



HISTORY OF THE RAMAPO CATSKILL LIBRARY SYSTEM

It was after passage of the legislation of 1958 permitting the formation of cooperative library systems that the libraries now comprising the Ramapo Catskill Library System realized an ambition dating back to 1948 when regional libraries for New York State were under discussion. On November 17, 1959, 25 public libraries in Orange, Rockland, Sullivan and Ulster Counties voted to establish a cooperative library system, designating the Newburgh Free Library, which had the largest nonfiction collection, as the Central Reference Library.¹

A system library board was elected consisting of three members from each county in which a majority of the libraries voted to participate, one member from Ulster County where about a third of the libraries were joining, and one member each from the cities of Middletown and Newburgh.²

The New York State Board of Regents granted the system a provisional charter, December 18, 1959. The proposed area to be served was 2,506.6 square miles with a population of 300,073. Today, the population served has grown to 675,513, with 322,892 residing in Orange County, exceeding Rockland County for the first time. With the addition of 22 more libraries, the total membership is now 47. On June 25, 1965, the Board of Regents granted Ramapo Catskill Library System a permanent charter.³

Elena Horton, with a staff of seven, began operation in temporary headquarters on West Main Street, Middletown while the permanent building at 619 North Street (now Route 17M), Middletown was being readied for occupancy. In September the system moved to the present headquarters, which were rented until December 1961 when the trustees purchased the building.⁴

In 1965, Eleanor Harris was appointed Director, followed by Robert E. Thomas in 1969. The 1960s saw the realization of a truly cooperative system with the development of the union catalog of book holdings and the delivery system put in place. This enabled libraries to exchange materials easily and effectively, creating the core services of the system. Other services offered were: rotating collections that went from library to library, establishing a non-fiction collection for central reference at Newburgh Free Library, initiating two \$200 book grants per year, consulting services and offering supplies. In addition, book collections for adults and children, AV materials and workshops for reference services were available.

During the 1970s with Alfred L. Freund as Director, RCLS led the State in automation by providing automated MARC records for the union catalog of book holdings. The System started coordinated book ordering for member libraries. The Sullivan County Bookmobile, begun in the early 1960s, was discontinued by the end of the 1970s due to lack of operational funding. Two communities, which had been very active bookmobile stops, organized their own libraries as reading centers during the next decade. RCLS'

Outreach Program to the print disabled population—Radio Vision, the radio reading service for the blind and physically handicapped—went on the air October 1, 1979. With the purchase of an offset press, the RCLS Print Shop was established.

The 1980s saw the appointment of Richard V. Anglin as Director in 1987, the first nine member libraries committed to automation and the creation of ANSER (Automated Network SERvices), while all member libraries received computers with modems and printers. RCLS, along with the other 21 systems in the state, contended with level state funding and realized a reduction in staff. During 1984 the System's headquarters building was completely renovated to add and restructure space.

The 1990s have seen the expansion of automation to include all 48 member libraries. With the creation of an RCLS Web site came the ability to access the RCLS database of member libraries' holdings including the electronic means to request library materials from home. Commercial periodical databases, creation of KidsClick! and LibraryLand (both nationally cited) and other library maintained Web resources have expanded the use of the RCLS homepage—www.rcls.org. Coordinated book ordering for member libraries, a once popular and economical service, gave way to individual libraries ordering electronically. Meeting rooms were refurbished and additional property was purchased for parking and storage. The statewide Summer Reading Program became a model for system cooperation with member libraries.

The challenge for RCLS is to continue to provide new electronic services and partner with our members to improve delivery and training while members share physical materials and more with the public.

Year 2000 has been another milestone with the consolidation of three libraries into one, Delaware Free Library, Jeffersonville Public Library, and Tusten-Cochecton Library merging to become the Western Sullivan Public Library on July 1. In addition, Fallsburg changed from a reading center to a school district public library. Fourteen-year veteran System Director Richard V. Anglin retired in July and the Board of Trustees chose Robert Hubsher to lead RCLS into the 21st Century

An updated Plan of Service, completed in 1998, is currently under revision. As we enter the new century, we are energized by our member libraries, the Central Reference Library, and our other major subject resource libraries as they build library collections for their communities. Libraries will continue to reach out to their constituents through the Web and through partnerships with other community agencies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

¹Mrs. Eleanor C. Harris, Director and Sumner F. White, Assistant Director. A Profile... Ramapo Catskill Library System. Reprint from *The Bookmark*, 1963 – 66. State Ed Department, April 1996.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.