

RURAL LIBRARY SERVICE NEWSLETTER

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The Rural Difference: A Commentary

The Rural Library Service Committee under the auspices of PLA's SMLS is given the assignment to initiate improvements in rural library service. The background for this task is a discipline lacking uniform definitions and purpose. It is one which lacks data, commands little attention of the library professional, and is a library field with little or no political or economical clout. This benign neglect exists in a country in which 65% of the nation's 8307 central libraries are in cities under 10,000 population.

The library community defines areas as rural based solely on population. Frequently, however there is a difference of opinion on the population size that qualifies an area as rural. The range varies from communities of 500 persons or less according to one report in UN Demographic Year Book to cities up to 50,000 according to the National Rural Center.

A different approach to defining rural is expressed in Vol. 16, p. 25 of the Encyclopedia Britannica, 1975 "predominant human activities are those which are involved in the production of foods, fibres, and raw materials. These field activities require a relatively high ratio of land per person. To the extent that a population is engaged in such field activities, it can be considered rural."

"Urban - engaged in activities by which the food, fibres, minerals, and raw materials from the field are processed and distributed to their users. These activities are usually performed in densely settled areas."

Whether one favors a definition of rural based on population or on activity, what can be agreed upon is there definitely a difference between rural and urban. Page 779 of the Encyclopedia Americana, 1979 writes "rural children differ from urban children in occupation interest, in outlook; in availability of libraries, museums, nature material, in social and economic status; in habits of eating, sleeping, dressing and working, in parental attitudes, in cultural background, in health, emotional reaction, and recreational patterns."

Not only is there a difference in the people but agencies in rural and urban areas differ as explained on page 30, Vol. 16 of the Encyclopedia Britannica, 1975.

"Schools, health services and adult-training agencies in rural settings tend to be less effective than those of the city, largely because the per capita cost is always greater in an area of low population density. Also, to the extent that effective service requires highly trained personnel, rural areas find it difficult to attract them from urban areas, where supporting agencies are more available and income greater."

Sandra Osborne writing in October 1973 on small libraries in Library Services in Rural Areas, p. 15 states: "The tax base is too small. They can't attract good people. They lack strong leadership. Obviously they need better staff, for often

these (small) sized libraries are run by non-professionals. They are a little too much tradition-bound. They should be more imaginative - offer more outgoing services, be more community oriented - take more initiative."

Those who work in or study rural libraries discover a great amount of negativism leveled against rural libraries. The library professionals usually with a strong urban bias view their country cousins with much skepticism as being too limited to provide adequate services. Also coloring the city view is the opinion expressed by Jesse H. Shera in his classic, Foundations of the Public Library. "But it is known that libraries are distinctly an urban phenomenon, that they flourish only when the economic ability of the region is sufficiently great to permit adequate support, and that they are the product of a mature culture."

While limited resources present major obstacles, the words of a New York State Rural Mail Carrier stated over 60 years ago will make us try to overcome them. He said, "Farm people will use the public library facilities very much the same as other people once the distance is over come."

It is the goal of the Rural Library Service Committee to lessen that distance.

CORRESPONDENCE

Mr. Ron Davis, Director of the Northern Territory Library Service in the Northern Territory of Australia has written requesting information on rural libraries that he might visit in 1982. His letter in part reads, "I am interested in the development of library services to remote communities. I am contemplating a study tour of North America in 1982 and I would welcome some advice on those library systems in the United States which have been particularly significant in developing library services to remote communities.

As Director of the Northern Territory Library Service I am having to contend with the problems associated with providing a library service to a community which has a population density of .09 persons per square kilometre. . . . (could you) provide me with information about your system so that I can finalize an itinerary."

You may write Mr. Davis at:

Mr. Ron Davis
Northern Territory Library Service
P.O. Box 39971
Winnellie, N. T. 5789
Australia

PROBLEMS CONFRONTING LIBRARIANS OF RURAL AREAS

The following list was first began at the 1980 New York ALA Conference and was added to at the recent Midwinter. While it is readily recognizable that many of the problems identified are applicable to any size library, the Rural Library Service Committee should view these topics from a rural perspective. I welcome

comments from the committee on how best to approach these identifiable problems:

1. Better use of funds and staff
2. Branches, bookmobile, book-by-mail and tight money
3. Building funds: Alternative funding sources
4. Educate public officials about libraries
5. Isolation from resources
6. Increase community support (extension services)
7. Motivate staff--how do we serve?
8. Motivate trustee involvement
9. Organize volunteers
10. Outreach unserved
11. Professionalism? Non professional staff/relations with librarian self-image
12. Public awareness: Getting demands presented to system; increased visibility
13. Resistance to change
14. Special groups: Illiterate, handicapped
15. Unserved areas who don't need (or perceive they need) library service
16. Continuing education opportunities for rural librarians
17. Developing political skills
18. Publicity
19. Programming
21. Contracts
22. Collection development
23. Library skills for the nonprofessional

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