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# Common Ground: The Rural Perspective

by Virginia Orvedahl and William Wartman

**T**he common ground of social responsibility that exists between any public library — small town, rural, or urban — is addressed in Whitney North Seymour's book, *For the People: Fighting for Public Libraries*.<sup>1</sup> He states that "the task of correcting inequality" is the common ground, and goes on to explain that the inequality caused by poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, or disability can be eased by the information and guidance available at public libraries.

Rural libraries may need to work harder than their urban counterparts both at bringing people into their buildings and at taking their services off site. In any case, the goal of serving all of the public is the same.

A close working relationship must exist between county, city, and school librarians in order to achieve an effective integrated approach to information delivery. One library cannot operate without the support of the others to meet user needs. Just as networking has integrated information access, so libraries in rural settings must share the philosophy of mutual cooperation if they are to meet their common goal of correcting inequality.

Once the needy cousins of already-established urban libraries, rural public libraries in North Carolina have come into their own. They now are willing and able to meet the challenges that are uniquely theirs, as well as those common to every public library. The situation of the Halifax County Library System and the Roanoke Rapids Public Library, as discussed later in this article, is an example of how they are meeting these challenges.

As early as 1917, in counties where a municipal public library existed, the boards of education and county commissions authorized the

library boards to extend service to rural areas.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, the "travelling library" concept — the earliest form of the bookmobile — was instituted. Today, the "travelling library" concept extends beyond gravel and paved roads to cable and telephone wire.

One way or the other, rural public libraries always have had to go the distance to reach their patrons. They have the innate characteristic of serving fewer patrons in a larger geographic area than their urban counterparts. This is supported by an analysis of the 1990 census data by the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center.<sup>3</sup> The center classified seventy-five of the one hundred counties in the state as rural, accounting for forty-three percent of the state's population. Rural libraries in North Carolina serve fewer than half of the state's population in an area that covers three quarters of the state's land mass.

Technological advances allow rural libraries to reach across the miles and deliver their services. Many aspects of library technology may seem simple, and almost a given in larger, urban libraries;

but they have changed the information horizon for rural libraries.

OCLC, the Online Computer Library Center, Inc., has offered rural patrons an avenue to unlimited resources. Access to OCLC databases allows rural libraries to serve a greater variety of patrons, particularly those whose needs are not necessarily met using the library's collection.

OCLC and other informational databases are available through the North Carolina Information Network (NCIN). Libraries that are part of the network have access to an incredible variety of information sources available through the state library, such as: the regional job listings, extremely important to rural isolated areas; statistical information from the State Data Center; and other information retrieval databases. All that is required for access is a computer, a modem, and telephone and telecommunications software. North Carolina libraries are fortunate that the State Library subsidizes the cost of a number of network services.

According to Howard McGinn, some of the heaviest users of the NCIN are rural libraries.<sup>4</sup> The network has given libraries an opportunity to provide business and local government with up-to-the-minute information. It has not replaced traditional library services, but "enhanced" it, he adds. Rural libraries are now competitive with their urban counterparts. Because of the North Carolina Information Network, rural libraries no longer have any excuse for not providing an abundant variety of information resources.

Networking is not restricted to technology in successful rural libraries. Multitype library cooperation allows not only for information sharing, but for efficiency in operation. Nancy Lovekamp describes a cooperative agreement between a public school

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district and public library system in west central Illinois.<sup>5</sup> The acquisition policies of the libraries complement one another. They share cataloging of new materials, and their computer hardware is compatible. Both systems have access to the Illinois Library and Information Network, a statewide computer network similar to NCIN.

The quality of resources and services provided in this rural Illinois area could be accomplished only with constant communication between librarians and their boards, according to Lovekamp. "It is vital that this communication and cooperation continue if the citizens of this rural community are to continue to receive quality library service in the future," she adds.

The North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center also reports that rural counties in the state have 45 percent fewer college graduates and a 60 percent increase in poverty.<sup>6</sup> Less educated, yes, but those in rural areas have as many, if not more, legitimate information needs. To meet these needs, a library must be more than a storage space for books.

It is significant to note that the census data counts only the years of schooling when determining educational levels. Many people, particularly the older population, have educated themselves through various informal methods including agri-

as that of some urban counties in the state.<sup>7</sup>

Don Dillman, a professor of rural sociology at Washington State University, asks, "Isn't it time that we stopped thinking of libraries as repositories of information and began to think of them as access points to the world?"<sup>8</sup> Rural libraries faced with the above demographics, geographic isolation, smaller budgets, and smaller collections always have had a clear understanding of the necessity of going outside the library building to meet a patron's information needs. Rural libraries always have been access points for their patrons, whether by furnishing local job listings and resumé writing information, or by providing space for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition sites or local anti-poverty agency programs.

While technology and cooperation are the conveyances of successful library services, the public librarian still has the task of letting people know what services exist for them. Marketing is a major responsibility of any public library, rural or urban, if the library is to become a true access point and meet patron needs.

Using the traditional kinds of media such as radio, television, and newspapers can be effective. However, in rural areas, other information outlets such as putting material in grocery stores, churches, or post offices, along with sending fliers home with school children, may prove beneficial. It is a presumption to think that people in rural areas get their information only from traditional media sources.

In addition to media marketing, the rural librarian must also become what Leah Griffith refers to as a "political marketer."<sup>9</sup> Making a case for the rural public library to local government and the library's own funding unit is a never-ending task that is essential for financial survival, and the development of community status and appreciation for the public library.

Marketing the library's wares to other local government departments in competition for local funds can demonstrate the library's importance. This process also provides an informational function as well. It answers the questions: can the library serve other information needs; and do these agencies have services to which the library can refer patrons? Working as a team, local government agencies, including the library, can create a better service arena and promote each

other for the common good of serving the taxpayer.

Halifax County, the state's fourteenth largest in geographic size, offers a twofold approach to the delivery of library services. The Halifax County Library System is headquartered in the town of Halifax, the county seat, with a population of 327. The system operates three affiliate libraries and a bookmobile. The Roanoke Rapids Public Library is a separate municipal library located in Roanoke Rapids, the county's only city with approximately 16,000 residents. Both library systems offer library privileges free of charge to all county and city residents.

Turning first to the county system, perhaps the biggest challenge in meeting user demand is providing necessary widespread geographic library access. The most obvious approach to this service requirement is the bookmobile. It is useful in its flexibility of where and who it serves and what type of service it provides. Its primary clientele are the elderly and the disabled. It also serves children in four of the county's low-income housing units. The county library system, via the bookmobile, also provides small book collections to six elementary schools. Halifax County cannot afford to have a degreed reference librarian as part of the bookmobile staff, but this does not mean that information needs of bookmobile patrons are not met. The staff forwards requests to the main library where reference assistance is available.

Technology and outreach services offer rural public library patrons access points

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cultural extension, literacy programs, and other noncredit community education programs. These are all situations in which the public library may play a vital role.

Rural areas traditionally have claimed an exemption to problems that plague urban areas, such as infant mortality and crime. According to the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, the infant mortality rate is highest in the Coastal Plain of the state, which, with the exception of Cumberland County, is defined as rural by the Center. In that same Coastal Plain, the North Carolina Department of Justice reports a crime rate as high

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to the world, but it is solidarity at home through the public library system that makes it all possible. The advantages of small town libraries becoming part of a county or regional system are many. They include sharing personnel, resources, and costs associated with information retrieval services.

As a unified group, a county library system can present a stronger force to political entities when they are seeking funding. Libraries, such as the Halifax County System, that serve the disabled and the illiterate, as well as those in poverty, can also address these same issues in the political arena. The public librarian walks a fine line when promoting libraries as a system, while at the same time promoting autonomy within the individual branches. Unlike fast food franchises, library systems generally can have similar standards and activities, but can deliver their services in a personalized fashion to best meet particular community needs.

It is the rare small municipality that can or even wants to fund a library, pay a professional librarian, and buy the hardware, software, and expertise to provide the latest information technology. The city of Roanoke Rapids has made this commitment. An expanded, remodeled facility opened in 1989, and full automation plans

are well underway. The library is heavily used and is well-funded as a department of the city government structure.

There are obvious differences in the focus and means of patron impact between the city (Roanoke Rapids) and county (Halifax) library operations, yet common ground exists in the rural perspective of service required. Both libraries deliver information to the same basic population group. The socio-economic background of the majority of the people being served is the same. Both libraries must make people aware of their offerings and potential to be an important resource in their lives. Both libraries must make their governing and financially supporting bodies aware of their importance in their respective communities.

Although situated in a rural library context, the Roanoke Rapids Public Library bridges the gap between outreach concerns of the county system and the need for a well-equipped library in the area of densest population, industry, and commerce. The two library systems, city and county, work together to meet the shared goals of being socially responsible institutions correcting inequality.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> Whitney North Seymour, Jr. and

Elizabeth N. Layne, *For the People: Fighting for Public Libraries* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1979) 71-96.

<sup>2</sup> Thornton W. Mitchell, *The State Library and Library Development in North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Division of State Library, 1983), 28-33.

<sup>3</sup> North Carolina Economic Development Center, *North Carolina Rural Profile* (Raleigh: North Carolina Economic Development Center, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Howard F. McGinn, "Electronic Services for Rural Public Libraries: Meeting the Challenge in North Carolina," *RQ* 29 (Summer 1990): 492-6.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Lovekamp, "Cooperation in Rural Libraries," *Illinois Libraries* 72 (February 1990): 144-145.

<sup>6</sup> See Note 3 Above.

<sup>7</sup> North Carolina Department of Justice, *State of North Carolina Uniform Crime Report* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Justice, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Don Dillman, "Community Needs and the Rural Library," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 65 (May 1991): 31-33, 155.

<sup>9</sup> Leah Griffith, "Political Marketing of the Rural Library," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 63 (May 1989): 44-47.

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