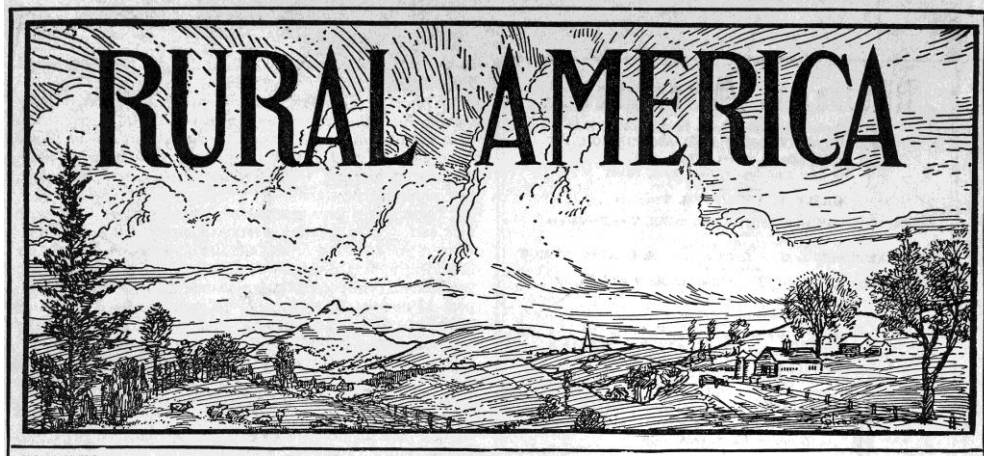


Objectives for Rural Library Service

Mary Utopia Rothrock

Supervisor, Library Service, Tennessee Valley Authority

Published in



Published by the American Country Life Association, September, 1937.

The foundations of our national life rest upon the soil. The nation depends upon the farm for its food stuffs and upon the farm home for the replenishing of its human stock in cities. No less important, though less readily apparent, is the contribution of rural life to the preservation of some of our national ideals - the maintenance of the family as a social institution; the cultivation of independent self-reliance, hand in hand with neighborliness; the existence of the philosophy of life which grows out of direct contacts with the soil and the plants and animals it sustains. We are accustomed to the thought that if the food supply from the nation's farms were shut off, our cities would in a few days be brought to starvation. Less quickly, but no less surely and tragically, would our social structure collapse if the constant infusion of rural blood and spirit were cut off. These facts make the problems of rural libraries national rather than local in their implications.

Thinking then in terms of the national welfare, we find ourselves face to face with many different kinds of farm life, embracing a vast range of conditions. The truck farms of New Jersey, the rustling corn and waving wheat of the grain belt, livestock farms, cotton plantations, all have their own peculiar economic and human problems. Mexican bean beetles, boll weevils, tobacco worms; share cropping, tenant farming, marketing; dust storms and floods; cooking,

washing, sewing, mending, drawing water, cleaning lamps, milking, churning - the unceasing drudgeries of the farm home; schooling for the children, the family's health, wholesome recreation - these are only a few of the problems which continually confront the nation's rural citizens.

In the face of these varied situations, is it possible to frame objectives for library service which will be applicable equally on the farms and in the villages of the densely populated East, in the Middle West, the South, the far West? Are there definite functions which the nation has the right to expect our rural libraries to perform for its farm families and those who live in its rural villages? It seems to me they may reasonably be expected, on behalf of the nation's welfare, to do these five things:

- (1) To increase the efficiency of farmers at their jobs
- (2) To help them preserve and enrich the soil, which is the nation's heritage
- (3) To promote their intelligent participation in the duties of citizenship
- (4) To advance wholesome family life
- (5) To contribute to the individual's adjustment to his environment.

The library is but one, and a very modest one, of the social institutions which are engaged in the pursuit of these objectives. Indeed, in recent years the expansion of other agencies for rural education -

universities and agricultural colleges, national and state departments of agriculture and vocational high schools – has almost completely overshadowed that of the library. In the fall of 1935, representatives of the agricultural extension divisions of ten states which had had some slight experience in conducting rural discussion groups met in Washington and agreed upon plans for promoting further organization of these groups in their states. Another meeting was held a year later – in November, 1936 – which was attended by representatives of all the states. As a result of this second meeting each state agricultural college was asked to appoint someone whose responsibility it should be to develop, through county farm and home demonstration agents, in every community of the state, discussion groups for the consideration of rural problems.

If these other agencies could perform all the services required for attaining our objectives, then there would be no need for the rural library. Far from this, however, they greatly increase the need for that peculiar type of service which the library is designed to give. For the problems of rural life, like those of all other life, have this disturbing characteristic: they are relative, not absolute. They are problems or not, depending upon what is happening at the moment elsewhere in the nation and the world. A wheat crop, which on an export market would fill the mid-west with prosperity, would sell on an uncontrolled home market at a ruinously low figure. Farm problems will not stay solved. They constantly shift and change. The invention of the cotton gin turned the whole course of the nation's history, and it is quite possible that the recent invention of the mechanical cotton picker may turn it again.

“The history of science abounds with instances when a new concept or discovery leads to tremendous advances into vast new fields of knowledge and art whose very existence had hitherto been unsuspected,” says Dr. K. T. Compton, President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “No such instance is so dramatic as the discovery of the electron, the tiniest thing in the universe, which within one generation has transformed a stagnant science of physics, a descriptive science of chemistry, and a conventionalized science of astronomy into dynamically developing

sciences fraught with intellectual adventure, interrelating interpretations and practical values.” Out of research upon the electron, he continues, has come business of “hundreds of millions of dollars a year; innumerable aids to health, safety and convenience; and an immense advance in out knowledge of the universe in which we live.”

Hence it is that to face life intelligently men must have recourse to the accumulated knowledge and experience of the past, to the record of the most recent advances in research and invention, to the history of past inventions and discoveries and their effect upon human life, and to the best current reasoning and speculation upon the significance of all this for their immediate situations. The need is for a reservoir, stored with the wisdom of the race, kept fresh and full by the living stream of print. It is for the fulfillment of this need that libraries exist.

The present status of rural libraries in the United States is a brief, sorry story. First is the sobering fact that 82 per cent of our rural population is without library service – that of the forty-five million who have no libraries, forty million live on the nation's farms. This situation, however, offers hope at the same moment it gives cause for despair. For it invites experimentation with new kinds of rural libraries, designed to meet the requirements of our expanding country life.

Even in the rural areas where libraries exist, we are operating them chiefly upon patterns determined by the conditions of urban life, with faint regard for the differences of environment, occupation and social organization which characterize their users. All too often the village library building suggests the type of service which emanates from it – a straight, hard front of brick with an imposing flight of steps leading up to a locked front door. In the better favored of these libraries, the books are predominantly Book of the Month Club, Newbery Medal, and Booklist selections – highly respectable, but to a marked degree in the literary, as distinguished from the grass roots, tradition.

In less opulent village libraries, the book selection is of a more antique flavor – sets of Dickens, Scott, and Cooper, Ridpath's

History of the World, Grant's Memoirs, well worn fiction and juveniles, and perhaps a manual on municipal government, copyrighted in 1898.

We librarians too are apt to be of the literary, or the antique, tradition; and even when we are not that, we can seldom claim to be specialists in the subject fields, acquaintance with which is necessary to make rural life satisfying, economically secure and productive of the nation's welfare.

Phillips Russell's life of Emerson opens with an account of that gentle philosopher's attempt, with the help of his son, to get the calf into the barn. While the boy tugged at the calf's ears, the transcendental father pushed upon the rear; but all their efforts were in vain. By and by an Irish servant girl, observing their struggles, came out, inserted her finger into the calf's mouth, and gently and effortlessly led it to the barn. In his journal that evening, Emerson recorded his admiration for "people who can do things."

Our rural libraries have more need for knowledge of calves than of Plato.

If the library is to help the farmer increase his efficiency at the job, it must provide the means of his knowing about plant foods and the chemistry of soils; about crops, markets, and livestock; about producers' and consumers' cooperatives; about carpentry, farm mechanics and elementary engineering. If it is to help him preserve and enrich the soil, which is our national heritage, it must give him the means of learning about rainfall and drainage, about the land uses appropriate to different types of soil, about the production and utilization of tree crops, and the growing of timber. If it is to contribute to the exercise of intelligent citizenship, it must make available both the history and the current status of the social, political, and economic problems by which he is surrounded, the occupational tendencies, population trends, and inter-relations of city and country, of sections within the nation and of the United States and other nations. As an aid to the building of wholesome family life, it must supply materials relating to community and individual health, to child care and education. Finally, it must lead individual members of the farm family into the use of books for recreation, and the growth of the imagination and the spirit.

Nor is this all. Country and city libraries alike should assume increasing responsibility for solving two other problems; they should prepare themselves to give competent, scientific diagnoses of reading difficulties, and to direct remedial reading; and they should actively stimulate and help guide the writing and publishing of books which are interesting and understandable to adults of limited reading ability. For, until these serious handicaps to reading are overcome, libraries cannot perform effectively their full educational function.

It is some such service as this that the national welfare requires of our rural libraries. No doubt something of this sort is now being done here and there.

Our better county libraries, with their present book collections and their efficient machinery of book distribution, have much more to offer than rural leaders, including librarians themselves, are fully aware. The great stores of information which may be unlocked by indexes and by the technical proficiency and spirit of service of librarians are largely unknown to rural leaders, and we librarians have not stopped filing and indexing and keeping statistics long enough to tell them. Or, can it be that we ourselves don't quite know what they need? By and large, however, even these services are only adaptations of traditional, which is to say municipal, library service - not devices consciously built with a view to attaining certain definite, clean-cut objectives. The pressing obligation which confronts us at the moment is to create a type of rural library service not in the conventional pattern, but designed to meet the specialized need of present-day rural life. This conviction arises from experiences and observations during the past three years in connection with the growth of several units of library service in the Tennessee Valley.

The program of the Tennessee Valley Authority is the planning and development of a river system and its drainage area to realize the maximum usefulness of all its natural resources in promoting the economic and social well-being of the people. This involves building dams for flood prevention and navigation, and utilizing their by-product, electricity, to

lighten the burdens of human labor; encouraging types of land use which will enrich the soil and, at the same time, by preventing soil erosion, will retard the filling of reservoirs and channels with silt; promoting an understanding of the problems of the area and stimulating such changes in ways of living and working as will result in the most effective use of these natural resources. It is an experiment in the planning of a region, conducted with the purpose of deriving information and experience which may be useful to the nation as a whole.

Three dams have been completed and four more are under construction. The Authority employs from twelve to fifteen thousand people, some of whom live in construction camp villages, while others live at their homes in the country and travel to and from their work each day. On all large construction jobs, it has been found to be good business, even if it were nothing more, to provide for employee training and recreation, and in the TVA this includes library service. In making provision for this, we have been enabled – perhaps “forced” is the more accurate word – by the nature of the TVA program and its rural setting to plan types of library service whose objectives are essentially those stated above. While these libraries are primarily agencies for increasing employee efficiency, the conditions under which they operate are such as to give them a degree of usefulness as laboratory experiments in rural library service.

In each construction center there is a camp library which has three main functions - to serve as the special library for the local training branch, to serve as a community library for employees and their families, and to function as a center for library service in the surrounding area, to such an extent as the requirements of the TVA program warrant this. These camp libraries are located in the community buildings. Ordinarily, they subscribe for about 100 magazines and newspapers and have book collections of four or five thousand titles.

The primary fact about them is that each is an integral part of a vigorous adult education program. At the present time there are adult education activities in seven areas of the valley. In a recent typical month, 133 regularly organized classes

with an attendance of 6,535 persons were conducted. The subjects studied embraced the whole range of job training and general adult education. The educational preparation of participants varied from the lower grades of elementary school to college graduation. Instructors were drawn from the ranks both of labor and of the professions and included volunteer as well as full-time trained teachers. During the same period 37 showings of educational films attracted 3,651 persons, while approximately 5,500 borrowers withdrew from the various libraries 12,875 books. Recreation, both informal and organized, and commercial films drew an aggregate attendance of a little more than 38,000.

This integration of the library with an extensive, organized adult education program calls for qualifications and duties on the part of the library staff unlike those ordinarily expected of the staff in the traditional library. The amount of book circulation is less significant than the variety of activities which are carried on either under the direct supervision or with the close cooperation of the library staff. At Pickwick Landing Dam, for example, the librarian is administratively responsible for adult programs in general – as distinguished from vocational – education, visual education, recreation, and homemaking, as well as for the library. This library, serving community and school, occupies two adjoining rooms in the community building, which houses also the classrooms for children of employees who live in the village, the auditorium-gymnasium, the commissary, lounge, post office, and barber shop.

The functions, other than the customary library services, performed in a typical month by the librarian or some member of the library staff include the planning and conduct of forums and community meetings, and conferences with school faculty members, training staff instructors, workers' committees, county and home demonstration agents, local librarians, school teachers, and other leaders in the area. The library staff helps as a matter of course, in school and adult education programs; and, in turn, both school and training staff members, as well as volunteer workers, help in the library program. It is a perfectly normal occurrence during the day to find a librarian in classroom or shop and

a teacher at the charging desk in the library. Out in the area away from the reservation, almost anyone you meet may be a librarian - whether he be a teacher, county agent, safety engineer, forester, chief clerk, saw filer, time checker, or a guard in the field office of a construction crew.

This variety of activities and personnel suggests another way in which these libraries differ from the traditional - namely, in book collections. The selection of books is made a cooperative effort wherein the specialized education and experience of training staff, school faculty, and the public is actively sought and utilized. The object of this is three-fold - first, to improve the selection of books by bringing to bear upon it the subject knowledge of technicians in the several fields; second, to keep those who participate in the task constantly awake to the printed resources available and their potential usefulness in all parts of the TVA program; and, finally, by the interchange of ideas between instructors, librarians, and book users, to integrate the library thoroughly with the life and work of the area it serves.

To the extent that this method is followed, the selection of books becomes a process of community education rather than merely a library routine. It is the practical application of a fundamental theory of democracy - that the ideas which grow out of group consideration have greater social value than those derived from solitary, individual reflection.

It has not been by premeditated policy but in response to public demand that the libraries place special emphasis on the natural sciences, the useful arts, and social and economic subjects. In proportion to other libraries of their size, they have many more technical periodicals, pamphlets, and bulletins, and they have recourse much more often to borrowing from one another and from nearby public libraries the books for which they have only occasional calls.

Conditions, not theories, are leading them away from the purchase of basic lists of the classics and standard titles to the purchase of working collections, with a very high rate of circulation turnover.

Methods of book distribution are as varied as the collections themselves and the activities of the staff. The majority of employees live in homes scattered throughout the valley, not in the construction camps themselves. Consequently, the library in the community building in the camp is chiefly a point of departure for the books, which are sent out wherever groups of employees may be reached. They go in book boxes to crews at work in reservoir clearance areas, and in book bags to community meetings. They occupy shelves in filling stations, post offices, schools, stores, and homes. They are carried in trays in the cars of family relocation workers, and of county farm and home demonstration agents.

One puzzling problem has been how to make books easily accessible to the men who live at some distance from their work at the dam and go only infrequently to the community building a mile or two away. At one of the dams a little, open-front booth fitted with shelves has been built on each bank of the river at a point which the laborers pass in going to and from their work. These booths are open as serve-self libraries, without supervision, 24 hours a day. Here it is possible for any one of a thousand workmen, at any time of the day or night, to select and charge out his book, without assistance and without red tape. Close observation of this experiment over a period of several weeks leads us to think that among these workers are many potential readers who will do a considerable amount of substantial reading when books are made accessible - as easily accessible, for example, as cigarettes - and that these unsupervised, unguided readers are fully as honest, intelligent, and conscientious as those who borrow from libraries.

The problem of trying to satisfy in efficient and economical ways the book needs of widely scattered employees has led to a variety of relationships to local, state, and national governments. It is easily to be seen that, wherever possible, it is desirable to reach employees who live at their homes rather than in the construction camp through their own communities rather than by an extension of service from the camp. Sometimes there is a local public or school library in the community; again a subscription library operated by a women's club. More often than not, it is

inconveniently located, has limited open hours, and a meager stock of books. Nevertheless, almost always someone connected with its management knows that it might and should be a much more useful instrument of education than it is.

In general, we have found that the people think of their local libraries as cultural accessories rather than as essential educational institutions. We have found too a prevalent conviction that the locality is already so deeply in debt that it cannot afford to make a library appropriation, especially since the people feel that the library has nothing vital to contribute to community welfare. And, it must be admitted that in many instances the library's service is so limited in scope that there is much to justify this opinion. **All too often, it is thought of as the private possession of a group, not as a servant of all the people.**

Where a state library extension agency exists, we have found local libraries better organized, more awake to their obligations and opportunities for community service, and readier to cooperate with others than in states where there is no central library extension office. Limited local horizons have been broadened; there is an awareness of neighboring communities as well as of their own, and of the fact that the library should be both an aid to the education of youth and an instrument of self-education in adult life.

In two counties of northeast Mississippi, we are having the experience of cooperation in the provision of library service with the WPA library project, which for more than two years has been operating in every county of the state. It is under trained state and district library supervisors, with county workers taken from the relief rolls, and with very limited funds for books. In Alcorn and Tishomingo counties, however, where considerable numbers of TVA employees live, the Mississippi state WPA organization has joined the TVA in placing several hundred books, thus effecting a very modest demonstration of county library service.

Such incidents as these seem to indicate that the mere fact of the cooperation of a national agency, whose goal is to improve

the economic and social conditions of the area, in local library movements may contribute to the improvement of rural library service to an extent far in excess of the amount of its financial participation. For example, we have found that when the idea of such cooperation is broached, the village and county governing bodies have shown an encouraging readiness to make appropriations for the improvement of the local library program in preparation for such cooperation. This increased local support makes possible longer hours of service and at least a few more books. It gives the library a new importance in the public mind as an institution obligated to serve the nation, as well as the locality.

Then, when the book shelves begin to blossom with interesting, current books, cooperatively selected and bought, which deal with the problems of farming, health, education, government, and the other social and economic features of rural life, the library begins to become a vital factor in community thought.

All this suggests that these experiences in one part of rural America may be straws in the wind which indicate some of the trends elsewhere in the nation. It suggests that the vast programs of present-day adult education which are being conducted by county farm and home demonstration agents, Smith-Hughes teachers, college and university extension services, and farmers' organizations, call for a national network of small, rural libraries, administered by highly adaptable librarians, who are trained in the techniques of adult education and are strongly gifted in the art of working with people; each library with a few thousand modern, timely books, selected by those who are to use them, with assistance from experts in rural subjects, whose emphasis is on economics and science rather than on literature, and with liberal inter-library loan facilities; and for very marked flexibility and informality in methods of book distribution.

Above all, it suggests that the times demand a library service of such breadth, depth, and coherence, as can come only from the fusion of community, state, and national efforts into a single unified program, for the attainment of national objectives of rural welfare.