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# 590: Local Notes -- Developing Libraries which are Sustainable, Engaged and Vibrant

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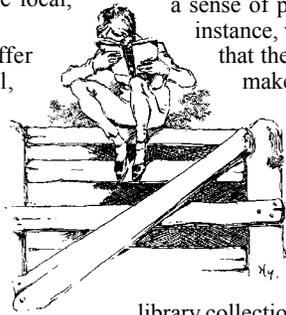
# 590: Local Notes — Developing Libraries which are Sustainable, Engaged and Vibrant

by **Steve McKinzie** (Library Director, Corriher-Linn-Black Library, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144; Phone: 704-637-4449) <smckinzi@catawba.edu>

**Charles Dickens** may have nailed it when he whimsically summed up all of the greatness and squalor of the 18th century as simply the best of times and the worst of times.<sup>1</sup> For librarians wading into the early months of the new millennium's second decade, **Dickens's** words have a hauntingly prophetic ring. We live in what may well be the greatest time for the library profession and yet possibly its most dangerous. On the one hand, like **Dickens's** 18th century, libraries ride on the crest of a wave of improvements. We have excellent facilities, vast print holdings, better trained librarians and an entire array of online sources and databases. On the other, librarians collectively face greater doubts about themselves and their library's place in the academic enterprise than ever before. The extraordinary versatility of the Web and **Google's** massive monographic digitization projects leave many of us wondering if there is any real future for traditional college and university libraries — at least as we have known them in the past.

Now, I have no pat answers or easy solutions to this growing *angst* among librarians. (Who knows? Perhaps these are the worst of times.) I do, however, have a recommendation — a plan of action, a way of coping with whatever frustrations or fears we may be facing. I suggest we return to our roots, to our core values, to the things that have characterized libraries from time out of mind. As a model for how we may engage in this restoration, I offer an unlikely source of inspiration for libraries: the sustainable agricultural movement.<sup>2</sup> Whatever may be your particular take on the back-to-basics movement among local food producers and consumers, they have an approach worth imitating for us in the library world. If we are to mimic the chief characteristics of this alternative, we should be about creating libraries that are local, vibrant, and engaged.

What would this mean? I offer three possibilities. First of all, like the sustainable agricultural movement which fosters open-air farmers' markets<sup>3</sup> and innovative food coops, (techniques designed to build networks and a customer base), we should take seriously our core constituents, our base — the students, faculty, and community members who stand to benefit



the most from our services. This first step is simple. Beef up your information literacy programs, energize your departmental liaison relations, and explore high-tech social networking or low-tech P.R. to get the word out about what the library has to offer. Of course, in a great many places, librarians and their staff are masters at these kinds of efforts, so it is less a matter of learning new techniques as it is a matter of keeping at what you have likely been doing all along.

Secondly, emphasize your local collections — the things that your library provides that your patrons can get their hands on: archives, monographic holdings, proprietary databases, and journals in whatever formats. Like the sustainable agricultural movement that values regional produce, things locally grown and locally sold, we should champion the value of our own readily accessible materials. Of course, any given library's collection of books likely mirrors another library's holdings. What grows at one farm likely grows at another. But all of this (both in agriculture and information sources) reflects strengths and benefits rather than drawbacks or downsides. These sorts of duplications illustrate what **Keith Engwall** and others have called a built in "distributive redundancy."<sup>4</sup> In the case of libraries, these varied, local collections offset the drawbacks of a massive googlization of the world's holdings and the dangers of those holdings being consolidated in only few hands. In the case of agriculture, local, small scale, organic producers counter the ill effects of the massive production of food by large agricultural corporations. For both libraries and agriculture, keeping things local means diversity, creativity, and greater sustainability over the long whole.

Thirdly, I believe we need to seek a balance, a sense of perspective. The futurists, for instance, who claim that print is dead or that the whole world is going digital, make the same mistake that the agricultural corporations make when they claim that massive, mechanized food production will always give us healthier and cheaper food. A more balanced perspective would mean that we value both the Web and traditional library collections, just as we cherish the qual-

ity of local produce and the convenience of the nearby supermarket.

Personally, I still frequent stores to buy grapes from Chile and bananas from Ecuador. It is usually the fastest and best way to get them. I also rely on the Web almost exclusively for a whole host of information needs. It is usually the quickest means for finding out what I need to know. Neither approach, however, causes me to give up supporting local organic farms or forsaking the regional academic library. In either scenario, seemingly opposite options have their place. Both alternatives have their purpose.

All of this is why for those of us who work in academic libraries, a return to basics, a re-visitation of core values, may be, in the final analysis, the surest anecdote to that nagging sense of *angst* that occasionally overtakes us. We should consider taking our cue from the sustainable agricultural movement. We should cherish our patrons, embrace the strengths of our collections, and maintain a sense of balance. Doing so would empower us to weather these best of times and worst of times. It would also enable us to create and maintain libraries that are local, sustainable, and vibrant. 🌱

## Endnotes

1. **Charles Dickens**, *Tale of Two Cities*. Philadelphia: *Running Press*, 1999, p. 1.
2. The sustainable agricultural movement defies easy definition, but it generally involves some form of environmental stewardship, small-scale production, and local farming communities. **Michael Pollan's** best-selling *Omnivore's Dilemma* provides a classic introduction to the movement.
3. A colleague of mine, **Valrie Davis**, Outreach Librarian for Agricultural Sciences at the **University of Florida**, points out that farmers' markets have an additional educational role. Such venues enable farmers to connect with consumers by a one-on-one assistance with food at the point of interest. She notes that her cheese provider, for instance, talks about his goats in a way that is provocative and interesting — making her want to support his profession. Librarians, she contends, do much the same thing when they engage their users about information sources.
4. **Keith Engwall**, comments on the list-serv Collib-I. Friday, April 23, 2010 2:07 PM.

## Rumors from page 12

will also be coming to **Charleston** while she is on maternity leave. She says that will give her husband time alone with the new daughter!

And speaking more of babies, my husband and I visited our new granddaughter, **Georgia Helen**, in Dallas Texas last month. A good time was had by all! And, by the way, she continues to be a genius! (see *ATG* v.22#2, p. 85)

Heard that **Steve McKinzie** <smckinzi@catawba.edu> is a **gramps** many times over

and is doing lots of driving to go see the new ones. From Pennsylvania, daughter-in-law, **Bria**, gave birth to a baby girl, **Lillie Mae McKinzie**, in Carlisle, PA on Easter, April 4th, at 10:40 PM (or thereabouts). (6lbs. 15oz.) Not long afterwards, daughter, **Jane**, gave birth

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