

---

## Introduction\*

PATRICIA LACAILLE JOHN

---

FIFTEEN YEARS HAVE ELAPSED since the publication of the last *Library Trends* issue on rural public library service. Many of the concerns identified in rural areas and libraries in the 1970s still exist and are discussed in this later issue. For example, rural families still have a lower income than the national average. Also, rural citizens—including librarians—attain a lower level of education. Rural communities have a higher poverty rate and have less access to health services. Rural citizens are older. Rural communities have fewer resources for services and libraries (Drennan & Drennan, 1980, pp. 493-512).

During the 1980s, many rural communities continued to experience these trends in addition to a severe economic recession. In general, rural areas saw economic and population growth during the 1970s while experiencing coinciding downturns in several natural resource-based industries—agriculture, mining and energy, and manufacturing—resulting in widespread economic distress, unemployment, and population loss in the 1980s.

As a result of the economic distress of the 1980s, rural communities saw how closely their economies are tied to the global economy. They further realized the need to diversify to make themselves more competitive in maintaining the economic health of their communities. The economic crisis made rural citizens increasingly aware of the critical need for accurate and timely information, of the value of information as a tool in economic development, of the growing information gap between rural and urban areas, and of the need for the same information access as their urban counterparts.

Patricia LaCaille John, Rural Information Center, National Agricultural Library, 10301 Baltimore Boulevard, Beltsville, MD 20705-2351

LIBRARY TRENDS, Vol. 44, No. 1, Summer 1995, pp. 1-6

\*This article is exempt from U.S. Copyright

Both the past and present issues of *Library Trends* on rural library service emphasize the continuing importance of new information technology and electronic networks to rural libraries and communities. The earlier issue examined cooperative electronic cataloging and interlibrary loan networks. This issue focuses on the need for rural libraries to provide access to electronic community information systems or civic networks, free nets, and, most important, to Internet in order to narrow isolation by instantly linking rural areas to worldwide information resources on any topic.

Books and reports focusing on a rural theme almost always raise the question, "What is rural?" The responses generate both quantitative and qualitative definitions. Federal agencies are unable to agree on a uniform definition of rural that meets all their individual rural program criteria. The Bureau of the Census definition—one of the three primary federal rural classification system definitions (the other two being from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service)—is probably the most common. Under the bureau's definition, all communities with a population of less than 2,500 outside of an urbanized area are considered rural. Using the 1990 census, the bureau definition classifies 61.7 million, or 25 percent, of the total population as rural and 97.5 percent of the total U.S. land area as rural (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1993, p. 26).

Further complicating any attempt to agree on a definition that fits all rural areas is the diverse nature of rural communities. U.S. Department of Agriculture officials acknowledge that "any attempt to comprehensively 'define' Rural America should be a task unto itself and would require much more ink and effort than is available for this project. Because of the obvious complexity of such an enterprise no attempt will be made for this report to pen any such definition" (Lyng & Vautour, 1989, p. 11).

Although rural communities "vary widely in geography, economic base, and labor force characteristics,...[they] do have certain features in common: small-scale, low-density populations; remoteness from urban centers; and economies narrowly dependent on one or two industries" (Salant & Marx, 1995, p. 11). Other policymakers and researchers pondering a definition of rural may conclude that it is "a concept beyond definition" (Rios, 1988, p. 2), a state of mind, or "if you think you are rural, you're rural" ("What is Rural?" 1994, p. 7).

The articles in this issue examine the economic and social challenges to rural America; the information needs of rural communities; the role of the rural library; library funding sources; staff and trustee leadership; staff development; information delivery services; outreach programs and partnerships; additional electronic information resources; and future prospects for rural libraries.

## SOCIOECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

Sara Mazie and Linda Ghelfi review the economic and social issues currently impacting rural America. They stress the importance of rural areas having access to information to achieve global competitiveness be-

cause information is an integral ingredient for successful economic development. Furthermore, they point out that, because rural libraries exist in nearly all rural counties, they stand as ready resources to provide access to the information superhighway.

### INFORMATION NEEDS

Bernard Vavrek emphasizes how important it is for community libraries to obtain organized timely feedback from their customers. Rural libraries must know and meet customer information needs and market their services to the community. Vavrek voices concern that the institutional library may be swept away by Internet and other online resources as the information superhighway becomes more democratized—a prospect that does not guarantee libraries customers when potential customers may easily set up a direct information account through a private source.

### TRUSTEE'S ROLE

John Christenson recognizes that the rural library trustee plays a key role in the future survival of rural libraries by ensuring that they have the resources and capabilities to meet the information requirements of their community. He emphasizes that rural trustees may ensure the library's survival by providing adequate funding and leadership, encouraging partnerships, supporting marketing programs, and promoting and supporting new information technologies—especially Internet access.

### LIBRARY FUNDING

Mark Merrifield examines federal and state roles, responsibilities, and funding sources that encourage rural library development. He points out the importance of the *Library Services Act of 1956* that provided rural library grants to improve library service for Americans both with or without adequate library service. Merrifield proposes changes in the federal and state government funding role to ensure adequate library service to all citizens.

### STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Dan Barron contends that well-trained and competent staff are essential to a successful library program. He stresses that rural libraries need to change their public perception from one of being a warehouse to one of being an information service. Rural libraries must market themselves as the community information provider and then be able to deliver the expected level of service. Rural libraries need educational assistance to change the public's perception and provide new services. Barron contends that it is impossible to expect the current configuration of library schools to meet all the education and training needs of rural library and

information providers often scattered over great distances. He therefore proposes meeting rural library educational needs by creating a virtual campus through distance education.

#### CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICES

Ristiina Wigg points out that, because most rural libraries have only one or two full-time equivalent staff, it is not surprising that rural librarians—many with limited formal library science education—often double as the children's librarian. In communities with few public facilities for children's activities except the local school, the rural librarian is in a position to influence, motivate, and foster lifelong learning behavior in rural children. It is essential, therefore, that rural libraries have properly trained staff and resources to stimulate and challenge children. Wigg advocates a rural library action plan based on cooperation among rural librarians, system level staff, state-level consultants, and national organizations to assist rural librarians in utilizing existing resources in providing and expanding children and young people's services.

#### OUTREACH PROGRAMS

Judith Boyce and Bert Boyce point out that rural libraries, most of which are underfunded and understaffed, face the additional financial burden of providing library outreach programs to patrons unlikely or unable to reach the library. These libraries often serve sparse populations scattered over large geographic areas. The Boyces survey traditional rural library outreach services, traditional services incorporating newer technologies, and new outreach activities utilizing advanced technologies. Rural library outreach may range from the personal delivery of materials for the disabled to online access in a bookmobile. They also examine rural outreach programs sponsored by colleges, universities, and national libraries.

#### MULTITYPE LIBRARY COOPERATIVES

Jan Ison discusses the growth of library cooperation in the United States, which is a twentieth-century phenomenon that greatly escalated in the late 1950s with funding support from the *Library Services Act of 1956*. She contends that cooperative partnerships will succeed only if their fundamental principle is to achieve results for the patron. Ison examines the roles of multitype cooperatives in rural libraries, the services and benefits that a cooperative library service provides to its members, the roles of the rural library in the cooperative organization, and the services and benefits that the rural library contributes to the cooperative. She concludes with a discussion of future challenges facing rural libraries, including the need for rapid response to change and the lack of affordable telecommunications access, adequate funding, and well-trained staff.

### RURAL INFORMATION CENTER (RIC)

Patricia John focuses on RIC services and partnerships and provides examples of the questions being asked by rural citizens. RIC provides information to rural citizens and communities and to officials responsible for rural programs at all levels of government—tribal, local, state, and federal. RIC networks with state libraries and supports the information needs of rural libraries lacking specialized information resources.

### TELECOMMUNICATIONS ACCESS

Steve Cisler stresses the importance for rural librarians' involvement in community efforts to provide telecommunications access to electronic information networks, especially Internet. He points out that, whereas computer expertise is not essential, involvement in the community planning process is and will generate a positive perception of the library's role and involvement in the community. Cisler discusses several examples of current electronic telecommunications networking projects in rural communities and provides several different technology options for community consideration.

### FUTURE TRENDS

Glen Holt surveys the major forces and trends he sees affecting the future of rural libraries. He also examines changes in rural libraries, including the impact of the changing service expectations of library customers. If libraries fail to meet their customers' changing information needs, they may lose customers to private sector services. He emphasizes the importance for rural libraries to know their users, survey their information requirements and, most important, meet them. To achieve this goal, libraries will need to devote a larger portion of their budget to obtain new information technology, especially Internet access, and provide sufficient funds for training staff to use the new technologies.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors provide several recurring recommendations for rural libraries and their state library, cooperative organization, or other library partners to address in order to ensure long-term survival. Rural libraries must:

- identify and meet customers' information needs;
- market library services;
- provide community leadership and/or participation in acquiring new information technology;
- encourage and acquire both traditional and new library partners to assist in providing new resources, services, and capabilities such as telecommunications access;

- shift focus and budgets from collection development and ownership to electronic access, Internet connectivity, and staff training in new technologies;
- provide localized community information and outreach programs; and
- change the community's perception so libraries are viewed as the community's chief information resource.

Rural libraries must accommodate change and meet the challenges that the new information technology presents so that they will not be left behind or, worse, not survive.

#### REFERENCES

- Drennan, A., & Drennan, H. (1980). Rural populations in the 1970s. *Library Trends*, 28(4), 493-512.
- Lyng, R. E., & Vautour, R. R. (1989). *Signs of progress: A report on rural America's revitalization efforts*. Washington, DC: USGPO.
- Rios, B. R. D. (1988). "Rural"—A concept beyond definition? (Report No. ED-R-88-09). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 296 820)
- Salant, P., & Marx, J. (1995). Trends and opportunities in rural development. *Northwest Report*, 17, 9-16.
- U.S. General Accounting Office. (1993). *Rural development: Profile of rural areas* (GAO/RCED-93-40FS). Washington, DC: GAO.
- What is rural? Are you rural? (1994). *Rural & Small Library Services Newsletter*, 5(6), 7.