

The Rural Public Library Trustee: A Preliminary Assessment

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THERE ARE MANY QUESTIONS one can ask about rural public library trustees. One question that came to mind, and the one which influenced the content and direction of this article, is the following: is it necessary to differentiate rural public library trustees and urban public library trustees? Attempts to answer this question led to the conclusion that such differentiation is not useful in relation to the duties and responsibilities of trustees.¹ What appears to be more productive is to examine the library environment in which the rural public library trustee functions.

That library environment, in contrast to the urban library, can be said to include at least five relatively unique operational elements: (1) remoteness from the mainstream of current library activity, (2) generally poor financial support, (3) lack of professional staff, (4) lack of adequate resources, and (5) generally poor status in the community served (an element shared with public libraries of all sizes).

Allie Beth Martin's overall assessment of the public library is far from encouraging, particularly in relation to the rural, small public library: "The fate of the American institutional phenomenon, the public library, is in question. Its position has never been truly secure in terms of general use or public support except in the large cities until recent years, and for a few short periods of marked progress countrywide."²

For purposes of this article, a rural public library is considered to be a library in any place of 10,000 population or less, the definition used in

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the Library Services Act to specify libraries eligible for funding.³ The Library Services Act itself was an attempt to deal with a long-recognized problem, the difficulty of adequately funding the small public library, which by definition was and is the rural public library.

Louis Round Wilson pointed out in 1938 that "of the 45,130,098 people in the United States who are without public library service, 39,673,217, or approximately 88 percent, live in the open country, or in towns of less than 2500 population."⁴ He went on to say that "here, then, is America's greatest library problem, the problem of providing effective public library service for the one-third of the total population who live on farms and in the small towns and villages of rural American."⁵ As of this writing (in 1979), 65 percent of U.S. public libraries are in cities with populations under 10,000.⁶

In 1944 Carleton Joeckel wrote a critical essay on the problems of library extension in relation to the optimum size of the library unit. In a series of what he called "rough strokes," Joeckel criticized the by-products of the small unit system, implying that this led to "too many library board members doing too many wrong things about the running of their little libraries."⁷ He continued: "Any broad view of the geography of library organization in America makes it clear that the American system has failed, in a large proportion of cases, to unite urban and rural areas into effective library units. For historical or governmental reasons, many cities have been content to go their own way quite separate from the surrounding rural areas."⁸

Joeckel's recommended solution to this problem of inequality was to work toward a sound framework of larger units of service. He said the ultimate success of library service depends upon the strength of the basic library units, and predicted that "the fears caused by any yielding of cherished local independence will quickly disappear when the more efficient service of the larger unit replaces the limited service of the very small library."⁹ Even today, this confident prediction would probably receive mixed reviews.

The library profession's formally adopted solution to the problems outlined by Joeckel rests upon the idea of formal cooperation. The 1956 ALA standards, for example, urged libraries to "band together formally or informally, in groups called 'systems.'" The document further stated that: "The development of systems of libraries does not weaken or eliminate the small community library. On the contrary, it offers that library and its users greatly expanded resources and services"¹⁰—a paraphrase of Joeckel.

Although much progress has been made in the move toward sys-

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tems, the small, independent rural public library is still with us. The problems of the small rural public library remain much the same today as they were twenty-five or fifty years ago: isolation, insufficient support, lack of a professional librarian as director, and lack of resources adequate to meet the needs of its users. These problems and their relatively intensive level present the rural library trustee with a challenge of greater magnitude than that typically faced by the urban library trustee, who often has access to expertise and resources totally beyond the reach of the rural trustee.

Library literature is well supplied with descriptive and prescriptive articles on trustees, most of which create a paragon whose list of traits are fully attainable by few, if any. Perhaps one of the greatest problems in writing about the library trustee is the lack of substantive, research-based articles on the trustee and his or her role. Although they are the subject of a sizable body of literature, library boards have been the object of little research. Much of the literature deplores how little research there has been and urges concentrated attention to library boards and governing authorities as subjects of research.¹¹

Before dealing specifically with the rural trustee, it seems appropriate to discuss briefly issues relating to library boards in general. The role and status of library boards have been the subjects of periodic controversy. The literature of librarianship offers a multitude of justifications to support and defend the board form of library government. Although this view predominates in library literature, there are both librarians and trustees who view the library board as a necessary evil.¹² The literature on library boards can be said to reveal two dominant, recurrent concerns: (1) Are library boards necessary? (2) What is the relationship between the library director and his or her library board in the areas of policy-making and administration?¹³

The essence of the positive prescriptive literature is exemplified by Hall, Winsor, McAllister and Warncke, and Young, all of whom stress that the librarian alone cannot carry the whole load of administration and policy-making.¹⁴

The library board aids the librarian in his or her many duties by acting as a buffer between the librarian and city hall, as an interpreter of the library to the community, as a handy source of expertise in various fields, and as a source of ready reference to community wants and needs. Typical of the strong belief in these vital support roles of the library board is Hall's defense of the administrative board in light of the failure of many boards to carry out successfully the duties assigned to them: "Library boards themselves...have it within their power to erase the

arguments against their administration, for their chief weaknesses have arisen from misunderstanding or neglect of functions rather than from any inadequacy in the functions themselves."¹⁵

A perusal of the trustee handbooks of various states, along with the type of material cited above, gives credence to Garceau's conclusion that "the library profession has developed an orthodox and generally-agreed-upon body of thought about the library board."¹⁶ However, this orthodoxy has been challenged by many, although few can offer evidence to back up their assertions. Supported by the research of the Public Library Inquiry, Garceau concluded that:

Perhaps the long-run development of public libraries should point toward libraries as operating departments. There is evidently nothing inherently incompatible with good library service in this unelaborated structure. No sudden break with the established form, however, is conceivable. Librarians have not yet by any means become universally trained as technical experts or as a learned profession, and where they have been so trained, their standing as experts is not always fully recognized.¹⁷

In contrast to Garceau's conclusion is that of Joeckel, whose landmark research study of public library government led him to assert that although its tradition may be greater than its performance, the library board has earned the right to survive, and that, indeed, a library is likely to succeed best with a lay board and a professional executive.¹⁸

Political scientists have been most persistent critics of the administrative board form of library government. Redford, for example, delineated the issues, saying that although the board form has been common in state and local administration:

I wish we had more scholarly analysis of this device. It certainly has brought to administration the interest and ideas of outstanding community leaders, and conversely has had an educative effect upon these participants.

At the same time, lay responsibility for top management and policy direction has its disadvantages. It strengthens functional independence and impedes coordination, and the argument against it is strong where continuing coordination with other functions is needed. It has been a device for keeping politics out of administration. Has it done so? Or, has it channelled politics into hidden and irresponsible channels? ...Has it removed too much from politics? Has it kept ques-

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tions out of the political channel which should have been considered here? Has it prevented discussion and education of the public on significant issues?...

How do lay boards obtain the information on which they operate? Must it not come to them from the bureaucracy they are to control? Without a study and planning staff of its own and without time for full time analysis of the problems, can a lay board provide the degree of democratic control over the bureaucracy that is needed?...Moreover, where there is a strong professional group interest in the work of an agency, is there not danger that the lay board will overrepresent such an interest and not provide a really independent control on behalf of the society as a whole?¹⁹

The questions Redford raised do not appear to have definitive answers, due primarily, it seems, to lack of empirical research upon which to base judgments. Although Donald W. Koeppe's study dealt with much larger cities than are relevant to this discussion, his thoughts concerning public library government are relevant to the issue of the library board and the lack of research data to support its role and validity. In an author's note to his study, Koeppe expressed these thoughts:

The reader will be inclined to ask to what extent I feel that these findings represent what goes on generally in the governing of the several thousand other municipal public libraries in the United States. I would have to answer that I do not know, and I would be quick to insist that no one else knows either.

I would also respond that our lack of knowledge is at the very root of our problem, and that almost all discussions of public library government are either windy, rhetorical endorsements of the ancient board form or an emotional attack upon it by individuals who for one reason or another can hardly be expected to be very objective.²⁰

With the library board as a "given," the next big question, of course, is the relationship between the library director and the library board. Concern for this relationship in library literature has most often been expressed in terms of the policy-making/administration dichotomy.

Garceau traced the historical evolution of the relationship between librarian and board, pointing out that "from 1876 to 1930 the problem of the relationship was continually discussed and nearly all possible

adjustments were suggested to obtain the right balance." During this time period, however, the librarian gained so much power that by 1927, Garceau concluded, "leadership in library government had...come into the hands of the librarian."²¹

Liljequist surveyed the library board literature from 1876 to 1950, comparing what it said *should* be the case with what library surveys revealed to be the *actual* practice in the librarian/board relationship. Among his conclusions, which seemed to agree with those of Garceau, were these: "(1) While in theory trustees and librarians have reached agreed conclusions on the divisions of the broad fields of policy and administration, they have not been carried out in practice, and in many cases are the exact opposite. (2) The biggest reason for the existence of the contradiction between theory and practice lies in the neglect of the library board. In most cases they have practically abdicated their function to the librarian."²²

Much of the library literature as mentioned earlier, reflects the policy/administration dichotomy, although Virginia Young has attempted to bypass the issue by saying that the relationship between librarian and board is one in which the duties of each: "fall into roughly parallel areas, the obligations and responsibilities of each are entirely separate....Properly comprehended and performed these parallel duties will strengthen and complement each other without risk of competitive or divided authority."²³

Both theory and practice in this sensitive area continue to be somewhat muddled, as Carpenter has noted: "On the one hand it is felt that boards should respect carefully the librarian's superior knowledge, and on the other it is felt that boards should be active and strong initiating policy and aggressively promoting the library."²⁴ These conflicting points of view reflect the confusion which has existed concerning the librarian/board relationship, perhaps much of it due to a faulty conception of the policy-making/administration continuum. (Thirty years ago a political scientist expressed the conviction that the earlier professional belief in the separation of policy and administration was never so clear, consistent, or hard and fast as often had been assumed.²⁵)

There seems to be abundant evidence that "without an excellent director a library board is inevitably very limited in what it can accomplish."²⁶ Monat, Nelson Associates, and Phinney have all stressed that the effective library services found in their studies were dependent upon the library director's ability and dynamic leadership.²⁷ Although this leadership may be crucial, Hamill emphasized the extent to which it depends upon the library board: "For, as against the board, whose

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powers are clearly set forth in statute or charter, the librarian seldom has legally defined powers or legally defined duties, except in cases where civil service regulations may specify them. Such powers as he exercises are usually not by statute but by delegation, often unwritten, from the board, and his role in the library's management is based on sufferance."²⁸

What emerges from these studies and statements is a picture of a dynamic relationship between a library director and the library board. While this is a generalization, it seems reasonable to assume that this relationship exists in libraries of all sizes and may be more crucial in the rural public library, where the magnitude of the problems and the difficulties in dealing with them are potentially greater than in larger libraries.

If one accepts the basic premises of this article, i.e., it is the difficult library environment in which the rural public library trustee functions that is of greatest importance in looking at that trustee's performance, and the duties and responsibilities of all library trustees are essentially the same, then the obvious question becomes: What special qualifications or strengths, if any, might one wish to find in a rural public library trustee?

A preliminary attempt to deal with that issue is made here through analysis of a survey of northwest Iowa public library trustees conducted by Marion F. Rasmussen,²⁹ and through a small sample of telephone interviews with rural trustees conducted by this author.

The Iowa survey generated 162 returns from the 209 trustees sampled, and 70 returns from the 108 board presidents queried. These trustees were from libraries serving populations ranging from less than 500 to 24,999. The author's survey consisted of 21 interviews with trustees connected to libraries serving populations from 1200 to 7500 in the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin—a small but geographically diverse sample of trustees. The relevant questions and answers in these two surveys deal with how the library board functions and with the individual trustee's personal preparation and attitudes.

The Iowa survey revealed that 81 percent of the libraries hold regularly scheduled meetings; the nationwide survey indicated that 95 percent of those boards meet regularly. These answers are encouraging, since they seem to indicate a businesslike functioning of those boards. Less encouraging are the answers to the question: "Does the board

conduct an orientation program for new members?" Both surveys showed that the majority of the boards do not (Iowa, 73 percent; nationwide, 62 percent). These results seem to indicate that little effort is made to educate the new trustee, except by experience. Given the magnitude of the problems faced by the rural trustee, one would consider a formal orientation mandatory.

Even more discouraging are the responses to the question: "When did you last attend a continuing education course or meeting?" Iowa results show that almost 72 percent of the trustees do not attend such courses or meetings, and the nationwide survey revealed that 86 percent of those trustees do not participate in continuing education activities.

The Iowa survey revealed that 8.9 percent of library board members serve less than one year; 42.3 percent serve one to six years; 25 percent serve six to twelve years; and 23.7 percent serve more than twelve years. The proportions in the nationwide survey were similar. Thus, one could agree with Rasmussen that: "It is a commonplace of trustee literature that the library trustee should not remain on his board so long as to become jaundiced or indifferent. Moreover, the trustee whose board tenure is long is very likely to have firmly fixed notions of what his library can and should do....The response to this question should put to rest the notion that appointment to the library board is for life."³⁰

Almost half of the trustees in the Iowa survey indicated that they read at least one professional library periodical, and in the nationwide survey the figure was 57 percent. While this is somewhat encouraging, it seems that if approximately 50 percent of public library trustees do not read even one library serial, then at least half of all library trustees are not as well informed as they ought to be. Reading a library publication should not be difficult, in terms of either access or comprehension. Almost 60 percent of the Iowa trustees polled do not belong to a library organization, nor do 81 percent of the trustees in the nationwide survey. Again, this evidence leads one to believe that the level of knowledge of library affairs among trustees cannot be high.

While it is true that the information gathered in these two surveys is not generalizable, that it is tentative and riddled with problems, as preliminary evidence it nevertheless indicates some serious problems. The major concern to which this information should be related is the assumption previously made that rural public library trustees, because of the environmental problems previously referred to, may need to be better informed, and thus more capable, than trustees of any other kind of public library. If this assumption is true, and if the evidence presented here proves valid through research replication, then the library profes-

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sion clearly has a major task before it, and perhaps one of some urgency as well.

Given the continued prominence of trustees and the development of trustee governance of public library systems, it seems clear that it would be useful, if not necessary, to give more serious attention to the role of trustees and to their care and feeding by the profession which claims to value their contribution. Like so many others, this author urges more research to assist the library profession in improving its understanding of as well as its work with the public library trustee.

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