types of libraries. Would you like to see a more formal networking system here?

Mrs. Ferguson: In the Clarion District? Most definitely. We are beginning to do that by compiling a "union catalog" of all the materials available in the fourteen libraries in our district. Then, by telephone or by mail, we can locate the materials needed and get them out to the patron. In this way the district can begin to share more and to depend less on the Warren Library which at present serves as a regional resource center. I feel very strongly that networking is a viable activity because in the fourteen libraries we now have more than 350,000 books. That's a fairly large base upon which to draw, although some of those books, perhaps twenty-five percent, will be duplication of titles.

 We've also completed a district directory which lists each library, the address, the telephone, the staff, the interloan contact, and the special collections. We find that the libraries have specialized to some extent, and we can build on that specialization. For instance, Brockway has an invaluable collection on Japanese literature,

history, and art. Rimersburg has begun to build a good collection on solar energy; they also have a strong collection in religion as does Punxsutawney. Oil City and Franklin plan to build a small business resource/reference collection with an LSCA grant. If we know where depth and breadth occur in our district's specialized collections, we won't duplicate that effort; but rather we'll share them. That's one way to stretch the dollars that are allocated for reference and information services.

Another service that we plan is a listing of all periodicals and newspapers in the district with the resources to go with them. For example, Punxsutawney has the Readers' Guide back to 1920; that's a primary source to search specific subjects, and even though we may not have the magazines or serials at Punxsutawney, we can locate them in other district libraries.

ESF: There is a marvelous collection of old bound periodicals at New Bethlehem.

Mrs. Ferguson: Aren't they fascinating? While we know these things are available, we need some kind of directory to locate specific items. Now I know you can print all the directories you want, but

unless the people who are working with those directories will use them, they won't be doing the job they are designed to do. We will do some inservice training with heads of the local libraries in how they can be used. I think we have the resources in our area; all we need to do is pull the data together so that we know what is available. I think that there is more out there in our libraries than we realize.

Another area we are beginning to work on is more cooperation between public libraries and public school libraries; hopefully we can bring together the special schools and/or collections that exist in our area, e.g., the Clarion Intermediate School District has the same boundary lines as the Clarion District Public Library System, so we may be able to develop an arrangement and/or schedule whereby we can send public library materials through the public schools' delivery system. There are all kinds of opportunities out there; we've begun some planning toward sharing of resources, but we need to delve deeper.

ESF:

Are you glad you made the move from Lower Merion to the Clarion District?

Mrs. Ferguson: Oh, definitely! Yes, very definitely, not only for my personal life but for my professional life as well. I find the job quite challenging and interesting, and I enjoy the people with whom I am working.