
Volume 13
Number 3
*Rural Libraries: The Strength of Community (Fall
2007)*

July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Rounds, M. (2014). Alsea Community Library: Serving a Rural Population From Within a Larger System. *OLA Quarterly*, 13(3), 3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1166>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Alsea Community Library:

Serving a Rural Population From Within a Larger System

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Alsea is a tiny unincorporated town in a remote corner of Benton County and is the service area hub for folks living up to 20 miles in any direction. Traveling east to Corvallis through the hairpin curves of the Coast Range takes 45 minutes when it's not foggy or icy on the pass near Mary's Peak. Alsea is extremely fortunate to have a thriving town library—a branch of the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library.



A local library is a place that encourages community identity and awareness, catalyzes local action, and can be a forum for ideas promoting self-sufficiency and sustainability both for individuals and for the village.

Since the 1960s the Corvallis Library has provided at least minimal outreach to several Benton County locations. First Alsea had a rotating collection of self-check-out books on a shelf in a local store, then we graduated to Book Wagon service, then upgraded to a real library in 1975, using an old bank building owned by Alsea School District. Over the next 30 years interaction between Corvallis and Alsea Libraries exploded. A Benton County Library District was created which formalized the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library funding partnership. At the same time, technology blossomed, increasing communication and information delivery. No longer was the only connection with the “Big Library” a weekly volunteer trip to Corvallis by the Alsea clerk toting one small box of books

and clutching a handful of written requests from patrons. Fax machines, computers, and online catalogs unveiled the excellent collection of the Corvallis-Benton County main library to Alsea patrons—and they fell upon it with relish.

Three courier trips a week in a large van now shuttle materials between Monroe, Philomath, Corvallis, and Alsea's beautiful two year old facility built and owned by a local Alsea nonprofit. Rural patrons get huge returns from the County Library District taxes they pay. For the price of approximately four hardback books or two tanks of gas per year, taxpayers have access to computers, printers, wireless Internet, reference assistance, and thousands of books plus audio and visual materials—without going over the mountain to get them. Our new facility has space for cultural events and library programs held in each rural branch.

The first time I worked as a substitute for Alsea Library's sole elderly clerk, she told me, “Now, we can't hang our shingle out, but what we're really here for is to listen to people's problems.” I laughed. Then. Now I understand how important a community library is for providing a safe, non-judgmental space where people can meet, discuss those problems, which often are community-wide problems, and find the tools to move toward solutions. A local library is a place that encourages community identity and awareness, catalyzes local action, and can be a forum for ideas promoting self-sufficiency and sustainability both for individuals and for the village. The asset of shared resources from a larger system allows Alsea to have a library with outstanding access to tools that bring our community together for entertainment, information, and problem-solving. We couldn't do it alone. 

