



Montana Chooses Federations of Libraries

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THE CONCEPT OF FEDERATIONS of libraries and its application for the large, sparsely populated state of Montana was admirably presented by Raymond E. Mahoney, in an article written for the January 1, 1952 issue of the *Library Journal*:

It is easier to arrange a federation than a consolidation in which individual libraries lose their identity. Many small and medium libraries are well-established units of local government having vested property rights and a long tradition of local autonomy. The struggle for larger units of service has often failed because of a head-on collision with localism. In many cases advocates of unity have attempted to do too much too quickly. They have tried to take over a series of smaller units (libraries, librarians, and lockers), dissolve their distinctive characteristics, and establish a closely integrated consolidation. But localism is a continuing force in the American way of life; local library boards have worked too hard and too long to agree to preside at a ceremony for their own dissolution.

Federation preserves the advantages of local libraries, adding the increased efficiency and specialization of larger units. It satisfies the desire for "home rule" and parallels the historic American principle of independence in local self-government. Basically it is an agreement to surrender certain rights for the greater rights which they enjoy through membership in a large organized system. . . .

A federation system of libraries may be the difference between success and failure when trying to organize service on a metropolitan, county, or regional basis. It offers the strong framework around which independent libraries may unite, improve, and go forth to better service.¹

Prior to the adoption of the present plan for library development in Montana, two concepts were considered by library leaders in the state: (1) regional library headquarters as branches of the state agency, and

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(2) independent regional libraries in six regions, with the center located in the largest city in the district.

State branches of the state agency were considered inadvisable by the majority, in part, because of the difficulty of administration occasioned by the vast distances that would exist between the regional office and headquarters. The problem is further enhanced by the fact that geographically and economically Montana is two states divided roughly along the western fringe by the Rocky Mountains. A second factor was the lack of financial support that could be envisioned in the foreseeable future from the state legislature. The yearly budget for the state agency at the time of the recommendation was \$14,890.

The proposal for the establishment of six regional libraries, which would divide the state into six library districts, came into head-on collision with localism. The Montana Library Association at its 1952 conference did not adopt the plan. The concept of a regional library became synonymous with loss of autonomy to many libraries and trustees, and the division of the state into six regions that would provide support in the amount of at least \$100,000 was considered by many to be arbitrary. The centers specified in the plan were not always natural trading centers to many of the adjacent counties, and in some instances there was a long history of local rivalries between the cities that were expected to pool their resources.

Montana's present plan provides for federations of libraries. Basic to the plan is the provision for local autonomy, for home rule and self government, and intrinsic to the plan is the provision for the extension of services from strength. A strong central library, well supplied with library resources of high quality and under the direction of a dynamic professional librarian to guarantee imaginative and effective leadership, is the first requisite. The plan is flexible and thus easily adaptable to any existing library situation in the state.

Montana's public library laws are permissive and are considered relatively good, in that any form of cooperation between all types of governing bodies is possible; cities may contract with counties, and counties may contract with cities or with other counties for a regional library. The last mentioned provision in the law has not been used. The three federations that are now operating on a self-supporting basis have legal entity through contracts for service with the center library. The agreements specify services to be received, method of administration, and the amount to be paid by the contracting agency. The contracts are in effect on a continuing basis until terminated by a notice of one of

the parties, six months prior to the dissolution of the agreement. There is provision in each contract for a yearly review of the amount to be paid for services. A board made up of representatives from each county, appointed by the county commissioners, acts in an advisory capacity. Local library boards continue to function as they have in the past, concerned with local library responsibilities. It is usual to have local board members chosen to serve on the advisory board.

No governmental problems have arisen in the organization and administration of the federations, up to the present time. In areas which were without service, steps have been taken that are required under the law to establish either a city or a county library and to allow the governmental unit the power to tax for library purposes. The law provides the alternative of contracting for service in lieu of the establishment of a library. Where a tax-supported library exists, the governmental unit continues to provide the necessary support. The funds for the additional services are paid yearly in two payments to the city treasurer of the Center. These funds then became a part of the budget of the headquarters library. An annual report of expenditures is made by the librarian of the central library, called the coordinator of the federation, and such interim progress report as he deems advisable. Strong leadership by influential citizens secures the necessary tax support for the library program from the local governing bodies.

The factors that determine the location of the federations and the cohesion into areas are homogeneity of population, ease of transportation and communication, contiguity, and especially, professional leadership at the federation center. A basic consideration in setting up the region is sufficient taxable valuation to insure funds adequate to meet the requirements of American Library Association standards as stated in *Public Library Service*.² Present federations do not include areas sufficiently large to meet the ALA standard, but in each of the three systems plans are being made to extend service into surrounding counties.

The services provided by a federation follow the same pattern that is in operation in many library systems throughout the nation. Ordering, processing, and cataloging have been centralized, relieving the professional member librarians from repetitious detail and providing cataloging of high standard. A uniform library card permits residents to borrow books from any library in the system. Through group purchase of books, supplies, and equipment, substantially larger discounts have been obtained. Monthly or bi-monthly meetings of the libraries provide in-service training and the expert advice and counsel of the

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professional staff of the center. Bookmobile services are shared, as are extensive reference service from the main library, and an intensive area-wide public relations program is in effect in each system.

The Great Falls Federation serving two counties more nearly approximates a regional concept than the other two existing federations in the state. Earlier there were two libraries in Great Falls, the strong municipal Public Library and a small county system. Service first was extended from the Public Library to the small town of Conrad in Pondera County which had an independent municipal library. The contract provided centralized ordering and processing of books and the consultative service of an extension librarian. In 1959 the Great Falls Public Library merged through contract with Cascade County Library and extended all services to both Pondera and Cascade County, through a bookmobile and branches. Conrad continues to keep its entity as a municipal library but participates as a member of the system and pays a portion of its budget to the center. The branches in Belt and Cascade, in Cascade County, and in Valier in Pondera County, each have a small city tax which each library administers, but the bulk of the support comes from county appropriation paid directly to the Great Falls Public Library.

The Sagebrush Federation located in the sparsely populated, stock-raising area in eastern Montana includes five geographically large counties and has its center in Miles City. The support in this area is predominantly from county tax, with the exception of Miles City and Glendive which are city-supported libraries with county contracts. With the exception of Carter County where there is no public library, each library is supported by city and county tax, and additional funds are paid into the center at Miles City for book processing, in-service training, and bookmobile service.

The Northwest Montana Federation of Libraries offers a slightly different program in that four relatively strong independent libraries exist there. Bookmobile costs are paid by county funds. The individual libraries (city or county) share the cost of centralized processing based on the size of their book budgets. Plans here are to include yet another county and to strengthen the federation into a more cohesive whole.

These federations came about from demonstrations of service provided through Library Services Act funds. Great Falls is the exception since there local funds were immediately forthcoming, but the federation started through the impact of the Library Services Act (LSA) program and through the loan of a bookmobile purchased with LSA

funds. The bookmobiles in each area remain the property of the State Library Commission but are kept in the area for as long as a federation exists.

The State Library Commission participates as advisor and mentor to the federations. A representative from the state agency is always in attendance at the regular meetings of the member librarians of each federation. Consultative visits are made with regularity, and there are continuing studies and evaluations to explore ways and means of improving and strengthening services. Additional federal funds will be provided by the state agency to each federation to assist in extending the system to include adjacent counties.

In volume one of *The Public Libraries of the Pacific Northwest*,³ Robert Campbell (Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Oregon) has done a definitive study on the financing of public libraries. He points out that Montana has both the largest area and the lowest population density in the Pacific Northwest and that the state is organized into the largest number of counties with the smallest average population per county of any of the states in the region. He concludes that, even though Montana's property tax burden is the highest in the region, the provisions for libraries appear capable of providing close to the minimum requirements to meet American Library Association standards if fully utilized. The localities, particularly the counties, have not fully exploited the taxing powers allocated to them for this purpose. He recommends larger units of service with costs paid primarily from local funds but subsidized to some extent by state grants.

Montana's first demonstration of a library federation was not successful. A seven-county system with Missoula as the center was initiated in 1957 and continued for a three-year period. Lack of success was not attributable to the type of organization but mainly to the lack of sufficient personnel to direct and to interpret the program, the limited supply of attractive books, and the choice of too large an area to serve adequately with one small bookmobile. The chief drawbacks were that the center was not strong and that the staff at the center was less than lukewarm toward the program. The resources of the small state agency were strained to the utmost in its attempt to assist with the demonstration and to implement the program of library development throughout the state. Much was learned in this initial attempt, however, and the existing federations have profited.

Montana has recently adopted the *Interim Standards for Small Public Libraries*⁴ and earlier adopted the American Library Association

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standards as set forth in *Public Library Service*.⁵ Library service of high standard can be a reality through a network of library systems called federations, which are built on the solid foundation of a strong center designed to consolidate strength rather than to combine weakness, and which provide for the priceless advantages of initiative, responsibility, and pride of ownership in each community. Three areas in the state have achieved satisfying progress toward that goal.

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