



Gratia A. Countryman and Family Papers.

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LIBRARIES AND RURAL LIFE

The library of today is a great social force. Never have libraries been so much used by the common man seeking information or by the unemployed man seeking both information and entertainment and escape. Increased service at every point is the experience of all librarians. The demand is without parallel in the history of libraries, amounting in some cities to a 50% increase.

Professor Beard has pointed out that this economic crisis differs from others in that it has led men and women to serious thinking. And this leads to serious reading.

Mr. Fosdick suggests that this crisis may mark a revival of learning. If the kind of reading which is going on in libraries today is an indication, then the revival of learning is already on its way.

Not only do scholars like Mr. Fosdick and Professor Beard stress this new eagerness for knowledge as indicated in the demand upon libraries, but our big metropolitan dailies have been expressing a new interest in what is going on in libraries. The Los Angeles Times recently remarked, "It would appear from the increased and practical use of libraries in these difficult times that the public library may no longer be deemed a luxury, but a public utility."

From the Richmond Times-Dispatch we quote, "Few of us realize how important the public libraries have become. It is one of the great boons to modern civilization that books have been made available to the masses of the people."

Librarians who are on the firing line, hearing tragic tales and attempting to find the right book to fit the particular personal need, know that sociologists are right when they say that reading keeps many people sane. Mr. Frank J. Bruno, Professor of Sociology at Washington University, St. Louis, writes, "I have been very much interested in recent reports as to the phenomenal increase in the use of libraries due to unemployment. This is a fact of significant social import. The rapid increase in suicides is startling, but the reason that there are not more actual riots at present may well be due to such influences as public libraries in maintaining the morale of the unemployed."

Public men and statesmen are also commenting on the value of the library. Stuart Chase recently declared that no group of workers in the whole community life of America is more strategically located or can do more valiant service in promoting constructive leisure than librarians.

Mr. Newton Baker has expressed himself most emphatically as follows: "In times like these the services of a public library are simply indispensable if we are not to start a relentless march backward toward barbarism. Not only is the library a place of comfort and relaxation to weary and depressed people but it is the mine of knowledge necessary for the use of the citizen who is going to take an intelligent part in the discussion and determination of public affairs. If the libraries of the country were closed tomorrow the average intelligence of the citizens would recede to a point which I cannot predict."

These and thousands of other statements about the value of reading and the benefit of free books indicate the growing place of free libraries in the educational scheme of today. But not anything which can be said of their value to the city dweller but would apply equally well to the citizens in rural districts. The times are just as difficult for the farmer and probably more so. He needs just as much enlightenment on world problems and domestic affairs. He feels the same discouragement and unrest. He has leisure time and fewer opportunities for inexpensive recreation, and after all the problem for both city and country may boil down to the fruitful use

of leisure. If Mr. Baker is correct in saying that "if the libraries of the country were closed tomorrow the average intelligence of the citizen would recede" what would he say of the general situation in rural districts where there have never been opportunities for reading? Whatever libraries can contribute to the enrichment of life in cities, to the education of children and especially adults, and to the use of leisure time, ^{they} that much and more should ~~it~~ contribute to those in isolated places.

Let me quote a letter typical of many which the city librarian receives. This one comes from Northern Minnesota and many others come from Dakota and Montana: "Would you please tell me whether we may receive discarded books from the library. We live forty miles from the nearest library and so we are unable to secure books. My brother is an invalid just now and would appreciate some." Can any one doubt the pleasure which even worn out copies would bring to thousands of families like this.

At present the weakest spot in American library growth is this undeveloped field in the rural districts. We are not blind to it. We believe with all the enthusiasm we have that the equalization of opportunity for library service is the largest problem before us, and must be solved.

It is not a new problem of today but it has been much intensified by the Adult Education movement. Indeed, it would be difficult for any educational project to succeed without access to books. The most successful solution of the problem has been made through the State Library Commissions existing in most states of the Union. The State Library Commission has developed a library consciousness over as wide an area as possible. It has stimulated townspeople to establish local libraries and helped them to organize and select their books, and inspired them to the greatest usefulness possible. Probably many of Mr. Carnegie's little library buildings would be dead losses, if these State agencies had not been in existence to turn the loss to gain. But their great contribution to the rural districts was and is the Travelling Library. Little villages too small to support a local library can borrow a travelling library. Farming communities can borrow them, and so can rural schools. Study clubs can borrow package libraries on the subject they are studying, and individuals can borrow for their personal reading. This makes extension classes and study groups possible. New groups are constantly added.

Here are some recent requests to our Minnesota Library Division which illustrate concretely the various

groups which write for books:

"Dear Sirs: I represent the ____ P. T. A., a country school P. T. A. We wish to know if we could get a travelling library and what it would cost us."

Another from a school teacher:

"I am teaching in a rural school where there is almost no library. Will you please tell me what I can get from you."

Here is one from a club:

"We are a rural club of 22 members and our families and we are interested in getting one of your travelling libraries."

This particular method of getting books to small groups is about the only way one could provide them. Books are carefully selected by expert librarians and can be used over and over again in different communities. Here is a letter to pull books right off their shelves. It came in October from a far northern point:

"I understand we could get discarded books from you quite reasonably. North of here is a rich country 60 or more miles across. There are a few families scattered thru there who have no chance at school or reading matter. One family 35 miles from

the railroad has three girls starving for reading matter and all the school they get is from their mother. Could you make it possible for these girls to get books?"

You and I can scarcely know what it means to live in that sort of isolation, but we can imagine the new world that came to that family in that box of books.

And so we might quote from the correspondence of this winter to illustrate what this method of library extension is doing for rural schools for adult education and for the joy and recreation of country residents. Reaching far out beyond any place that extension work is likely to go, serving many groups who are not prepared for any formal courses, these carefully selected groups of books travel about the state to any one who applies for them.

We are inclined to believe that the travelling library system conducted by expert and sympathetic librarians will continue for many years to be the most economical and practical method of reaching rural schools and communities, especially here in the Northwest. It is a flexible method and can adapt itself to any project carried on by the University Extension or the Agricultural Department or Farmers' Institutes or Federated Clubs.

We come now to the most interesting library development of recent years, the County Library movement. It is an effort to do better and more intensive work in rural communities than can be done by the Travelling library. As its name suggests, it covers the county as its field and is supported by the county. It is successful to just the degree that it has money to function with, but its possibilities are very great. We can define it best perhaps by saying that it is a public library for a county. It works like a city library with a central collection and its system of branches, stations, school libraries, and delivery system. If it is adequately supported, it gives just as good service to this large unit as a city library does to the city.

The laws allowing the establishment of county libraries vary somewhat in the different states, but the plan is functioning to some extent in 35 states. It is most fully developed in California where a large number of counties have fully developed independent systems. In such cities as Portland, Oregon, and Cincinnati, Ohio, the city library is supported by both city and county taxes and becomes thereby a county library, serving both urban and rural groups.

In this State, which is similar to numbers of other states, the law allows county libraries to be established in one of two different ways. The County Board can levy a tax and establish an independent county library system, or the Board can make a contract with a strong town or city library as the administrative agency and levy a tax to carry the expense of distributing book service through the county.

In Hennepin County, the Commissioners have made a contract with the Minneapolis Library and have levied a mill tax to support a county system. The Minneapolis Library opens its resources to county residents. They may have a Library card and draw books directly or they may send in requests through a county branch.

The system has been developed in just the same way that our city system has been developed. There is now a branch library in every one of 21 villages or consolidates schools. Each of these occupies a pleasant reading room, has a well selected collection of books, and is directed by an experienced local librarian. Some of these branches are open every day, some of them but two or three days a week. There are also 14 stations in cross-road stores, town halls, or even in private homes. Besides these, we have placed collections in every one of the 89 rural school

buildings. So we carry on a system of branches, stations, and school libraries. Then, too, we have a delivery system. The book truck, containing 500 books on inside shelving, visits every point at least once a month, rain or shine, changing the books in the school building, carrying out new books to the branches, bringing in those no longer wanted or those that need binding. On the way about to the 124 distribution points, the truck stops at private houses to serve rural families too far from a regular branch; 285 families have regular service. We believe we are reaching, in one way or another, every rural group and nearly all rural families in this county and perhaps the fringes of the bordering counties. A large central collection has been built up; teachers come in regularly every Saturday to choose additional books for special projects, from the central collection.

For fear some one will be missed or some one will fail to get a book on time for some entertainment or speech, we have a parcel post service. Any one may telephone in from his home or from a school or branch, and the book wanted will be mailed. We are sure that the people of this county are getting just as complete a service outside of Minneapolis as within. More and more people are reading and studying. The circulation

has grown from 92,000 in 1922 to 511,000 in 1932, and the end is not yet.

Now the country folk in this county are prepared for adult education. Their tastes in reading are just as broad and just as varied as city people's, when they have access to books. It is most interesting to see these tastes express themselves, as gradually they learn the resources which the library furnishes. They can ^{on how} borrow books/to repair their cars and farm machinery or build their barns. They get books on insecticides and spraying, on soils, on raising goats and rabbits. But at the same time these farmers more than the villagers are interested in history, and government. Numbers of groups of young mothers meet to study child psychology and care of children. One group has organized to study peace questions; in another village is a local garden club. Rural P. T. A.'s and rural churches use the books for their social programs. One librarian reports that many people in her neighborhood have followed up the reading courses in the Reading with a Purpose series.

Before the depression dropped like a wet blanket upon us, the county library plan was rapidly growing through the county. In the South, eleven counties were being

used as demonstration centers. In Iowa one county was used as a demonstration experiment for one year. We wish you could listen, as we did, to the report of one mother who was in charge of a neighborhood station. She recounted the effect it had on different families, the pleasure to men, women, and children. It was a transformation of interests. They hoped it was a permanent addition to their lives, but the County Commissioners would not take over its support and so this wonderful response to books gave way to a quite heart-breaking disappointment. Nothing that I have ever heard so convinced me of the enrichment which books can give to life, especially to a poor and struggling rural community, as the tale of this librarian of a withdrawn county library.

We can only regret that more county libraries were not established before this crisis. It will be difficult for some time to induce county officials to tax themselves for library purposes,- a subject which they cannot understand and with which they often have no sympathy.

But it seems to me that libraries are the first thing to be considered by this group. Before rural schools can function there must be books; preceding all efforts with study groups or extension classes, there must be books. Books are essential and the wider their distribution

the more rapid will be self-education and the response to efforts at adult education. Not to such people as you, do we need to prove the vitality, the power, the gospel of books.