

## The History and Development of Rural Public Libraries

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THE HISTORY OF RURAL public library service in the United States has been one of constant expansion of service to unserved populations and of the formation of increasingly larger units of service. Public services in rural areas must overcome five interrelated obstacles: scattered population and low population density, poor transportation and communication systems, lack of financial resources, lower educational levels than in urban areas, and division of authority among several local governments which may not be related to social, economic, and settlement patterns. Since the migration to the cities beginning in the late nineteenth century, there has been a social and economic division between city dwellers and country people, and a further division within rural areas between village and farm.

Five successive periods of rural library development can be identified, all striving to overcome this rural/urban split and to equalize service to rural inhabitants. The first was the library extension movement, beginning in the 1890s, which first extended service to rural people through traveling libraries operated by the state library agencies. Service by this means proved too great a burden on the state agencies and did not provide the same level of service that the cities and towns received. Next came a move toward county libraries in the World War I years and the 1920s, pioneered by California and New Jersey, which aimed at making one local government responsible for library service and providing an adequate tax base. This system worked well in Cali-

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ifornia because of the large size of the counties, but most of the counties in the country were not large enough to be adequate units of service, so the movement in the late 1930s and 1940s was toward regional and cooperative services. Libraries had first experienced the benefits of federal and state aid during the depression from Works Progress Administration programs, and began looking toward this aid as a way of providing improved rural service. This hope was realized in the Library Services Act (LSA) of 1956, which provided federal aid through the states specifically for rural libraries. LSA was expanded in 1964 to become the Library Services and Construction Act, with much more emphasis on aid to large and urban libraries and on interlibrary cooperation on larger regional and statewide bases.

A discussion of the terms *rural* and *rural library service* is in order here. The word *rural* comes from the Latin word for "country," and its basic meaning of "living in the country" (as opposed to the town or city) has remained unchanged for centuries. However, the substance of country life has changed considerably, especially in the last century. Until the latter part of the nineteenth century, virtually every American lived in the country and farmed for a living, or at least part of his living. Since then, the bulk of the population has shifted to the cities (although the absolute size of the rural population has remained stable since the depression, and there has been migration away from the cities in the 1970s), and the rural population has become predominantly nonfarm as agribusiness and corporate farming increased. Since the connotation of an agricultural life is no longer valid, what distinguishes the rural inhabitant from the urban? The old idea of country life as characterized by simplicity and lack of sophistication still obtains. The stereotype of the country bumpkin dates at least from the fifteenth century (when *rural* was a synonym of the pejorative *rustic*), and its persistence can be seen as deriving from two enduring facts of country life: low population density and the simpler social structure it enables. Rural areas can be identified not so much by population levels or economic patterns as by the degree of influence of urban social structure on the community. Rural areas near large metropolitan areas tend to have more nearly urban values. Drennan and Shelby have pointed out more than twenty distinguishing characteristics of rural populations that affect information use, most of which can be seen to derive from lack of sophistication in dealing with relatively complex social structures.<sup>1</sup>

If "rural" cannot be identified entirely by place, what about rural library service? Until the 1940s, rural library service was identified largely with extension services. The first rural services were the travel-

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ing libraries administered by the state, and were based on a conviction that rural areas were not able to organize and support their own libraries. This conviction has turned out to be reasonably well founded. Rural library services today may be based on a local county library, but it in turn depends on support from metropolitan libraries, regional and state libraries, and state and federal funds. Any definition of rural library service must include not only libraries in rural areas, but the supporting agencies and extension services as well.

### **The Library Extension Movement**

The public library movement of the nineteenth century resulted almost entirely in municipal libraries which did not serve the surrounding countryside. Only the New England states, notably Massachusetts, achieved complete or nearly complete coverage in the nineteenth century, because of their unique form of local government, the New England town. This system included both the urban area and the surrounding countryside under one local government.<sup>2</sup> In the 1890s, state library agencies began to be formed as part of the state legislative library, as a separate library commission, or, in a few states, as part of the state education agency. These agencies were responsible for providing "advice and aid" to local (mostly city and town) governments wishing to establish libraries or already maintaining libraries, and for providing extension service in the form of traveling libraries.<sup>3</sup>

The traveling library was "a collection of books lent to a community for general reading,"<sup>4</sup> and its purpose was to provide moral and cultural edification rather than useful information or research materials, which was in line with the purpose seen for small public libraries at that time. Collections were either "fixed sets," in which the original combination of books remained unchanged and were rotated among different communities, or "open-shelf," which were collections made up for a specific community from a central general collection. "Study libraries," fixed sets on one topic or a series of topics, were loaned to community groups interested in pursuing special subjects. Special loans were also made from open-shelf collections to clubs, institutions, and schools.<sup>5</sup>

Fixed sets were the recommended collections for traveling libraries, with special loans for serious readers. The administration of fixed sets was much easier, since new lists of books did not have to be made up each time a collection was sent out. Most of the books were fiction, with a few nonfiction titles to "help [people] think to some purpose."<sup>6</sup> The

idea was to encourage reading for the sake of reading, as a wholesome and uplifting recreation. Collections were to be located in public places—general stores, post offices, telephone exchanges—so as not to discourage those who might be intimidated by having to intrude on a private home, and an “interested librarian” put in charge.<sup>7</sup> This first rural service was not free. Every state but Delaware and California required the borrowing community to pay at least some of the transportation charges.<sup>8</sup>

Rural libraries were one of the many rural educational institutions that benefited from the country life movement, which began informally among urban middle-class professionals and businessmen, many of whom had rural backgrounds. The “closing of the frontier” had brought a slowdown in agricultural expansion; improved farming methods and machinery had decreased the amount of farm labor needed; and the urban population was growing rapidly through immigration from rural areas and from abroad. The country life movement was based on a conviction that the exodus to the cities was caused by deficiencies in rural life, and that the great democratic agrarian traditions on which the nation had been founded were about to be lost forever. The new urban middle class had a romantic view of the American farmer and the rural way of life they had so recently left, as a repository of their cultural traditions, a sort of living museum. There were several points of view on what exactly should be improved in rural life to preserve it, but the result was an effort to improve the economic lot of the farmer through scientific farming and marketing techniques, social and cultural life through the schools and churches, and access to urban facilities through better roads.<sup>9</sup>

Rural sociology as a field of study became established at about this time, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the land grant universities and their extension agencies, and various private and semipublic organizations such as farm bureaus and cooperatives expanded research and educational programs to improve rural life. The movement gained legitimacy with the appointment of the Country Life Commission by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1908.<sup>10</sup> Public libraries were often recommended as one means of community improvement, and in at least two states, Oregon and Texas, county farmers’ libraries were authorized by state law.<sup>11</sup>

By 1915 twenty-eight states had legislation authorizing state traveling libraries, and thirty-four had a state agency responsible for advising or supervising local libraries. New York was providing matching funds in aid to local libraries. The overwhelming majority of legislation at

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this time permitted any municipal government to establish a public library. Only nine states—California, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Montana, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Pennsylvania—permitted a county to maintain a library. In most states, county governments were permitted to contract with a municipal library for service, and municipalities were permitted to contract among themselves. In several of the states where county libraries were permitted, cities and towns could exempt themselves from the services and the support of the county library.<sup>12</sup> These laws effectively meant that residents of unincorporated areas had no legal means of providing library service for themselves except to gain the use of a town library or to use the state traveling libraries, where they existed. Rural residents had no control over the administration of the town libraries, which, even if they served the outlying areas by contract, could be expected to have the needs of their immediate constituency as first priority.

### **County Libraries**

The American Library Association Committee on Library Extension issued a report in 1926 which revealed that 93 percent of those people in the United States and Canada without library service were rural residents, living in open country or places with a population of less than 2500.<sup>13</sup> This group constituted about 40 percent of the total population. The county library system had proved successful in California and New Jersey, and seemed the obvious solution to the problem of extending coverage to rural residents. As early as 1917, an article in *Library Journal* called for county library laws for all the states.<sup>14</sup> County library service was advocated as the best means to universal library service, with the county levying taxes on the whole population to support a central library and many branches and deposit stations. This would have the advantages of allowing the employment of a trained librarian to supervise the whole unit, money to be spent on books instead of buildings, equal access for every citizen, plus the economies of scale engendered by centralized acquisitions and processing and the avoidance of duplications.<sup>15</sup> Traveling libraries were being replaced by book trucks (later, bookmobiles) which at first supplied deposit stations and only later began circulating books directly.

The Julius Rosenwald Fund gave one-half million dollars in 1929 for a demonstration of county libraries across the South. Eleven counties in seven states (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas) were chosen for the demonstra-

tions. The resulting libraries were thoroughly studied by Louis Round Wilson and Edward Wight of the University of Chicago.<sup>16</sup> Both Wilson and Wight, along with Carleton Joeckel of the Public Library Inquiry,<sup>17</sup> concluded that the county, in general, was too small a unit of service in terms of wealth, area, and population. Oliver Garceau analyzed the inadequacies of counties as having a service unit too small in population, wealth, and area; as having no justification for a service outlet other than the central library in the trade center; as having a too widely scattered population; and as weakening the central library by attempting extension service to this scattered population.<sup>18</sup> The idea, at least, of county library service had been successful: from 1915 to 1940, the number of states with legislation authorizing counties to maintain public libraries increased from nine to thirty-seven.<sup>19</sup>

### **Regional Libraries**

During the depression, it became increasingly apparent that the county, in most instances, was not a large enough unit for rural library service. The proportion of those without service had decreased from 43 percent in 1926 to 37 percent in 1935, but 60,000 more people were without service, partly because 2 million people had moved back to the country due to unemployment in the cities. Of those without service in 1936, 88 percent were rural residents, and 75 percent of the rural population was still without service.<sup>20</sup> Less than 10 percent of the counties in the country had complete service, and only 50 percent had partial service.<sup>21</sup> The proportion of counties without service varied inversely with population; Carleton Joeckel, speaking at an institute on current trends in libraries in 1936, said, "the whole question of library extension is essentially a rural problem—a fact which we all know."<sup>22</sup> Almost one-half of the counties in the United States were entirely rural (that is, they contained no incorporated place with a population of more than 2500), and nearly two-thirds of these had no library. Joeckel proposed several possible solutions: cooperation, federation on the Danish model of central libraries, county libraries, or multicounty regional libraries.<sup>23</sup>

The first demonstration of regional library service was a project funded by the Carnegie Foundation United Kingdom Fund in British Columbia, and was widely held up as an example for the United States. Three regional libraries, with branches, deposit stations, and bookmobiles, centrally administered, were set up in 1936.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) was providing funding for library extension activities.

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In the early years of the depression, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and later WPA, provided funds for employing workers to repair books and to compile union catalogs and special indexes. By 1938 a Library Service Section of WPA had been created to coordinate all library projects, and the main thrust of the state programs under this section was to extend library service to areas without public libraries. In the period from 1935 to 1941, WPA spent twice the amount on library service projects that had been normally budgeted by state and local agencies, and WPA and the National Youth Administration (a part-time employment program for youth) more than doubled the size of the library work force.<sup>25</sup> There were forty statewide projects, and at least half the counties in the country received assistance. At least two states, Arkansas and North Carolina, instituted state aid for libraries after WPA demonstrations.<sup>26</sup>

In the period from 1935 to 1940, six states (Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Vermont) passed legislation requiring the state library agencies to prepare statewide plans for setting up regional libraries. In most cases, these plans had to be approved by the local government agencies involved—a precarious political process. Thirty-one states had some provision for contracts between library agencies or for regional library agencies.<sup>27</sup>

### **After the War: LSA**

The entire decade of the 1940s was characterized by a reexamination of goals and planning for the future by the library profession, but the exigencies of war prevented much action until the second half of the decade. The United States emerged from World War II as a major world power, with responsibility for the guardianship of the atomic bomb and for helping Europe and Japan recover from the devastation of the war. The war effort had produced a flood of technology waiting to be utilized in peacetime. Returning soldiers were taking advantage of the GI Bill to go to college and technical school in unprecedented numbers. The Marshall Plan, the country's first major foreign aid effort, signaled a new kind of war, in which the building of alliances by sharing technology, education, and information was more important than fighting physical battles.

At issue was just what the role of libraries was to be in this new world. The American Library Association saw the new public library not as a place for literature, but as an information distribution agency taking advantage of the new technology, and as an agent of social

change.<sup>28</sup> At the annual conference in June 1946, the ALA Council approved the first seven chapters of *Planning for Public Library Service*, the new set of standards produced by the Committee on Post-War Planning. This plan, written by Carleton Joeckel, called for library service that would provide “enlightened citizenship and rich personal living” for every American.<sup>29</sup> It provided for four levels of service: a national bibliographic center, state library agencies in each state, regional reference centers, and, at the direct public service level, 1200 public libraries, each serving a population unit of at least 90,000, replacing or consolidating the 7500 public libraries then in existence.<sup>30</sup>

The Public Library Inquiry was also proposed at the 1946 conference. Funded in the amount of \$175,000 by the Carnegie Foundation and conducted by the Social Science Research Council, it was a comprehensive study of the development and objectives of the public library, current operations and management, government support and controls, services offered, and the relationship of the library to the community and of the library to the new technology and new developments in communications.<sup>31</sup>

The results of the inquiry and the new standards both emphasized the importance of strong state library agencies and large units of service. State aid to libraries was increasing, and equalization of rural service was still being emphasized.<sup>32</sup> These trends, along with the experience of public libraries with federal aid during the depression, the growing emphasis on federal social programs, and the new emphasis on education, culminated in the Library Services Act of 1956. Federal aid to rural libraries had been proposed in the 1930s by both ALA and the President’s Advisory Committee on Education. After the establishment of the ALA Washington office in 1945, rural library legislation was introduced in every Congress until LSA was passed.<sup>33</sup>

The Library Services Act was specifically designed to encourage the development of state and local library programs and to leave control of public libraries in the hands of state and local government. To be eligible for grants, states had to develop comprehensive plans for library service, and state and local funding for rural library service had to remain above 1956 levels. A rural area was defined as a place of under 10,000 population. Funds were allotted to the states on the basis of rural population and were matched by the states on the basis of their per capita income. Appropriations of \$7.5 million annually were authorized, but the actual funding for 1957, the first year of operation, was only \$2 million, and the full amount was never appropriated.<sup>34</sup>

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Some of the major results of the program were the strengthening of the state library agencies, the demonstration and development of county and regional libraries, and the development of other cooperative projects. Over half the funds in the first year went for personnel, and about 40 percent for books and materials. Rural reference collections, especially, were strengthened, and film circuits and audiovisual centers were established. Other programs developed under LSA included centralized processing centers, training programs, and surveys of library needs for planning purposes.<sup>35</sup>

### **Library Services and Construction Act of 1964**

In 1960 LSA was extended for another five years at the same level of appropriations. For fiscal years 1960 through 1964, the entire amount, \$7.5 million, was appropriated each year. In 1964 LSA was expanded to become the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA). The new act removed the population limitations, so that LSCA was not confined to rural areas, and it contained three new programs beyond the basic continuation of LSA in Title I, Public Library Services. Title II provided funds for public library construction, Title III for interlibrary cooperation, and Title IV for state institutional libraries and services to the blind and physically handicapped. LSCA reflected the growing national concern in the 1960s for the urban poor and other disadvantaged groups besides the rural population. The original act ran through fiscal year 1967, but was extended in 1966 through fiscal year 1972, and in 1970 through 1976. The first year, \$25 million for services and \$30 million for construction were appropriated, and over the years funds for services increased slightly and funds for construction decreased sharply. No funds for construction have been appropriated since 1973.<sup>36</sup>

The total effect of LSA and LSCA seems to have been increased centralization of service, not through direct administrative control, but through the strengthening of the state agencies. Provided with increased staff and funds, these agencies have been able to exert control through the personal contact of field workers, state-supported training programs for local personnel, demonstration projects, and bookmobile service.<sup>37</sup> Multicounty libraries and cooperative systems have been promoted under Title III of LSCA, especially. It would seem that the benefits of LSCA for rural service have not been direct, but that rural libraries have benefited from the improved support services available from state agencies and cooperative systems.

## Conclusion

The history of rural library service has been one of a struggle to provide equal service to the rural population. Transportation difficulties have been overcome by libraries that travel: boxes of books, bookmobiles, and recently, mail-order libraries. Low population density has been dealt with by increasingly large units of service. State and federal funding has to some extent alleviated the local lack of funds in rural areas. The division of authority caused by the large number of local government units which are allowed to maintain public libraries seems to be a continuing problem which has been dealt with only moderately successfully by statewide plans and cooperative systems, mainly because these programs are voluntary and local governments want to maintain their autonomy. Educational levels remain lower in rural areas, and since education seems to be the one factor linked consistently to library use, this may mean that, even were the other obstacles perfectly overcome, libraries would still not be as well supported in rural areas.

In spite of all this, rural library service does exist, and has been extending coverage and improving in quality of service since the nineteenth century. The flow of migration reversed in the 1970s, and a young and well-educated population is moving from the cities into the countryside. The next challenge of rural libraries may well be to adapt to larger populations with more urban values.

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