

West



Virginia

Libraries



WEST VIRGINIA LIBRARIES

Volume 8
Number 4

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE WEST VIRGINIA LIBRARY
ASSOCIATION

December
1955

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WEST VIRGINIA LIBRARIES is the official organ of the West Virginia Library Association. It is published quarterly. Contributions and other Communications should be addressed to the Editor or to the appropriate Editorial Assistant. Subscription is included with the membership dues. Annual subscription is one dollar to non-members.

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WEST VIRGINIA'S SECOND REGIONAL LIBRARY

By

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On the evening of April 21, 1954 around seventy people attended a public meeting at the county court house in Buckhannon. They had come, at the request of a local commercial association, to see what could be done about bringing rural library service to central West Virginia.

Many were strangers to each other. The Executive Secretary of the Library Commission and a consultant had been invited to discuss possible Commission aid. Two library board members from the Alpha Regional library had been asked to describe the service in their region. And among the audience were representatives from several counties.

The meeting settled few questions but it was important, for it introduced the problem of organizing a regional library and resulted in the appointment by the group of a Regional Steering Committee to begin planning a project.

Contradictory as this statement may seem, what strikes me now as the most significant feature of the venture that followed was the exceeding scarcity of the unusual. Great care was taken in the planning and in the execution. An effort was made to prepare for every emergency that might likely occur. But by and large nothing particularly surprising happened between the beginning and last August, when the County Courts of Harrison and Upshur made the two-county region a fiscal reality. This relatively calm progression should have, it seems to me, a considerable meaning for all of us who want to see more library service for our state.

A step-by-step report would probably have limited value and not a great deal of interest for most librarians. Still, certain facts seem worth mentioning for their own sake or for their significance for future organizational efforts. This account will emphasize those facts at the cost of being fragmentary.

Each new region lays groundwork in learning for the next. The Library Commission's experience with the Alpha Regional Library and the Monroe County Library enabled us to outline a recommended program with considerable assurance and helped make it possible to anticipate most of the problems that have confronted us thus far. On the other hand, familiar patterns had unfamiliar variations, and a few were entirely new.

There were interesting variations. One was the early interest shown by the Upper Monongahela Valley Association, which created the stimulus leading to the meeting mentioned earlier. Several local community organizations gave important support to the project from its conceptual period on, and a few were working on the idea even before that. The UMVA, however, introduced a new voice--that of the regional development group, with its alert and wide-ranging desire to promote benefits for the residents of its membership area.

The introductory effort in this region differed from that in the Alpha region in one very critical respect. The Alpha Regional Library was developed as a demonstration, with the Library Commission furnishing practically all the support during the demon-

stration period. Because of a budget deficiency the Commission was forced to limit its promise of assistance to the present region to bookstock, centralized technical processes services, the loan of a bookmobile, the services of a consultant, special loan facilities, and a few miscellaneous items. This assistance was of course of great value, but it was much less than the earlier region received. While it cannot be said that the Committee here faced greater problems (there were too many variables to permit such a concise comparison), to some they seemed to be taking a pretty long shot at success.

The Library Commission long ago adopted certain policies that it learned are a necessary accompaniment of any assistance to a specific area. Among the most fundamental and undeviating are those concerning local attitudes. Any rural sociologist can give abundant examples of the expert who has gone into a community and campaigned eloquently for a program, only to come out of it dismayed and perplexed by failure. Such failures can usually be traced to a naivete, which overlooks the fact that these sincere but unilateral crusades by-pass obvious democratic principles.

The Library Commission must recognize the parallel in its policies. In its relationship with individual counties it can serve but not coerce, advise and assist but not direct, interpret but not campaign. It can offer material aid, stimulation, and professional leadership; but where that ends and the actual drive to obtain library service begins, the matter inevitably becomes one between the people and their county officers.

Recognition of these facts has been reflected in the Commission's attitude during every phase of the present program. Commission representatives attended the first meeting and

subsequent meetings in this region only at the invitation of local citizens. The Commission consultant came into the region to work with the Regional Steering Committee by their invitation. His report to the Committee, based on a lengthy survey, stated Commission requirements for receiving assistance and included many suggestions and recommendations but no injunctions or demands. And although he conferred regularly with the Committee and gave some physical assistance to their efforts, he did no campaigning and approached County Courts only if the Court requested him to.

The survey mentioned in the preceding paragraph was an interesting elaboration on previous Commission practice. A large amount of the study and planning required in earlier programs occupied an integral place in the organizational period. Here, however, the immediate need to provide the Committee with concrete recommendations for a program to offer to the County Courts made an exhaustive survey the essential first step.

The survey was thorough. Its purpose was to get a reasonable amount of information on every aspect of community life that might perceptibly affect the chances of developing a successful rural library service and to gather detailed data upon which to base a recommended program. This included an analysis of such factors as population distribution, educational level, existing library service, recreational resources, community organizations, transportation and communication facilities, trading patterns, living conditions, economic support, and county finances. Information was collected from printed materials, ranging from the U.S. Census to local bus schedules, and from more than one hundred personal interviews. To get a first-hand knowledge of the communities, countryside, and road conditions, the consultant traveled about