

Introduction

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RURAL PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE is a distinct, important, and complex problem that affects large segments of the United States population but has lacked the attention and examination of the library community. Allie Beth Martin wrote in 1972, "Rural public library service has been largely overshadowed by urban-suburban crises in recent years."¹ Three-quarters of a decade later, rural libraires and rural public library service are still being neglected and overlooked by scholars and decision-makers, and the national library press and literature. This issue of *Library Trends*, in its examination of rural public library service, is an attempt to correct this neglect.

Rural public library service is not a distinctive and independent system any more than urban and rural society act as separate entities: "The village community by definition has never been a totally isolated entity but a part, however remote, of the national state."² Similarly, the rural public library has been a part of and influenced by the national library community. And like the rural village, it is witnessing a decline in its autonomy as it becomes more and more a part of the national scene. This development has come about as the local rural library has increasingly come under the influence of county, regional, state, and network systems. DeGruyter's chapter on the history and development of the rural library reviews the growing influence that county, regional and statewide services have had on the rural library, while DeJohn discusses the impact of networking.

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While rural public library service is not perceived as a separate and distinctive library system, it does, however, have unique and specific problems due to its setting which are valid units of study and analysis. Ann Drennan and Anne Shelby wrote, "Significant differences exist between urban and rural areas—in lifestyles, attitudes, and values, in information needs and in delivery system needs."³ Twenty-three distinct economical, political, and sociological areas were cited by the authors as examples.

Central to the rural and urban dichotomy is geographical remoteness. "Geographic remoteness means a different way of obtaining information,...lack of knowledge of and access to social service agencies, ...remoteness from adequate education,...from traditional methods of continuing education,...from information for rural businesses,...from a variety of leisure activities,...from special services for young children,... from choice of mass media."⁴

In addition to geographical remoteness, other concerns which need to be addressed when designing, providing and delivering rural library services include low population size, population density, transportation, and poverty and educational levels. Ann and Henry Drennan further explain rural uniqueness in this issue's leading chapter.

In the Drennans' article, as is the case in each of the chapters, the authors have tried to answer the problem of defining the term *rural*. This may not be unlike the six blind men and the elephant. Whichever part of the rural problem one grabs hold of may determine that writer's perception of the beast. Thus, the issue's authors offer a variety of definitions and descriptions for rural. As an example, the Drennans distinguished concepts of rural, substantially rural and remote. Weech in his chapter on standards identifies the three traditional rural definitions generally followed by the library community. Fry, Lange, and Curran and Barron use the traditional definitions, while the other authors in this issue either qualified them or offered alternatives.

Defining rural public library service offers the same potential for diversity of opinions as defining *rural*. For this issue of *Library Trends*, rural public library service is defined simply as public library service conducted in a rural setting.

Rural public library service is often incorrectly perceived as simply a farm problem of only regional importance, which will simply disappear as rural populations decrease. But, in fact, it is not just a regional farm problem but a national concern that affects a wide representation of Americans, from the farmer in the Midwest to the fisherman off the New England coast, to the miners in Appalachia, to the textile workers

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in the Southeast, to the retirees in the Southwest, to the timber workers in the Great Northwest.

The belief that the rural problem is lessening and is becoming indistinguishable from urban problems can be attributed in part to a decreasing farm population. Farm population, estimated at 32 million between 1910 and 1920, had fallen to about 9 million in 1975.⁵ Also decreasing in population nationwide is the very small town of 500 population or less.⁶ However, what is not often recognized is that cities of 500-2500 have been increasing in population at a rate higher than the national average.⁷ Additionally, although rural population as a percentage of the total U.S. population has dropped from a high of 95 percent in 1790 to 26.5 percent in 1970, the rural population in real numbers has remained fairly stable at 54 million for the past quarter-century.⁸

Rural population has remained relatively stable but its makeup is changing from farm-dominated to mining, timber, fishing, and manufacturing. And yet, library planners may be using out-of-date perceptions and stereotypes of the rural community.

In this issue's chapter on information services, Vavrek cautions his readers to "first acknowledge the realities of library service in the [rural public] library" and then deal practically with it, thereby describing the aims of this issue. Articles here were commissioned to examine the long-overlooked and changing realities of rural public library service. A second purpose is to describe the distinctive, important, and complex problems confronting rural libraries, and third, to identify areas for further study.

These goals are accomplished in the descriptions of its people by Drennan and Drennan, its services and programs by both McCallan and Vavrek, its myths by Curran and Barron, its standards by Weech, its governance by Lange, its operations by Fry, its history by deGruyter, and its future by DeJohn.

References

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4. *Ibid.*, pp. 172-76.

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5. Ford, Thomas R. "Contemporary Rural America: Persistence and Change." *In* _____, ed. *Rural U.S.A.: Persistence and Change*. Ames, Iowa State University Press, 1978, p. 6.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 6.