

THE VILLAGE LIBRARY PROJECT
YUKON-KUSKOKWIM DELTA, ALASKA

Gordon H. Hills
Bethel, Alaska

"Library service of any quality in rural areas is a very new, indeed a revolutionary concept: as revolutionary in its own way as computers or satellite communication . . ."¹ Couple this with the fact that both computers and satellite communication (including television) are joining libraries in Yupik Eskimo villages across the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta, and we assuredly have, in terms of access to new information, a revolutionary situation.

The Project area² is in west central Alaska, along the Bering Sea coast. About the size of the State of Washington, it is almost entirely tundra, with the Yukon River forming the northern edge against hills, and the Kuskokwim River flowing southwesterly into the bay of the same name. A maze of tributaries and sloughs characterize both river courses. Viewed from the air in the summer months, the innumerable ponds, lakes and serpentine sloughs over the vast tundra area in between give the impression of a waterscape, rather than a landscape. Scrub spruce forests are found upriver and on hills bordering the Yukon. The region is located just south of the arctic circle and has a climate of long, rather harsh winters and relatively short summers. Winters are characterized by short days and zero or below zero temperatures with wind, but the summers more than compensate with endless daylight and bountiful subsistence resources across the land and waters.

The Yukon-Kuskokwim delta is the largest and most heavily populated contiguous area of Native settlement and culture in Alaska. All but a small fraction of the population is Yupik-speaking Eskimo, living in 57 villages ranging from 100 to about 400 in population, with 3 or 4 having between 600 and 700. Bethel, the regional center on the lower Kuskokwim, has 4,800 of a total 19,500³ population in the area.

Euroamerican or western values and development policies and priorities have been supplanting or at least strongly influencing the traditional economies and beliefs at an increasing rate. This is especially true since the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed by the U.S. Congress in 1972. This brought Native local and regional corporate organizations into gradual control of large areas of Alaska, to culminate in total land and resource control in 1991.

During the first half of the 19th century Russian explorers were followed into the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta by missionaries of the Russian Orthodox, Moravian and Roman Catholic faiths. After the sale of Alaska by Imperial Russia to the United States in 1867, the U.S. Government slowly began to assume some care and responsibility for the Native population in the Territory of Alaska. In this century, the U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs and most recently the Alaska State Government (statehood came in 1959) have developed local government, health and educational systems. Telecommunication networks and modern transportation services developed by government, the military and the private sector are the equal of any in the world, for a region so sparsely populated and remote. One main lack is interconnecting highways, prohibited by, among other factors, the exorbitant cost of building and maintaining a roadbed over permafrost. In Alaska, however, air travel has become a system of 'intercon-

necting highways.' Any local roads are confined within a village or connect with a nearby airstrip.

In a word, in terms of access to information and resources for modern development, the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta is being catapulted straight into the 21st century, and many of the Yupik people are the ones most anxious to have their hands on the controls. The traditional subsistence economy is already under pressure from a growing population, and easier transportation (snow mobiles, called sno-gos or snow machines, in winter; outboard-powered, flat-bottom river boats during the warm months; and a variety of aircraft by scheduled and charter carriers all year round). There is regular barge freight service from the mainland U.S., and both jet and turbo-prop airliner service between Bethel and Anchorage, 400 air miles due east. (There are also two other regional sub-centers whose runways can handle jets, one on the Lower Yukon, the other 150 miles upriver from Bethel on the Kuskokwim.) Presently oil and gas exploration and dam proposals are posing dramatic changes for the subsistence economy, which flourished relatively undisturbed for thousands of years.

Public desire for library development in the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta was expressed during a series of meetings sponsored by the White House during the winter of 1978-79 ("Speak-Out" for libraries, etc.) Possibly some of this interest had been stimulated by previous school library development, which was strong in at least one of the three school districts in the region, the Lower Kuskokwim School District. Financial and technical assistance was needed to start a program of library development in the remote villages desiring libraries.

The Head Librarian of Bethel's Kuskokwim Consortium Library (serving both the residents of Bethel and Kuskokwim Community College, the later providing about 80% of its funding) started a search for funds that eventually resulted in a large state appropriation going directly to the college for a village library development project. Preparations were begun and a Project Coordinator was hired for the 1980-81 fiscal year. Nine villages participated the first year, which perhaps was too many.

The criteria for accepting a village to participate in the Project have altered somewhat since the beginning. At first the existence of community college programs was a prime factor (Adult Basic Education⁴ center, credit courses taught by contracting with qualified school teachers in the village). Later of necessity other factors became more important: the surety of a heated, lighted place for the library; the interest and commitment of local officials; a conscientious and otherwise qualified and trained library aide; population; remoteness; community-wide interest and support. Interestingly, we found that it was often easier to establish a library in a small, poor village than in a large, affluent one, due to the fact that there is usually one dominant power clique, figure or family in a small village, whereas the large village may be wracked or disorganized by opposing power factions, or having difficulty managing all kinds of grants for a variety of projects. The city manager (village administrator) may be supportive--or disinterested. The traditional mayor may or may not be strong on the library. And with each election, each change in village administrator, the local climate for the library may well shift, for better or worse.

In return for the village's contribution of a heated, lighted place for the library, the Project provided transportation and per diem for the resident library aides to attend two 3½-day training workshops in Bethel, a "core collection" of library materials, adequate library furnishings, subscriptions to about twenty periodicals, a cassette recorder/player, Yupik language and cooperative extension materials, plus two visits during the first year by the Coordinator to help set up the library and get it started. In the following years the project funded one annual on-side visit per village by the Coordinator, an annual workshop/meeting of all library aides, plus ongoing consulting support to resolve any problems.

Training has been in the most basic procedures for (1) establishing the library, and (2) operating the library. The aide is pivotal in every respect, since he/she acts as the agent and liaison for the Project, once the Coordinator leaves the village. We have found, over the three years' experience, that one must be in as close touch with the village administrator as with the library aide, in order to make realistic progress. Belatedly, as the funding and support services for the Project are being phased out by Kuskokwim Community College during Fiscal Year 84, we must also recognize that the traditional mayor of each village should have been uniformly included in our village liaison. In several villages this happened naturally, but in others, where the village administrator seemed in-charge to a "Kussaq" or Caucasian Coordinator only just learning the socio-cultural ways of the Yupik villages, there was no contact at all with the traditional leaders--and in certain villages it can be seen in retrospect that this omission significantly handicapped the progress of the library.

It should be mentioned that a background in cross-cultural relations for college field staff, those who work in the remote villages, is important. And learning the Yupik language, although not required, has been encouraged for these workers, whose clients are almost exclusively Yupik Eskimos. Admittedly the trend is for more and more young Natives to be, if not bi-lingual, then exclusively English-speaking, but the parental and grandparental generations--certainly in some of the more traditional villages--can be functionally illiterate when it come to written English, at least, though they may have a fragmentary acquaintance with spoken English.

The original Coordinator, who did a creditable job in helping set up nine libraries the first year (although two or three almost failed from lack of follow-up support), appears to have had enough difficulty with the remoteness of the delta and, as he had a small family, with the innumerable flights to remote village alone (20-25 per year was the average the first three years) that he resigned early. The current Coordinator, who will have worked from the second year to the end of the Project, has picked up his cross-cultural knowledge informally, and by close observation. He also worked previously for an Indian tribe on the Washington coast, living outdoors much of the time, and thus was better prepared for bush and cross-cultural encounters generally. It also helped that he was unmarried, though he had a dog team in Bethel, which some would say is almost like being married!

The core collection of each village library consists of forty-five linear feet of fiction and non-fiction, meeting standards of a basic collection for a beginning (very) small public library. This would be about 15 shelves 3' wide, or three 5' high shelving units. The non-fiction portion is strongly reference in character, and the fiction shelves are predominantly juvenile,

westerns and romances. Added initiatives bring adult fiction in donated paperbacks and back files of magazines like Alaska Magazine and National Geographic.

The villagers are solicited for recommendations at all times, and this has resulted in practical repair manuals, local Alaskan, high interest sports books on specific sports, local maps, sectarian religious books, business and trade skill texts, and materials on life-coping skills being added. Anything pictorial on Alaska is of high interest. Illustrated adult fiction would be popular, but there is very little available. One yearns for the old Classic Comics of the '40s and '50s. Cassette tapes of music, bible readings and on other subjects (e.g., basketball coaching) are also available. The first village has purchased a microcomputer for use in its library/A.B.E. Center building, and another possibility is to have a television monitor and video-recorder/player, especially if the village has cable television, which is slowly spreading among at least the larger villages. Telephone service, by the way, has rapidly evolved from the one village phone of one or two years ago to individual phone service for most villages. In the future undoubtedly lies the prospect of computer networks, and teleconferencing is already common. All villages with television sets can receive at least two state channels now, one for entertainment which is a combination of network programming, and the other is the Learn Alaska channel, for educational purposes, including continuing education.

Five villages were accepted during the second year, 1981-82, then two more in 1982-83. Progress for all libraries has ranged from definite to very uncertain. In the fall of 1983, fifteen are either open or on the verge of being so, because of school starting and the summer subsistence season coming

to an end, and the one remaining village will be hiring an aide and opening their library once a small building purchased from the school district has been moved and reassembled on village land. Over these years of the Project there has been almost constant change in the status of each village library, due to the fact that each one has been evolving toward improved housing, budget management and library aide performance. Probably the main incentive for the participating villages to raise standards is to meet requirements for receiving Library Assistance Grants made available by the Alaska State Library.

After difficulties encountered during the first year, it was evident that local political support should be emphasized and continually monitored. Formation of a village library committee was strongly recommended, rather than having the village council sit as the library committee. Most local liaison work has to be done by the library aide, who is coached in workshops and reinforced by other, more experienced aides in ways to bolster the standing of the library, as well as the standard of library services offered. One main goal has been to make the village libraries appropriate, community-oriented libraries. The social status of a new library is somewhat problematical, culturally speaking, until the collection, services and programs it offers are accepted as relevant and helpful and can be recommended by elders, many of whom do not read English or the new Yupik orthography.

The role of the Coordinator, as agent for the creation of new libraries and as advisor for those already established and operating, is significant and, for a time, seemingly indispensable. The main goal of this final, phasing-out year (of Project assistance) is to make the village libraries as independent as possible. A handbook is being prepared for the use of village administra-

tors and village library aides alike. The Coordinator has been facilitating and expediting improvements for the individual village libraries and monitoring their progress by phone calls, on-site visits to help directly (especially in training new aides, which is now done in the home village), and by passing on timely information and advice about changes needed in order to meet requirements for the library assistance grants. Almost all the villages need these grants to keep their libraries going. These are consumed mainly by the aide's salary and heating fuel costs. But then these subsistence villages are dependent on a variety of large state grants and governmental services, for everything from building and maintaining airstrips to operating schools. (Currently the old B.I.A. elementary schools are being turned over to state school districts, and in the future the distant boarding high schools are being phased out as well, as almost all villages now have their own K-12 systems.) even the salaries of village employees are provided through state sources. Although jobs in the private sector exist they are few in number, though a cash economy is gradually replacing the traditional subsistence economy.

The cross-cultural nature of the Project presents interesting problems. As mentioned above, training of villagers to be library aides has evolved from schooling sessions in Bethel (which brought villagers far from their home village to the regional center, with its diversions, temptations, and relative anonymity for the visitor) to on-site visits by the coordinator for one-on-one instruction, coaching, and just plain visiting and getting acquainted in the aide's home village. It is crucial to establish good relations in the village, to know the community better and to be known oneself. As well as making friends, this effort also gives the aide confidence and recognition and the library a start toward acceptance and some status, by eliciting the interest,

support and pride of local officials in a new community service. In going to a home village, the Coordinator chooses to 'go with' community pride and cultural strengths in order to reinforce the training, rather than pulling a villager into the mostly "Kussaq" (white) dominated regional center of Bethel, far from family and friends. Speaking of Kussaqs, there is a point of view or mentality that says that establishing libraries in these villages is not replacing anyone's cultural values, that Yupik people have been reading English for a long time, and that there has never been any adverse reaction to establishing these libraries-in-the-villages is premature, and that they will fail if not constantly nurtured. I must disagree with both these positions, because the truth lies in between these extremes.

Another cross-cultural question involves the position of males and females vis-à-vis the public library in a Yupik Eskimo village. Does it make a difference if the aide is a young woman or a young man? It appears that it does in some villages. Some men may not go to the library simply because it is operated by a woman and is thereby made a "woman's place." In one village the library was placed on the second floor of a city building, where the village administrator's office is located. Both the village administrator and the library aide are young women, and there is also a space for the women's sewing circle to meet! (The first floor is reserved for men's activities.) Recognizing such conditions and the mores of the villagers, we have also thought to suggest designating certain shelves in the village library as "Men's Books," and others as "Women's Books," just as some have always been labelled "Children's Books." This is not an over-reaction, nor is it sexist; it is an attempt to make the libraries more acceptable to all the villagers, not just to women and children and some of the young people. The reluctance

of some men to use the library in a village because of this gender identification is also seen in the use of the Adult Basic Education Centers in certain villages, where young men are said to be unwilling to show a lack of prowess in academic and related areas of knowledge by being seen entering the place, although they might go in to get acquainted with the young woman personally! Hunting, fishing and trapping are the men's traditional, subsistence domaine; the women are at home with children, or gathering plant resources, making or washing clothes, preparing and cooking food, processing game and hides brought in by the men, etc.

In order to qualify for Library Assistance Grants and matching money available from the Alaska State Library after the village library is established, each participating village council must pass a library ordinance or resolution and have the library open at least ten hours per week for 48 weeks of the year, although "alternative library services" may be offered during the summer months, when subsistence fishing takes precedence over all other community activities. This usually involves placing an exchange paperback and periodical collection in the village administrative offices, which are open throughout the year. Passing a library ordinance or council resolution to that effect makes the village public library an official arm of village government.

The Library Assistance Grants are for operations and improvements for an existing community public library, but not for construction of a library building. There are other state funding sources available for the purpose of new library construction, but as of this writing there are no longer funds available for this use through the federal Library Services and Construction Act. Orientations and advice are given at all workshops for the library aides,

regarding the requirements and preparations needed to qualify for such state grants and any other funding for libraries.

The type of housing utilized for a village public library takes many forms: rooms in community or recreation halls, or in other village government buildings, former clinics or vacated houses, old federal government trailers or school classroom buildings, and lastly, combined school/public libraries that are set up in the local high school's library area. The latter arrangement has to be negotiated between the village's school advisory board and the village council. Wherever feasible and desired, for its apparent economy and efficiency, the Project has supported such combined or multiple use of the village library area. For example, some villages hold their Adult Basic Education classes in the library, or the village library aide doubles as the A.B.E. monitor.

On the face of it, one would think that it would work out best in these small, isolated villages--many of them quite poor--to have the school and public library in one facility, to eliminate the duplication of services. However, under the prevailing cross-cultural conditions this is not easily done, and in fact is not wanted. Of the sixteen villages that joined the Project, not one has retained combined school/public library housing, though several started out that way. The villagers apparently prefer to have total control of their own library. On the other hand it seems clear that the village library joins most logically with the local A.B.E. program, for these combinations are relatively easy to effect, and the A.B.E. program is administered by the regional community college.

As well as offering public library services, the village libraries are also there to provide some preparation and support to high school graduates in

the villages who may be considering higher education, and to do the same for students in field extension courses of the community college. Support for A.B.E. students has already been mentioned. Interlibrary loan is encouraged, as well as any other mutual assistance and sharing. Last winter one library was totally lost when the community hall in which it was housed burned to the ground. In a few weeks a large quantity of new and duplicative materials were being donated by the other village libraries, and shortly the village had more than enough good library materials to open in a new location. The strongly supportive response from the other libraries also boosted the spirits of the "burned out" library aide and, instead of quitting his library job, he took on a new enthusiasm which eventually resulted in the library re-opening, furnished with all new shelving and furniture purchased with remaining grant money and some village funds.

The library aide position in most villages being only a quarter-time job, the aide usually has other part-time jobs or subsistence activities to pursue. As a resource person the library aide is sometimes able to obtain employment in the local school as a teacher's aide to help take care of the school library as well. We have also found that the aide really needs to be a high school graduate. Then with library training and regular coaching he or she is more likely to operate the library in an effective way, responsive to villagers' needs. Experience with high schoolers has shown that they are too immature and self-oriented, regardless of training, and use their library hours mostly as a trysting time with their peers!

Funding for the Project itself, after the first year's direct appropriation from the legislature to the college for this purpose, developed a checkered character, but at all times originated, directly or indirectly, with the

Alaska State Department of Education and the University of Alaska. Funding for the second and third years came partly out of the continuing appropriation to the college, plus two grants: one from the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, the other from Alaska State Library. The fourth and final year's funding comes from the college and supplemental grant for a project evaluation for the first half of the college year, then probably from grants exclusively for part of the second half. The Project fortunately began at a time when ample state funds and a local state legislature with much seniority were available. It will end at a time of a reordering of the college's priorities, which do not include any further village library development or support of any kind, and a downturn in state revenues, brought on by a slump in the world oil market.

The annual meeting of library aides (which may continue--the next one is scheduled for February, 1984--because expenses of each aide can be paid through each village library's own library assistance grant) takes place in a different host village each year, to take advantage of the strong cultural reinforcement and sense of community so prevalent throughout the region. The village setting also offers an opportunity for outside guest instructors to experience the cultural and environmental conditions that predominate. For the current Project Coordinator, working with village people and the aides has been as much a learning experience as it has been one of instructing others. One recommendation recently made is to create an Advisory Council for the Project, to ensure that the villagers control policy formulation for future library development in the Yukon-Kuskoswim delta.

It is certainly a difficult and delicate task to insert a foreign cultural institution into any community, and then to ask them to operate it

alone. In the long run, however, it is the only way it may be accepted and integrated into community life and activities. In the past, the traditional Yupik 'library' has been the oral tradition maintained by elders. In the Village Library Project we have looked for ways to benefit and grow because of this oral tradition, to eventually bring the village library effort into concert with it. Through the children, who know libraries through their schools, this can be achieved in time. Library programs with high topical and local interest have been encouraged, oral history techniques and archival controls have been introduced, and local imprints and audio-visual productions by and about the Yupik Eskimo people have been sought.

As the Project continued these four years, a growing concern has been to have a thorough outside evaluation. This fall (1983) a major evaluation effort will be undertaken, of all aspects of the Project. Records of circulation (and visitors) in the individual libraries are being kept regularly now by everyone, so these measurements of library use can be considered as well. Of equal concern is how a village's governing leaders judge the library, and efforts are constantly being made to solicit and learn from their appraisal. The formal evaluation will include on-site visits over the course of a week to most of the sixteen villages, especially those reflecting special difficulty and special progress. The evaluation team will probably be comprised of two professional librarians, a man and a woman, knowledgeable and experienced in the delivery of library services to Native/bush areas. This reason for specifying a man and a woman is to give a balance and authority to the team that will make their work more effective, recognizing the acceptable roles of men and women in the traditional culture, so strong in the delta villages. For each village visited, the traditional mayor will be formally invited to escort

the evaluation team. The village administrator will also be asked to participate. It is important when visiting a village in any formal or representative capacity to identify oneself and the purpose of the visit, and to demonstrate friendliness and mutual respect by meeting with local leaders.

There is much to know and respect of the Yupik Eskimo life and culture, in this period of accelerating cultural and economic changes. All the funding in the world cannot buy a rational and humane progress in cross-cultural development if the ancient tradition and the integrity of local authority and customs are ignored. Perhaps, long after the "Village Library Project" is gone, the village libraries throughout the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta will not only support orderly and responsible regional development, but will also help preserve a healthy balance between modern and traditional ways.

NOTE: The author invites comment, which, along with results of the formal evaluation and other review, may be included in a postscript next spring.

FOOTNOTES

¹From Unesco Bulletin for Libraries, 26:1, P. 2-7, "Functions and Organization of a Rural Library System", by F. A. Sharr, State Librarian of Western Australia.

²Identical with the Calista Native Corporation area

³Figure provided by Association of Village Council Presidents

⁴Hereinafter referred to as A.B.E.