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# Use of Technology in a Rural Public Library Setting to Provide Both Traditional and Nontraditional Reference Services

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Small rural public libraries are alive and thriving in the United States! Their concerns are being voiced in the literature and at conferences. The Summer 1988 issue of *Public Libraries* featured the topic, "The Small Public Library in the U.S.A." Included in this issue was Danny L. McMillion's delightful look at "Librarianship—West Virginia Style." McMillion's enthusiasm about libraries in small towns, especially Rainelle, West Virginia, is infectious. McMillion says that "small-town librarianship may not fit the stereotyped expectations of most people but it sure is fun."<sup>1</sup> Rural libraries were emphasized at the 1986 Public Library Association (PLA) conference within a conference, "Rural Roots." It was noted that "the smaller the community, the more the library is needed for a window on the world."<sup>2</sup>

Janet Baker, director of the Conant Public Library, Sterling, Massachusetts, has identified three roles basic to public library service in Massachusetts. These three roles are "an interlibrary access point, a recreational reading and viewing center for adults, and a recreational reading and viewing center for children."<sup>3</sup>

North Carolina is a largely rural state composed of many rural communities. Fortunately, all of the rural areas in North Carolina are served by public libraries. The history and experiences of the Nantahala Regional Library are typical of other rural public libraries in North Carolina.

The Nantahala Regional Library serves the public through branch libraries and bookmobile service in Cherokee, Clay, and Graham Counties in western North Carolina. The area served is the sparsely populated foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The rolling hills and whitewater rivers, combined with the numerous recreational opportunities offered by the National and State Forest Service and Tennessee Valley Authority

(TVA) lakes, account for the area's having become a haven for vacationers, summer residents, and year-round retirees. Large percentages of the land area in each county are owned by either the TVA, National and State Forest Service, or the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

Because of its isolation and lack of transportation, new industry is reluctant to relocate in the area, thereby slowing the growth of the economy and suppressing the tax base. Per capita income is among the lowest in North Carolina and illiteracy is among the highest in the state. School libraries are in many instances understaffed and underfunded. Located far from large cities and major universities, area residents often depend on the public library as the only source for information. The Nantahala Regional Library is using technology to better provide information to its patrons.

Residents of the area have close ties to Tennessee and Georgia, feeling that people in other areas of North Carolina think the state line does not extend beyond Asheville. Television reception, poor at best, is usually received from out of state. Due to a shortage of stores and medical facilities, shopping and visits to doctors are often conducted out of state. This isolation, combined with the lack of resources available in large cities, has caused the residents of the area to develop a fierce independence as well as a strongly developed sense of community. As in all rural areas, the best communication is via the local grapevine. Neighbor pitching in to help neighbor is commonplace.

The Nantahala Regional Library is the oldest Regional Library in North Carolina and one of the first fourteen regional libraries in the United States.<sup>4</sup> The Nantahala Regional Library originated on May 1, 1937, "when the Tennessee Valley Authority signed a contract with the Murphy Library Board to provide service at the construction site of the Hiwassee Dam in Cherokee County.

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A trained librarian was employed at the Hiwassee Dam library, library hours were increased at Murphy, and new books were purchased. As the dam neared completion, the library service was curtailed; but the several small libraries continued, and the voters of Cherokee County approved a library tax of 3 cents per \$100.00 of assessed property value to support the program."<sup>5</sup>

This special referendum held November 5, 1940, enabled regional library service to continue after TVA support was withdrawn June 30, 1940. The first Nantahala Regional Library Board members were appointed in 1940. Works Progress Administration (WPA) and National Youth Administration (NYA) funds were used to provide clerks for manning the branch libraries and the bookmobile, as well as for filing and doing various clerical jobs. The Nantahala Regional Library was incorporated February 25, 1943.

Bookmobile service was first provided by the State Library Commission. WPA then took over bookmobile service until the bookmobile was turned over to the Nantahala Regional Library in 1943. Bookmobile service has been provided continuously with stops rotating once every four weeks.

From the very beginning the Nantahala Regional Library has benefited from professionally trained librarians. Trained staff with access to both state and local funding in an area lacking in other resources served to provide a forward thinking progressive library system.

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The current objectives of the library are contained in its book selection policy. "The purpose of the Nantahala Regional Library is to provide all residents of Cherokee, Clay and Graham counties with a comprehensive collection of materials to aid in the pursuit of information, research, education, recreation, and the development of creative capacities for their leisure time. It is also our purpose to organize these materials for easy access and to offer guidance in their use."

"We are here to promote the reading and educational interests of the community. This can and will be done through a multitude of activities and media both within and without the library, and through the use of the State Library and other available collections."

"Materials will be selected with respect for all backgrounds, ages, abilities, interests, and levels

of education. This will not only apply to our current users, but to those who might be users in the future."

"To fulfill our goals we will work with the community agencies, organizations, schools, business firms and government agencies of the region as well as local residents."<sup>6</sup>

The staff of the Nantahala Regional Library attempts to provide an answer to every reference question asked by patrons. The North Carolina Information Network (NCIN) has been invaluable in meeting this goal. The NCIN has enabled North Carolina libraries to fill the first of Janet Baker's roles for public libraries; rural public libraries in North Carolina are now better able to serve as an interlibrary access point. The North Carolina Online Union Catalog and the Online Union List of Serials, both maintained at OCLC, and part of the North Carolina Information Network, provide rapid access to the holdings of university, college, community college, corporate and public libraries in North Carolina. Telefacsimile has permitted instantaneous transmission and reception of all types of documents to and from locations all over the world. Electronic mail and bulletin boards are available for use by both librarians and the public. Bulletin boards are available for job listings, calendars of events, information for children's librarians, and the North Carolina Automated Purchase Directory list of goods and services being purchased by the state which can be bid on by local businesses. Each of the branches of the Nantahala Regional Library has an electronic mail "address" and has the capability of electronic communications.

Use of these new technologies has provided both a challenge and an exercise in thinking about alternative routes of service. Which is cheaper—traditional mail or fax? What is more important—timely delivery of material to patrons or using traditional methods of interlibrary loan? Some examples of nontraditional routes of service experienced by the Nantahala Regional Library may offer insight into these questions.

As a member of the North Carolina Information Network, the Nantahala Regional Library was one of forty-three library systems to receive a telefacsimile machine purchased with LSCA funds. The fax machine is available for transmitting and receiving information by both staff and patrons at no charge. When a locally owned bank recently held an election of new board members at the library, important proxy forms were received on the fax machine during the hotly contested election for the control of the board. In another instance local law enforcement officials transmit-

ted documents to a federal marshal in California. This resulted in the arrest of two men on drug charges and the seizure of \$200,000 worth of property.

A local entrepreneur publishes a magazine for ham radio operators. He has received articles for his magazine on the fax machine from as far away as Australia and Japan. The managerial staff of Industrial Opportunities, Incorporated, a sheltered workshop, tells customers and suppliers that it has shared access to the library's fax machine.

Two local law firms have bought fax machines for their firms after using the library's machine. Out of town attorneys use the library's machine to receive documents from their offices. One attorney working on a Saturday had to have a document sent that day. Even though the fax machine is housed in a portion of the library that is normally kept locked on evenings and weekends, staff members who had never used the fax before were still able to send the document after receiving instructions over the telephone.

The library's fax is the only public use fax in the tri-county area. Local banks send in clients to transmit signature verification for transfer of funds. Airframe and powerplant logs have been received for a potential purchaser of an airplane. Library reports are quickly sent over the fax to the State Library in Raleigh. Plans are to purchase fax machines for each branch, which will allow more effective use of the combined resources of the system.

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Use of the North Carolina Online Union Catalog maintained at OCLC was made possible by the purchase of used computers and printers from the local community college. Four computers and printers were purchased for only \$1250. Although the Radio Shack TRS 80 Model III's were considered outdated by the community college, the Regional Library staff was able to purchase modems and communications software and adapt them to OCLC's ASCII requirements. Now each branch is equipped to initiate requests

through OCLC. Before requesting material, branch library staff must first call the headquarters library to check the Region's Union Catalog. Photocopies are routinely requested over the OCLC ILL Subsystem and received via fax. Patrons are impressed with the speed of document delivery. Photocopies of law journal articles were requested for a doctoral candidate and received the same day. A local owner of a trout raising business requested government documents concerning diseases of trout. Photocopies were requested through OCLC, received at the Nantahala Regional Library's fax, and retransmitted to the patron's fax machine.

Use of technology is not limited by the four walls of the library. Very traditional methods of service delivery have also benefited from new technology. The current bookmobile is equipped with an Astron Power—Wilson 1510 ten channel UHF business transceiver. The use of the radio allows instant communication with headquarters if an emergency arises on the bookmobile. Knowing that the staff can be contacted if an emergency arises has increased employees' morale. When the bookmobile had a flat tire twenty miles from a filling station and fifty miles from regional headquarters, the bookmobile staff was able to call the regional headquarters by radio. Headquarters staff members then called a mechanic to change the tire.

The cost of these new services offered at the Nantahala Regional Library has been far outweighed by the benefits of better and quicker service to patrons, increased staff job satisfaction, and greater visibility in the business community. Rural librarians are challenged to make the best use of their scarce funds, staff, and facilities. Rural library patrons are entitled to quality library service provided by pleasant staff members in an attractive setting. Technology can help meet this goal.

### **References**

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