Pathways to Tomorrow's Service: The Future of Rural Libraries

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ABSTRACT
THIS ARTICLE IS AN EXAMINATION of the forces and trends, the imperatives and the options, affecting the future of rural libraries. It explores shifts in rural library constituencies, the varied factors—including funding and staffing—affecting their ability to deliver service, critical technological developments, and changing customer expectations. If rural libraries are to have a bright future, the staff and trustee leaders of rural library districts will have to grapple with these issues.

THE STATE OF RURAL LIBRARIES

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, . . . it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of Light, . . . we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its nosiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

This beautifully woven tapestry of contrasting words that opens Charles Dickens' 1859 novel, *A Tale of Two Cities,* is an appropriate starting point for an examination of the future of rural libraries. For, no library-related topic provokes greater difference of opinion than the current situation and future prospects of rural libraries.

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On the one hand, a recent survey of libraries serving thirty-four Connecticut communities, most with under 25,000 patrons (Welch & Donohue, 1994, pp. 149-51), suggests that they do not need much change. When asked why they did not visit their local libraries, nonusers provided no "reasons that might be construed as reflecting library deficiencies, such as inadequate facilities, poor services, etc." Rather, nonusers stated that they did not have time or simply were not in the habit of using the library. The study concluded that, while schools needed to do a better job of getting students into the "library habit," rural libraries were doing a good job in meeting the needs of their users.

A far different picture is painted in a recent national survey executed by the Center for Rural Libraries at Clarion University of Pennsylvania. In one report from the study, Vavrek (1990) concludes: "There is a gap between the daily information needs of rural residents and the ability of the [rural] library to satisfy those needs" (p. 2).

As major reasons for nonuse, those surveyed stated "a lack of transportation," "being physically unable," and "not being sure of what is at the library." And new services were wanted: 70 percent of users and 30 percent of nonusers asked for "computerized information," "job training," "books on tape," and "activities for senior Americans."

Although most Clarion University study respondents regarded rural libraries as popular reading places, only 20 percent listed their public library as a place to obtain "current" information. The rural library ranked behind asking a professional or asking a friend or relative as the best source for up-to-date information (Vavrek, 1993, p. i).

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, . . . it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of Light. . . .

This article examines the changes in rural libraries which have produced such contrasts. These changes include shifts in rural library constituencies, the varied factors affecting their ability to deliver service, critical technological developments, and changing customer expectations. If rural libraries are to have a bright future, their leaders will have to grapple with all of these issues.

The Challenge of Rural Change

Decades ago, the steam engine and the railroad began to erode the edges of rural isolation. In recent decades, more modern transportation (the automobile and the motor truck) and communication technology (telegraph, telephone, radio, and television) accelerated the process.

The new technological implements connected cities, suburbs, edge cities, exurbia, satellite cities, farm-to-market towns, and crossroads hamlets. The resulting blur of settlement often became so indistinct that even scholars found it difficult to decide where one kind of settlement ended and another one began.

As this process continued, it upset traditional institutions and ways of life. The rural Kansas town of Elmo, where my parents resided when I was born, no longer exists. Shiloh, the rural church near Chilhowee, Missouri, where my father's parents worshiped, stands abandoned; only the size of the nearby grown-over cemetery marks the site's importance to long-gone generations. My mother's parents' rural farmhouse in south Dickinson County, Kansas, is now a ripple in a wheat field. Only a solitary tree growing through the broken boards of an old well cover marks its former place. The Dayton Township School, where my father began teaching farm children at the onset of the Great Depression, is a fenced-in knoll covered with tall prairie grass.

Market town, rural church, country school, and agricultural homestead–the cornerstones of early-modern American rural culture–have not withstood the upheavals of industrial-age job swings, the ease of modern transportation and communications, and changing family lifestyles.

As we approach the millennium, the information-age twins of computers and networks hasten the disruptive processes. The pressures on rural institutions increase. There is only one good response and that is change.

An August 21, 1994, editorial in *The Wichita Beacon* (New Times section) put the issue this way: "Rural Kansas is not dying. It is changing. . . . Areas that can't, or won't, accommodate change surely will wither away....[And unfortunately] the one thing many rural communities most fear is change; thus they fear the very thing that can save them" (p. 16A).

This paper's editorial summarizes the critical mandate for rural libraries: They must change. Rural locales and their people are changing, and rural libraries must change to keep up. Unless they change, they face the threat of irrelevancy.

Change in Rural Populations

Reflecting their locations within the nation, rural populations are varied and shifting (Ford, 1994, pp. 30-31). In general, the population of rural sections of the United States has grown since 1950 but more slowly than for metropolitan areas. The generalization masks a huge variance, from intensive exurban growth booms to decades of depopulation, that have left particular rural landscapes barren of people.

In northern Missouri, for example, ramshackle abandoned farmsteads thrust up here and there out of the meager soil. Nearby, little farm-to-market towns lay dead or dying. In the state's Upper Ozarks rural southwest, meanwhile, there is a growth boom fed by new tourism, heavily-marketed country music, and occasional new factories. The Missouri rural boom depopulation contrast can be found in almost every state.

The age of rural inhabitants shows the same variation. Rural population is both older and younger than metropolitan areas, characteristics strengthened by out-migration of the young in search of jobs and in-

migration of the elderly looking for inexpensive places to retire. The only spots where similar age contrasts exist are in old central cities, where nearly any in-migration is youthful while the elderly almost always constitute the most settled residents. Youthful leave-taking has been a painful fact for long decades of rural history. *The Wichita Beacon* editorial warns: "Smaller communities must stop exporting their talent to the cities" (Rural Kansas..., 1994, p. 16A). But few areas have been able to halt the generations-long farm-to-city exodus.

A lack of well-paid jobs drives much of the rural out-migration. Less than 10 percent of rural populations still work in agriculture; more than 50 percent of all employment is in services. Almost always, in recent decades, the journey to work involves long distances–from one rural community to another or to a nearby city or metropolitan area.

My home town of Abilene, Kansas, current population 7,000, is a good example of small town and rural job realities. For decades the town lived off the legend of 1870s Sheriff "Wild Bill" Hickock and, more recently, the tourism associated with the Dwight D. Eisenhower birthplace, museum, and library. Recently, Abilene recruited a new 400-job candy factory. Suddenly the real estate market has consequence, and new small businesses are dusting off the shelves in long-vacant stores.

The average annual family income derived from rural jobs is a few thousand dollars less than that for metropolitan area families. As with other statistical indicators, however, the range is more revealing than the average. Some rural families live in the same disastrous poverty as do the residents of big city slums; other families enjoy considerable prosperity.

In a housing survey this author completed in Pontiac, Illinois, in 1968, one impoverished family was found residing in a chicken coop even though the town had just recruited three new industrial plants. That type of contrast is typical to anyone who frequents rural towns.

Education levels on average are not as good as for metropolitan areas, but they are not as low as for families who reside in the poor illiterate enclaves dotting every urban landscape. And, as with the city, the reason for literacy problems are as much matters of local and state government policy as they are consequences of poverty.

In Missouri, some relatively poor districts are using distance-education classes delivered over an educational television station to educate "isolated" rural children. In some other wealthier close-to-city districts, schools sometimes cannot afford current textbooks much less a computer in a classroom or school media center.

The population characteristics of rural America make it a surrogate for the variety of the nation as a whole. As such, it raises the same questions for the leaders of rural libraries as those who watch over the fortunes of other public libraries.

Who will be served? What services will be provided? What special efforts will the library make to serve its critical constituencies, including its weakest groups? And, in the management of its services, how will the institution maintain its strong base of supporters? Who will shoulder the burden of maintaining public funding?

The answers to these questions are never simple. For all kinds of reasons, discussed in later sections of this article, these questions are harder now and are especially hard for rural libraries.

CRITICAL RURAL LIBRARY CONSTITUENCIES

One measure of the future of any public library is found in how it serves its critical constituencies. These market groups include its traditional strong customers, the community's fastest growing populations, those who are helping build and sustain the area economy, and its most dependent populations. In its service to critical constituencies, each public library makes its case for continued and/or expanded community funding.

In assessing its pathway to the future, each rural library needs to consider how to serve its critical constituencies. Because of rural demographics and economic changes, four groups are especially critical.

Women: The Traditional Rural Library Constituency

A recent survey found that women comprise 70 percent of rural library users. The typical woman user is a forty-four-year-old high school graduate. She is a "homemaker" who makes weekly visits to the library, which she perceives as a familiar and comfortable place. Typically she stays six to fifteen minutes, principally borrowing best-sellers for herself. She also drops in for equally short stays to use the copier, fax machine, or telephone (Vavrek, 1990, pp. 2-3, 21-25). Rural libraries have only one critical problem with this typical user: National employment and lifestyle trends make her an endangered species.

By the year 2000, "80 percent of all mothers will have a career during some portion of their child-rearing years," and 85 percent of work force entrants will be minorities, women, and new immigrants (Vanderkolk & Young, 1991, pp. 11, 20). As demonstrated by decades of relocations of light manufacturing and service firms, footloose employers regard rural, working age, high school educated women who will work for reasonable, and even low (by urban standards), salaries as a valuable labor commodity to be snapped up wherever possible. Business relocations to small towns and rural areas almost always include her as a primary labor target.

When homemaking women take on a full-time job, they work the same long hours as men: one-fourth of America's full-time work force–both male and female–say they are on the job forty-nine hours a week. As women become full-time workers, the weekly time they spend on housework declines from an average of fifty-five hours to between fifteen to

twenty-five hours (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1990, pp. 97-99; Vanderkolk & Young, 1991, p. 44). Even with this cutback, working women spend far longer at household and family tasks than do their male mates.

Struggling to keep up with work and family, women usually sacrifice their discretionary time, including that used for leisure reading. St. Louis Public Library already has seen the effects of women working, as fiction circulation has declined from well over 60 percent in the mid-1980s to perhaps 57 or 58 percent of the total in 1994. As fiction circulation has fallen relatively, self-help and job-related book and magazine use has risen.

Rural libraries need to consider carefully about staking their futures on their traditional "homemaker" market group, which, at the very least, is growing short on time, and which, in the near future, may enter or re-enter the full-time work force.

At-Home Workers

The fastest growing employment sector in America is home employment. Between 15 and 20 percent of American workers are now employed in "mobile offices"—that is, they operate out of their own homes. Many of these are knowledge workers who have specific information needs (Shellenbarger, 1994, pp. B1, B7).

At-home workers are frequently information seekers who make heavy use of libraries to obtain magazines, government documents, and business information. Serving a population which includes many individuals subjected to recent layoffs, St. Louis Public Library has faced a growing demand for library mediators who help home workers find the information they need. Such workers take special delight in establishing a research-reference relationship with their "personal librarian."

At-home workers already have infiltrated rural libraries. *North and South Trilogy* author John Jakes is typical. Along with his home in New York, Jakes and his wife regularly reside in Hilton Head, South Carolina. While there, they conduct a great deal of their research at the public library in nearby Beaufort (John Jakes, personal communication, June 27, 1993).

Megatrends 2000 authors John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene (1990) summarize the work-at-home trend this way:

> Linked by telephones, fax machines, Federal Express, and computers, a new breed of information worker is reorganizing the landscape of America. Free to live almost anywhere, more and more individuals are deciding to live in small cities and towns and rural areas. A new electronic heartland is spreading throughout developed countries around the globe, especially in the United States. (p. 304)

As the urban-suburban business exodus continues, many rural libraries can expect an increase in the reading and research demands of at-home workers. This is an articulate constituency which can help catalyze

a dynamic future for a sedate rural library. No pathway of future service deserves more consideration in a resources-short rural community trying to find inexpensive mechanisms to trigger the growth of area businesses.

Senior Citizens

An "age wave" is sweeping across America, and rural sections of the country are among its chief beneficiaries. "By 2025, Americans over 65 will outnumber teenagers by more than two to one. . . . By the year 2050, it's likely that as many as one in four Americans will be over 65" (Dychtwald, 1989, p. 21).

In small towns throughout rural America, the result of the "age wave" already is apparent. New country and workout clubs, health food stores, and retirement communities are appearing on small-town streets. Little market-town banks plan world tours for area seniors. And Bloomington, Minnesota's, Mall of America successfully promotes shopping excursions for well-heeled seniors from the small towns of Wisconsin, Iowa, and the Dakotas.

These developments signal a healthier longer-lived group of seniors than at any time in the nation's history. Their choice for recreation is "exactly the kind of recreational activities that today's retirees enjoyed while they worked" (Dychtwald, 1989).

Activist retirees already are challenging rural libraries. Their energetic pursuit of activities and their need for sophisticated information regarding finance, investments, travel, and other personal decisions can challenge even the best trained and most experienced public library reference librarian. Some of these newcomers already have served as catalysts to transform rural libraries. Others are on their way.

Meanwhile, in poor and very isolated areas where urban retirees have not brought dynamic change, rural libraries still need to address the specialized needs of seniors. Generally, such populations face these conditions:

> fewer institutional services available, greater distances to travel to services and shopping, lower crime rate, lower per-capita income, less-healthy individuals (perhaps because average age is higher), distance from children greater, more widows, quality of housing lower because it is older, lower population density, neighbors at greater distance, and fewer alternative means of housing (e.g., apartments and retirement homes). (Hales-Mabry, 1993, pp. 54-55)

Because many elderly have physical challenges requiring special facilities, collections, and services, the Americans with Disabilities Act has special significance for rural libraries. Such changes are of great importance, especially if a rural library takes seriously its equity role (American Library Association, 1990; RASD, 1987).

Senior citizens are a growing rural-library constituency. Vavrek (1993) found that 33 percent of surveyed rural respondents wanted more services for the elderly at their libraries (p. 26). The statistic suggests an increasing service demand.

Children

Childhood has changed—for the worse. Louv (1990) writes that childhood has been redefined by a broad "expansion of experience and the contraction of positive adult contact....Children and adults pass each other in the night at ever-accelerating speeds, and the American social environment becomes increasingly lonely for both" (p. 5).

This broad shift has been hard on America's children. The Children's Defense Fund 1994 yearbook summarizes some of the changes. One of the most important is in children's reading levels. Among Missouri public school fourth graders surveyed in 1989, for example, only 71 percent of whites and 33 percent of blacks were reading at their grade level. The same study found that only 22 percent of Native American children in Arizona read at their grade level. In South Carolina, only 49 percent of all children of whatever race read at the present grade level (p. 99). The situation was not good for any state, whether dominated by urban or rural patterns of living.

The Children's Defense Fund (1994) studies provide other summaries of children's conditions as well. In the United States in 1992, 1,987,000 children were eligible for Head Start. The nation was able to serve less than 36 percent of them (p. 92). In 1992, 13,349,000 children were in families that received food stamps. The number was up almost 42 percent since 1989 (p. 95). The same source reported 196,000 children living in group quarters "due to [their] own or family problems" (p. 90), 438,000 children living in foster care (p. 89), and 2,695,000 children were "reported abused or neglected" (p. 88).

Rural residents recognize that children's problems are not confined to America's cities. That is why 18 percent of respondents in the Clarion University survey wanted their rural libraries to provide day care as part of their services (Vavrek, 1993, p. 26), even though the demand was not tied into books, reading, or literacy.

Rural areas already have made responses to the plight of children. The Surry County Literacy Council, located in South Carolina's rural Northwest Piedmont, operates a successful Reading is Fundamental program (Reading is Fundamental, 1991, p. 51). Home-schoolers, dissatisfied with rural educational quality, make heavy use of public libraries (Scheps, 1993). And the "Sharing Our Resources" program in rural Vermont makes rural public libraries into cornerstone institutions that support the efforts of teachers and schools (*Check This Out*, 1988, pp. 11-12).

Louv (1990) says that public libraries will be forced to make still greater changes to accommodate the nation's loss of childhood. He writes that libraries will come to be looked to as "the last safe place" and as volunteer "family hubs" which will take on surrogate school and parent roles (pp. 5, 325-29). This shift will make children and students—along with researchers and pleasure readers—the most numerous in building users of public libraries (O'Brien, 1989, p. 29).

Inadequately funded schools, overworked teachers, and two-job parents are searching everywhere for another institution to help them cope with children and/or juvenile charges. If rural libraries are going to sustain library and information services for their communities, they need to consider carefully how they will define "a family hub" or other child serving programs.

Information Technology: Expectations, Opportunities, Threats, and Costs

Expectations about Current Information

"Everything's up to date in Kansas City" assert the lyrics of one song from the musical *Oklahoma*. In the early twentieth century, electric lights and the telephone measured city-style progress in rural areas. Now the measure is consumer electronics, which can transform even the most isolated rural families into expectant observers and plugged-in participants into information-age communication. Such families are reshaping the demand for rural library service.

A West Coast author (Aleshire, 1993) conveys the enormous impact that electronic innovations have had on the American home:

> 98 percent of all U.S. homes have one television set and 65 percent have two or more television sets; 78 percent of all households own a videocassette recorder and 30 percent own two or more VCRS; more than 60 percent subscribe to cable television. Furthermore, 98 percent have telephone service, 46 percent have a telephone answering machine, 31 percent have Nintendo, 17 percent have a camcorder, and 33 percent have a personal computer. (pp. 1, 16-18)

Although no recent breakthroughs have motivated such huge buying surges as did automobiles, radios, or televisions, the U.S. consumer electronics market still grows by nearly $30 billion (4.3 percent) a year. One fast-selling product is books on tape. Audiobook sales totaled $1.2 billion in 1993, up 40 percent from the previous year (Levy & Smilgis, 1994, p. 73).

The consumer electronics revolution long ago reached rural areas. Though backward telephone companies may still limit their rural customers to rotary dials, powerful satellite dishes dot the yards of farm and small-town homes. And, if some Ozarks "holler" families still do not have electricity or a phone, other physically isolated rural families run their farms and service businesses with the help of online computers.

When watching the latest other-side-of-the-world upheaval on satellite or cable television, listening to the latest CD, or tuning into the British Broadcasting Company on public radio, consumer electronics product users expect currency in news, entertainment, and styles of delivering service.

Vavrek (1990) reports the results for rural libraries. First, "the [rural] library is apparently not considered as the resource for information of a timely nature" (p. 27). Second, 37 percent want the newer format books-on-tape along with books and magazines. And third, 48 percent of rural residents expect their libraries to provide them with "information technology"—just like that they believe they would find in up-to-date Kansas City (Vavrek, 1993, pp. 25-27). The *Oklahoma* song lyric is a good reminder to rural library policymakers that customer expectations about currency are a growing factor in technology and collection expenses.

A recent Urban Libraries Council study from seventy-nine large libraries reported that electronic materials, which had occupied 4 percent of their collections budgets in 1990 would occupy 18 percent of that budget by the year 2000 ("Paper Format...," 1994, p. 2). Well run rural libraries are likely to meet easily this conservative change marker.

Private Sector Competition

It is not a given that citizens will turn to rural libraries—or to any public library—for electronic information or for the most current information. Writing on developments in private sector business, Davis and Davidson (1991) conclude: "When existing industry participants neglect the information dimensions of their business, for whatever reasons, independent third parties emerge to fill this role" (p. 96).

If the rural library makes no effort to become a principal community position resource for current information and lifelong learning, then rural residents who have the means will find private sector alternatives.

One of these is CompuServe which, over a computer modem and telephone line network, offers access to "news, stock quotes, travel arrangements, movie and restaurant reviews, shopping, and an online encyclopedia." In addition, it allows basic rate subscribers two electronic mail messages a day. And, CompuServe has "added *The American Heritage Dictionary*, the *Consumer Reports Complete Drug Reference, Soap Opera Summaries*, and the *Hollywood Hotline*." In many American libraries, such publications are big draws for the current-reader crowd.

The price for CompuServe service is generally affordable. Under $9.00 monthly, it is less than the cost of most household television cable fees (CompuServe, 1993) and certainly cheaper than even a single hardback book.

Another online public library competitor is PRODIGY which, along with allowing customers to select their own airline reservations and trade stocks, organizes online bulletin board conversations with well-known authors like Paul Andrews and Sue Grafton. Isolated libraries could easily organize participation in these conversations for local fans of these and other authors.

PRODIGY also features a book column, written by Digby Diehl, a columnist for *Playboy* and *Good Morning America.* He says the response to his electronic column is exciting. "I've worked for magazines and newspapers, but I had never experienced the response that I received from readers on PRODIGY. I was impressed with both the intimate understanding and the fun they have with books" ("Sue Grafton Online," 1993, p. 16).

PRODIGY, CompuServe, and the other online companies still are too awkwardly designed and too "techy" to capture a mass market. But their subscription numbers are growing, and online services are always searching for new ways to obtain users. It is not a far reach to suggest that some online information service soon will begin offering to lend single books, videos, and books-on-tape for a fee. Or such companies could create subscription pricing for customers who want certain categories of materials sent immediately to them.

In other words, rural libraries already have competitors trying to capture their best customers—i.e., middle and upper income families who pay the bulk of residential property taxes in any political subdivision. Anyone who is certain that for a fee, online library and information services could not replace rural libraries may want to recall how, during the 1970s, "free" television representatives proclaimed firmly that Americans would never pay for cable television even while cable companies were installing their first cable boxes.

Electronic competition is one of the major business challenges which the staff and trustee leadership of every rural library needs to understand as a matter of defining the future of their institution.

Rural Libraries: Some Statistical Basics

Rural Libraries' Relative Importance

Rural libraries, generally defined as those serving under 25,000 patrons, are numerically the most significant category of American public libraries. In 1992, the rural cohort constituted 79.6 percent of all American public libraries, almost exactly the same percentage as it had in the previous two years (Chute, 1994, p. 42; 1993, p. 41; 1992, p. 37). The significance of rural libraries even within "urban states" is striking. Illinois, for example, claims that nearly 50 percent of its libraries serve populations under 5,000 ("Public Library Statistics...," 1994, p. 6).

Growth in Number

The Department of Education reports that rural library numbers (those serving populations under 25,000) increased from 6,972 in 1989 to 7,218 in 1991, then dropped to 7,118 in 1992 (Podolsky, 1991, p. 25;

Chute, 1993, p. 41; 1994, p. 42). Summarizing over the four years, the number of rural libraries rose by 3 percent. The 1991-92 data suggest that a decline may have begun. Only further counts will provide sure indications.

Given the expansion of exurban and rural populations in recent decades, a growth in the number of libraries might be expected, especially with the availability of federal Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) funds to subsidize new buildings. With LSCA construction funds now out of the federal largess, and with state government budgets tightening, the building of new rural libraries has become more problematical.

Funding

Funding levels for rural libraries are lower on a per capita basis than for urban libraries. In 1992, per capita funding for all public libraries averaged $18.73 while per capita support for all rural libraries averaged $17.19 (Chute, 1994, p. 73).

Per capita funding was higher for libraries serving less than 1,000 persons ($19.03) and for libraries serving 10,000 to 25,000 persons ($19.04). But the libraries serving populations in between—a vast majority of rural libraries—had per capita support two or three dollars less than the national average (Chute, 1994, p. 73).

Rural funding shortages are legion. They are of special consequence currently because, along with older better understood expenses like salaries, books, and building maintenance, rural library budget makers need to add items for information technology machinery, communications networks, and software and media collections.

The problem of low per capita support and relatively small budgets is fundamentally related to the American tradition of local taxation to support local government services. It also is related to the historically low rate of taxes on rural land, farm equipment, and out buildings. These realities mean that many rural librarians operate as poor cousins even as state sales taxes from a new small-town Walmart store are used to build roads and bridges, and multinational corporations operate million dollar feedlot operations within their taxing districts.

Some rural library districts are poor because their districts are poor. Others are poor because their constituencies, who have the means to do so, choose not to support their libraries. Still others have funds because they have won solid tax support from middle-income and business constituencies. And then there are those groups which are in states where some equalization formula serves to provide a solid base of public income that evens out relative wealth and poverty for local library units. In short, there is no one rural library funding problem.

Lack of public knowledge about library budgets is another serious rural library problem. Most library tax district constituents do not have the foggiest notion of how rural public libraries get or spend their money.

In the private sector, when there is no money, businesses close. As public budgets continue to tighten through the 1990s, a lot of America's public libraries, including rural libraries, will be left with limited financial options. These include asking voters for more money, lobbying for larger government tax equalization schemes, cutting certain types of services, rationing services, finding cheaper ways to operate (often involving sharing expenses and benefits with other agencies), or closing in anticipation that other agencies will provide the same or similar services.

Township governments, rural business, rural colleges, rural public school districts, and rural churches all have watched as their funding base declined and in some cases disappeared. All rural library financial problems are made worse because they need to invest now in information-age technology and electronic information products which their constituents want and expect.

Spending and Staffing Patterns

Rural libraries apportion their smaller budgets in different ways than larger libraries. The biggest difference is that they spend a smaller proportion on staff and more on collections.

In 1992, the smallest cohort of rural libraries, those serving under 1,000 persons, spent 47 percent of their funding on staff and 23 percent on collections. The 1,000 to 2,499 cohort spent 53 percent on staff and 22 percent on collections. The 2,500 to 4,999 cohort spent 57 percent on staff and 19 percent on collections. And the 5,000 to 9,999 cohort spent 61 percent on staff and 28 percent on collections. Nationally, the figures were 65 percent and 15 percent (Chute, 1994, p. 73).

To summarize, those libraries with the smallest budgets spent the smallest proportions of those budgets on staff. That is not an accident. That is a policy choice.

The relatively low percentages of total budget spent on staff helps explain the low number of library professionals found in rural libraries. The percentage of total full-time equivalents in rural libraries with an ALA-accredited MLS ranges from 2.5 percent for libraries serving less than 1,000 persons to 19.5 percent serving populations of from 10,000 to 24,999 (Chute, 1994, p. 29). By way of comparison, St. Louis Public Library, with 250 full-time employees, has about 22 percent professional staff. A quick search of any recent set of public library staffing reports shows that, while many larger high-circulation suburban systems carry proportionately fewer professionals, rural libraries still are significantly lower in this important employment category.

To sum up, the boards of trustees of rural libraries have made conscious budget decisions, first to spend less overall on staff, and second, to employ less well-trained staff. In other words, rural libraries have maximized books and minimized their institutional ability to offer skilled professional library service.

These have been critical decisions. Rural library budget makers have created libraries short on trained professional leadership. Where will they turn for library and information science expertise as they attempt to work out pathways to a bright institutional future?

SETTING A PATHWAY TO THE FUTURE

Leadership

Rural libraries have no automatic claim to their future. They must have outstanding leaders who will make effective decisions that will balance cost, collections, and technology in a way that will make their work significant to those who pay taxes in their communities.

Two groups need to be educated—staff and trustees. Regarding professional staff, Vavrek (1990) writes: "It is no longer feasible to assume that the modern public library is capable of existing.... [without] the most qualified, academically trained staff" (p. 37).

Training for rural library staff has not been easy to get for even the most conscientious staff members, especially those whose travel is limited by economic circumstance or family responsibilities. Rural library boards, in many cases, have minimized professional travel and conference education of staff. Meanwhile, universities have been cutting back on the number of library schools—and that means reduced educational opportunities in many states.

There are other problems. Well-intentioned ALA library school accreditation policies have limited library and information science school extension offerings even when a few faculty were inclined to be entrepreneurial. And university extension course policies often have worked to the same end.

The result of all of these decisions—the long-term neglect of training opportunities for thousands of rural library staff—is, as I have stated elsewhere, one of the great embarrassments of the library profession (Holt, 1993a, pp. 41-62; 1993b).

The tools exist to make professional training in librarianship more widely available. The state-based educational corporations associated with the Online Computerized Library Center (OCLC) have done much to promote technical services training throughout many states. As OCLC moves into more public service librarian and end-user products like EPIC and First Search, OCLC-related training undoubtedly will expand.

Within recent years, Emporia State's distance education project has brought a library degree into driving distance for many rural and small-town library staff members. And at least one sophisticated television-based distance education program already exists in librarianship (Holt, 1993a). As interactive television and computing opportunities increase, rural librarians should find it easier to obtain the training they will need to operate twenty-first century libraries.

The education of library trustees is another matter. Young (1992), along with her book on trusteeship (now about to go into its fifth edition), has written a helpful starting essay for small library trustees looking for a policymaking overview.

Williams's (1993) book, now in its second edition, has accomplished the same task for Canadian trustees. In her introduction to Williams's book, Young writes: "The essence of effective library service lies with those persons who care enough to ask and to know, to plan and to execute, and to understand profoundly why" (in Williams, 1993, p. vi).

At the end of her book, Williams issues a call to trustees which might well be regarded as a declaration for the education of rural library trustees. Addressing trustees, she writes:

> Many trustees today sincerely believe they are providing services when in fact they are only involved in tokenism. Look at any area you care to—services to persons with physical or developmental handicaps, services for multilingual and multicultural users, services for native Indian communities, services for literacy and the business community—and ask yourself if you have any idea of the standards needed for adequate service to those constituencies. A deeper understanding of these services will make us, boards and librarians, more open to providing these services. We'll view them not as frills, something to do in order to jump on the bandwagon, but as part of an overall obligation we have to serve all citizens. (p. 152)

Such concerns need to be at the heart of trustee leadership for rural libraries.

A Vision of Change: The Imperative of Connectivity

No public library can do everything. But one thing that all modern public libraries have to do is to introduce information technology into their ways of doing business.

In her pamphlet on rural library trusteeship, Young (1992) writes:

> *Computers, telecommunications, fiber optics* and *packet switchings* are all terms that have settled securely into library lingo. It is no longer an area that is reserved to the large and the medium-sized library. In even a small library a microcomputer might well pay for itself in terms of procedures and routines that could be computerized, with a resulting savings in staff time and, in most instances, a streamlining of many aspects of the library service program. . . . Technology is an area that the local trustee and staff should investigate with an eye to maximizing both the library's resources and services. (p. 8)

A few years ago, the library entry point into information technology was to buy a computer. But change has been quick. Today, institutional entry is a computer, modem, and network connectivity. The latter needs to be achieved on wide bands and at high speeds (Lynch, 1992, p. 110).

Drabenstott (1994) writes: "Interconnectivity...is the basis for much more powerful services that will enable end users to integrate access to information resources more conveniently into their everyday activities" (p. 19). Today's cheapest connection almost always is on the Internet. A mid-1994 policy study (McClure et al., 1994) shows that rural libraries are woefully behind in making use of this inexpensive network.

The Internet already has demonstrated its benefits to rural dwellers (Stone-Martin & Breeden, 1994). An Internet connection allows North Dakota's rural communities to peruse the world's library catalogs (pp. 111-12). It makes it possible for West Virginia rural school students to receive science instruction from professors associated with the Boston Museum of Science (pp. 101-02). It lets rural Wyoming schools and libraries access each other and state university databases (pp. 71-72). It makes possible the sharing of University of Oklahoma distance education classes with isolated schools in Oklahoma (pp. 61-62)—and nearby Missouri schools as well. In New Hampshire, it provides "an off-hours key to the Library" (pp. 55-56).

A connection with the Internet is a network starting point. The number of machines connected with it now has reached 3.2 million, an 81 percent increase over one year. Much of the Internet's growth is international ("Internet Growth...," 1994, p. 122). As with every library tool, the Internet has its benefits (relatively cheap access to all sorts of communications, reference, and subject specialists, and databases) and its weaknesses (relative slow speed, the public nature of many communications, arcane search features, along with the astonishingly bad manners and male chauvinism of many of its most avid users).

But limits are only that, and they do not overcome an increasing necessity: The first step on the rural library pathway to tomorrow's library service is to get the institution connected to the Internet. Rural libraries without connectivity ought to find the money for the new expense and/or pressure their state legislators, advocate with their public service commission regulators, and nag their state libraries until they get the connection, training, and support to make good use of it.

Redefining Access

Computers and networks can help rural libraries act like big libraries on a limited budget. From a single personal computer over a general or dedicated network, a knowledgeable rural librarian can help any one customer obtain access to world class information sources. The end result is to redefine the library so that it offers optimal rather than minimal service.

To accomplish this goal, however, it will be necessary for most rural library leaders to redefine access. Libraries have always been about access. A still useful definition states: "Access to a potentially informative document [including fiction books] depends on identifying, locating, and having affordable physical access to it" (Buckland, 1992, p. 2).

So long as single paper copies of books and articles dominated libraries, all libraries, including small rural libraries, were limited to providing the copy they had. In that setting, libraries bought what books they could, they put them on shelves, and users checked them out.

Interlibrary loan modified this access process by using available technologies—at first typewriters, telephones, and mail trucks—to order and transport a book or paper item from a holding library to another library where it was needed.

Computers and networks have hastened this process while lowering costs and expanding materials availability. As a result, library leaders, including those in rural libraries, can balance assets and access. They can do that by buying less materials and by planning to use information technology to borrow more items electronically (Higginbotham & Bowdoin, 1993).

To sum up, networked computing allows rural libraries to engage in a new level of resource sharing that benefits their customers. Provided they are trained to know how to make an electronic system work to its fullest capacity, rural librarians can provide their specialized customers with access to a world of information while purchasing the books and magazines which they are certain their customers will use heavily. In this way, heavy user groups and specialized researchers can be served optimally within the library's budget limits.

Using Information Technology as an Outreach Tool

Another use of information technology is as a tool for outreach and service. In this application of technology, the rural library becomes the hub or switchboard matching connections with distant databases with the needs of constituent customers. Although writing about the university setting, Kibbey and Evans (1989) state exactly the needs of the rural public library when they write: "The ideal electronic library is not a single entity where everything is stored. It is a range of services and collections made accessible through networks" (p. 16).

The concept of the ideal library becomes richer by using technology as outreach tools to serve local area constituents, including those who are poor, small in number, or very isolated.

St. Louis Public Library, in its LibraryLink project begun in 1989, has relied heavily on information technology to provide equity access for small and isolated user groups. By 1994, St. Louis Public Library catalogs could be found at more than twenty-four sites, including all inner-city magnet high schools, two inner-city YMCAs, a settlement house educational facility, the anteroom to the aldermanic chamber at City Hall, and RankenTechnical College.

This outreach program has treated the catalogs as automated teller machines, open whenever the partnership institution is open. Staff from the institutions were trained to make extensive use of the search platform and database provided.

At nearly the same time, the library turned on its dial-in Desktop Library. This service now accounts for 10 percent of the library's cardholders and about 15 percent of monthly reserve requests. By the time this article is published, computerized full texts of magazine articles will be available in all branches; it will be mounted on the desktop dial-in network in mid or late 1995.

Rural libraries can use technology the same way. They can build on the vision of universal remote access, offering the resources of a virtual library networked to include the contents and services of many different libraries and other information sources (Gapen, 1993, p. 1; Landoni et al., 1993, p. 176). Providing off-site terminals, giving dedicated modem access software to schools, churches, and civic agencies, as well as small businesses; and operating a high tech infomobile as a bookmobile are among the countless ways to use technology to help build pathways to improved services for rural libraries.

Civic Networks

Another possible technology based service for rural libraries is an electronic community information system or "civic network." Already established civic networks demonstrate how small libraries can provide information to many users at relatively low cost.

Under the leadership of computing departments at state universities, a few state libraries, state and local government officials, and some public libraries, civic networks have become a burgeoning business in both urban and rural America. Funded and controlled by public agencies, civic networks provide a variety of services—e.g., lists of tourist attractions, various license renewals, community job information, draft legislation, phone numbers of "helping" agencies, utility maps, and requests for books and magazines from the library.

A few civic networks have gone statewide. The networks in Maine, West Virginia, and Minnesota include isolated dwellers in rural areas as a matter of policy (Lowe, 1993).

Rural public libraries occasionally have been full participants in the operation of many such networks. In Missouri, Columbia Public Library operates a three-county dial-in network, and Springfield-Greene County Public Library operates one used by populations of many Missouri and Arkansas rural areas. At the same time, however, "sobering examples of the disconnection between civic networks and public libraries are also evident" (Molz, 1994).

Civic networks offer a bright prospecting and service tool by which rural libraries can reach out electronically to provide information that area customers want and need. Along with being a useful service, organization of, and/or major participation in, such a network has the additional advantage of helping rural libraries obtain higher visibility as an important community "player" among community influentials (Vavrek, 1990, pp. 33-36). Rural library leadership needs to give civic networks a hard look.

CUSTOMER RESEARCH AND MARKETING

Working with people who walk through the library door every day can be as limiting as it is eye opening. In preparing for the future, rural library leaders need to keep a sharp eye on noncustomers.

At the 1993 ALA convention, Beach (1993), of Edgecombe County Memorial Library in Tarboro, North Carolina, stated the "first task" of rural librarians: "Get to know—really know your library through the eyes of your users," she told the audience.

Vavrek (1990, p. 17) is pessimistic about how this part of rural library work is going. In a 1987 survey, he found that only 30 percent of rural libraries had completed any kind of community survey in the previous five years.

At the same ALA session at which Beach appeared, Reed (1993) told how a single librarian in a rural northern New England town used the findings of a well-constructed survey to persuade a hard headed board of trustees that their library had to have more funding to meet the vital needs of constituents. Reed reported that this finding out phase turned easily into "cultivation" and permanently setting up open communication channels to tell the library's story, including its financial need. Reed summarized the process:

> I want to impress on you how important it is to cultivate all the people in the community. We had done a good job in building coalitions with our users. . . . But, we had done a poor job in building coalitions with our town governors who understood so little what the library meant to their constituents that they didn't bother to object to our plans initially because they didn't seriously believe we could pass a bond or raise a tax. . . . When you need to generate quick support for an immediate need, you will have the best success if you are turning to community members, both users and nonusers, whom you have cultivated, cared for, and communicated with regarding the importance of the public library in the fabric of the community.

To sum up, in an age when information technology is as great a competitive threat as it is a policy tool, ignorance is not bliss; it is an invitation to a future disaster.

On the other hand, marketing studies of a constituency allow not only targeted service but cultivation, whether of voters for a tax increase or donors to support a library's special program.

LIBRARY BUSINESS TACTICS FOR THE 1990S

Urban and rural alike, library customers have grown more particular. This section analyzes some of the most important current trends in customer expectations as they apply to rural libraries.

Customization of Services

As consumers over the past half decade or so, public library customers already have been trained to expect customized services. Examples abound: Gas stations save customers three to four minutes by putting

ATM style credit card readers on the gas pumps so customers do not have to go inside and wait in line (Solomon, 1993, pp. B1, B5). Hertz, at some locations, has counter computers that let their customers print out exact routes between airports and hotels. And mailing companies provide fine grained zip sorts and time drops that astonish by their relative cheapness and the levels of customer response they generate.

Much of the customized service revolution is accomplished with a tool familiar to most libraries—the multistriped bar code. The ugly little bars have revolutionized food purchasing, warehouse storage, check writing, library check out, just-in-time auto parts delivery, and UPS package delivery to name only a few areas (Dunn & Dunn, 1993; Finley, 1993).

Even traditional library automation systems provide opportunities for libraries to begin thinking about how to customize service, a feature of life which customers have come to expect. With advance permission, libraries large and small can notify regular patrons about forthcoming publications; can place automatic reserves for regular customers; prepare a specialized index of magazine articles from which business users can electronically order full text; and mail invitations to segments of the citizenry who are most likely to want to attend special programs.

To sum up, modern library patrons expect customized services. Rural libraries that provide customized services will be cultivating a growing base of enthusiastic users.

Lifelong Learning and Citizenship

Rural libraries have a long way to go to meet the needs of lifelong learners and decision-makers in a democracy. Nonusers especially perceive that the library has reference books and best-sellers. It is seen as a far less useful place in providing information on local government and social services. Vavrek (1990) writes: "The transformations have yet to be made in converting the typical rural library to a community information center" (p. 28).

The consumer electronics market already has started to move into the library's information strongholds. Customer trends in encyclopedia purchasing illustrate the phenomenon. "In 1994, families with multimedia personal computers are expected to snap up 3 million CD-ROM encyclopedias. But only 500,000 to 700,000 print encyclopedias will be sold, perhaps half the number of five years ago."

There are two big reasons for the shift. First, good electronic encyclopedias are quicker and easier to use than paper volumes. Second, the electronic encyclopedias sell for $99. The book-version *World Book* lists at $679; the *Britannica* starts at $1,800. Among all electronic encyclopedias, the best-seller is not from an old encyclopedia company but *Encarta* by Microsoft (Langberg, 1994, p. 5C).

Encyclopedias have always sold best to people who see themselves as lifelong learners—or who hope to make their children into lifelong learners. Learning also is the theme for electronic products for children. Along with *Encarta* for children, there is *The Body Illustrated* for teens and *Gettysburg Multimedia Battle Simulation* for military strategy students of all ages (Armstrong, et al., 1994, pp. 80-88; Flynn, 1994, 68-70). When well reviewed learning tools like these show up in retail stores, it will not be long before those who regard the library as a learning place will expect to see them there.

Whether it is through the development of new services, shifts in collections purchases, or provision for electronic products, rural libraries can use new tools to help meet the information needs of lifelong learners.

Addressing Equity Issues

From its beginnings, the American public library has had an equity commitment. In 1993 and again in January 1994, St. Louis Public Library marketing surveys revealed that a wide proportion of its public wanted the institution to address the service inequities of its older buildings, help children with school work, help fight illiteracy, and continue a high level of outreach services to the elderly and preschoolers. In addition, the surveys showed that St. Louisans wanted their library to comply both with the letter and spirit of the Americans for Disabilities Act. Enhancing these equity programs became an important issue in the library's most recent successful tax campaign (Melman & Lazarus, 1993; Midwest Research & Telephone Contact, Inc., 1994).

The ADA mandate is a healthy one. Speaking at a recent conference, Esquith (1993), senior ADA policy analyst for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation, noted: "The ADA is going to create new solutions to old problems, and part of the spin-off benefit to everyone is increased cooperation among agencies, among libraries, among anyone who has anything to do with the ADA" (p. xi).

ADA, therefore, presents rural libraries not with a problem but with an opportunity to examine their buildings and their services so they will operate in compliance with the new law. For many libraries, working with this opportunity already has allowed the improvement of services, including greater cooperation with other public and private agencies (Crispen, 1993, pp. 27-54).

Business Accountability

At all levels of government, there is increased competition for public revenues. When the public economy is tight, there always are demands for more accountability and an increase in productivity.

This reality translates into a call for all public libraries, no matter what their size, to begin accounting for their costs in public documents rather than by attempting to make their case with anecdotes and letters from grateful customers who then forget to vote yes in district tax elections.

College and university libraries already have had to undertake cost accounting, and the Library of Congress has been reprimanded for poor cost controls, including those in collections development (Cochrane & Warmann, 1989, pp. 55-57; "GAO Audit...," 1991, p. 830). As anyone who has ever done fund-raising or has campaigned for a tax increase knows, memorable word pictures are wonderful for making great first impressions, but increasingly libraries get asked hard business questions as well.

Just like other libraries, rural libraries face increasing pressures to go beyond traditional "output measures" to account for the totality of institutional work. The challenge will be to demonstrate benefits to voters through cost benefit and other value analysis (Sakaiya, 1991).

Rural librarians and boards of directors must pay special attention to the ways in which they conduct their business. Rightfully upset over stories about waste and mismanagement by government agencies, library district voters should expect nothing less.

Resource Sharing

Operating accountability will eventually force resource sharing on all public libraries. Financial pressures are increasing on large urban libraries and on university libraries to end free- or even cost reimbursement-loans to libraries from whom they do not have mutually benefiting relationships. In states which have state libraries unable financially, or unwilling as a matter of policy, to underwrite the costs of rural library net borrowing, free interlibrary loan is in considerable peril.

Other resource sharing opportunities are becoming available. Formal loan agreements among institutions making up primary members of civic networks form one opportunity. And rural net-lending networks can be found throughout the United States.

Federal policy mostly is abetting the trend to electronic resource sharing. The Government Printing Office, for example, is moving quickly to make much of its issuance available electronically, usually over guaranteed free dial-in connections at major government document depository libraries.

The national libraries also are moving in this direction. The Library of Congress already has started the movement to become the nation's electronic library serving libraries and end-users alike. And the National Library of Medicine continues to develop a wide range of up-to-date materials on public and personal health. Not all of these require a medical or biochemical doctorate to understand.

The National Library of Agriculture holds out special promise for sharing relevant resources with rural libraries. A visit to an NAL booth at any library convention always yields a handful of new services which they are delivering, mostly electronically, to county and small-town extension offices, schools, and libraries.

These trends are coming just in time, since as part of being well run, "we observe that the demand from our library patrons for quality resource sharing is clearly evident and real" (Baker & Jackson, 1993, p. 4).

Focusing on the Job to be Done

This article has been an examination of the forces and trends, the imperatives and the options, affecting the future of rural libraries. In ending this discussion, this author returns to where he began.

The rural library scene is a land of sharp contrasts—rich and poor, dynamic and stagnant, well-managed and foundering, deserving of a bright future and pathetically self-destructive. With so many thousand rural libraries serving the people of so many different locales in America, we should expect nothing less.

At the same time, we should not let the diversity of rural libraries confuse the reality of the plight which many of them face. Undoubtedly, many of them will follow the way of rural churches, rural one-room schools, and little towns like Elmo, Kansas, and pass out of existence.

But this fate is not universally predetermined. Public librarianship has never been a communitarian movement. Rather, each public library is the product of local civic pride, when citizens of a political subdivision set out to create for themselves the institution in their mind's eye.

Because all libraries, including public libraries, represent, and are constrained by, the citizenries of local governments, except where they can manage help from another entity, their fate is in their own hands. That means, quite simply, that unless local leaders and citizens see libraries as fulfilling a valued mission within their communities, these libraries have little chance of long-term survival. By the same reasoning, their future is in the hands of local librarians and local trustees who can refocus the institutional mission to meet the shifting needs of a changing constituency.

The history of public librarianship in America is one long tale of adaptation. Rural libraries that follow that story line—that find new uses for themselves in providing needed services to their own particular customer niches—undoubtedly will find ways to survive and prosper into the twenty-first century.

In the age of information technology, rural libraries have enormous potential. Those that have good leaders will have a bright future. Rural libraries must change. If they do not, they certainly will pass from the scene.

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, . . . it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of Light, . . . we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

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