

Future Agenda for Rural and Small Libraries in the US

The purpose of this paper is to briefly comment on the status of librarianship in small and rural libraries, to note recent developments, and to provide a framework for the implementation of a systematic vision for the future.

Preface

The backbone of public librarianship in the United States can be found in the 7,000 or so small libraries that populate rural/urban American. These consist of industrial, ranch, resort, bedroom, seat of government, agricultural, and extractive communities. Despite the preponderance of small towns and their libraries, these have often been dwarfed in the public's view by more glamorous depictions associated with institutions in metropolitan America. In the public and library press, notice of a donation of Kerouac manuscripts to the New York Public Library typically received greater attention than the sleep over party of teens at the Bullard Sanford Memorial Library in Vassar, Michigan.

Contributing to the above has also been a scene of decades of neglect in Schools of Library and Information Science that have found more favorite topics to be pursued by instructors and faculty than the rigors of working with library boards and the budgeting process in small public libraries. As a further matter of perspective, thirty years ago for a researcher studying rural libraries, it would have been easier to locate information of the same about life in Ghana rather than something pertaining to the United States.

Tipping points causing change to the above situation have included a series of national events contributed by the action of the American Library Association and its various committees structured to study small and rural public libraries and the formation of the Center for the Study of Rural

Librarianship at Clarion University of Pennsylvania. The vital driving force, however, has been the selfless contributions made by librarians, staff, and trustees of local community libraries.

Recent Developments:

The last ten years have been particularly propitious for small and rural libraries correcting the previous historical imbalance. Outstanding credit has to be directed to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for its enormous contributions spurring the development of both infrastructure and collateral training in information technology at the local level. More recently the Foundation's actions have enabled the development of WebJunction, a marvelous clearinghouse of information, along with projects like MaintainIT, and most significantly *Library Journal's* award for the Best Small Library in America. The latter has given remarkable identity to our previously invisible institutions. Not to be excluded in the array of contributors has been the Rural Library Project in Georgia, the Rural Library Initiative in California, the action of the Western Council of State Libraries, and the contributions of numerous state bound associations dealing at committee levels with rural libraries. Importantly, in 2002, the establishment of the Association for Rural and Small Libraries, and the Association of Bookmobile and Outreach Services, has given organizational direction for the future.

Over the last twenty years, there were two efforts to extract a "national agenda" for rural library services. The first such entitled "The 21st Century—Rural and Small Libraries, Action Agenda," was compiled during the H. W. Wilson Symposium of the Future of Public Libraries at Omaha, Nebraska, on September 26-29, 1990. A second effort, "Action Agenda for Community and Economic

Development,” was written during a meeting sponsored by the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, the National Agricultural Library, and the Northeast Center for Rural Development, in cooperation with the State Library of Maine, on September 19-21, 1991. This occurred at a conference dealing with “Information and Rural Economic Development.” Regretfully, these latter documents became part of good intentions left undone. It took a group of twelve individuals, meeting in the early months of 2008, in Clarion, to consider what were options for the future. Those attending included: Ken Davenport [Iowa], Becky Heil [Iowa], Susan Hill [Ohio], Carla Lehn [California], Rebecca Miller [New York], Jim Malzewski [Washington], Emily Parker [Washington], John Philip [Ohio], Jim Rancilio [Michigan], Don Reynolds [Tennessee], and Bernard Vavrek [Pennsylvania].

Rural Library Summit:

With the above as prelude, one is led to the most recent effort at “building” community libraries at the national level. On July 17, 18, 2008, a “Summit Meeting on Rural and Small Libraries” was hosted by the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship in Clarion. Attending were: Laurie Brooks, Associate Deputy Director, Institute for Museum and Library Services, Washington, DC; Mary Chute, Deputy Director for Libraries, Institute for Museum and Library Services, Washington, DC; Blane Dessy, External Advisory Committee, Department of Library Science, Clarion University of Pennsylvania; Theresa Gemmer, President, Association for Bookmobile and Outreach Services [Everett Public Library Outreach Librarian, Everett, WA]; George Needham, Vice-President, Member Services, Online Computer Library Center, Dublin, OH; Satia Orange, Director, Office for Literacy and Outreach Services, American Library Association, Chicago, IL; Don Reynolds,

President, Association for Rural and Small Libraries, [Director, Nolichucky Regional Library, Morristown, TN]; Carol Sheffer, President, Public Library Association, American Library Association, Chicago, IL [Deputy Director, Queens Library, Jamaica, NY]; Greta Southard, Executive Director, Public Library Association, American Library Association, Chicago, IL; Bernard Vavrek, Director, Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, Clarion University of Pennsylvania; and, Jan Walsh, President, Western Council of State Libraries [Washington State Librarian, Olympia, WA].

Vision for the Future:

All of librarianship is challenged by an increasing array of opportunities that play on the Internet stage. Actors of all types have come forward to provide their own versions of information packaging and access. Despite the mentality that electronic networks are the core matrix of today’s cultural services in the United States, it is the American public library that provides critical multi-point contact at the community level, on a daily basis. New challenges have developed. *Arsenals of Democracy* was the title of a decades old book about the societal role of the public library. Increasingly, it has been necessary to reassert that role, in an increasingly fractious society.

While Americans have great trust and reliance on their public library infrastructure, these cultural building blocks have not always grabbed the national imagination as one might hope. This paper is about hope and future success created by those individuals who have committed their willingness to do so. This action represents the first step in a national movement to re-energize small and rural public libraries.

- Bernard Vavrek, Director
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Action Items for the Future:

The Summit participants realize that many of these actions are dependent upon the approval of governing bodies. Participants will communicate these items to their respective boards and councils for approval prior to implementation.

1. PARTNERSHIP/COLLABORATIONS

What?	Who?	When?
Align with other national organizations with common interest in rural issues <ul style="list-style-type: none">rural compactbroadband accessearly learning	ARSL ABOS	9/2008
Encourage, explore and develop models for cooperation between small and rural libraries and with other libraries	ARSL ABOS WJ OLOS COSLA	6/30/2009 webinar then ongoing discussion boards
Encourage small and rural libraries to reassess their services regularly based on changing demographics, in consultation with other community agencies <ul style="list-style-type: none">early learning	PLA ARSL ABOS COSLA	6/2009 website available

2. NETWORKS

What?	Who?	When?
Create a network of mentors	ABOS ARSL WJ	begin now – in place summer 2009
Create a “go to” list of people with interest in small and rural libraries to act as advisors/speakers	ABOS ARSL WJ	begin now – in place summer 2009

3. RESEARCH

What?	Who?	When?
Comparative library funding by size	PLA?	10/2008
Economies by scale	PLA	10/2008
Funding opportunities for small and rural libraries/directory	B. Vavrek’s graduate students - CSRL	8/15/2008
Value of a national information policy * How to fund public libraries	B. Vavrek	12/2008

4. TRAINING and EDUCATION

What?	Who?	When?
Core competencies for library management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify what's available • promote these resources • identify and plug holes 	Western Council COSLA WJ	12/15/2008 IMLS deadline Complete by Summer 6/30/2011
Core competencies for external relations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify what's available • promote these resources • identify and plug holes 	PLA – Emerging Leaders	7/31/2009 if chosen
Identify and promote LIS programs that encourage public libraries especially small and rural libraries	ARSL @ ALISE	1/2009

5. FINANCIAL SUPPORT

What?	Who?	When?
Design a plan for a national funding mechanism to make training available to all workers in small and rural libraries	Plan A: Don to ask Pat Wagner Plan B: Grant proposal from ARSL Plan C: George to offer OCLC staff	No date given
Promote template on what libraries save individuals to small and rural libraries	ABOS ARSL OLOS COSLA	12/2008
Underwrite, publish, and promote new studies on economic multiplier effect of small and rural libraries	ARSL	1 st step – ARSL to identify current studies applicable to small and rural libraries 12/2008 2 nd step – identify gaps 12/2011