

LIBRARIES SOUTHWEST, INC.

What is this organization called Libraries Southwest? Are the rumors about it true? What are they up to over there in the southwest corner of the state?

The beginnings of Libraries Southwest, Inc. were innocuous enough. Who would have ever thought that this creation (some call it a monster) would evolve from an innocent meeting of five parish librarians?

It all began a number of years ago when the librarians of Allen, Beauregard, Cameron and Jeff Davis parishes were guest speakers at the Calcasieu parish branch manager's meeting. At lunch following the meeting we did what all librarians do when two or more are gathered together, we talked about our libraries - our successes and failures, and more important, our frustrations and irritations, sharing with kindred souls who had been there and knew exactly what we were talking about. We enjoyed our lunch/gripe session so much that we decided then and there that we needed to do this more often. Quarterly meetings on a mutually convenient day of the month were agreed on with the location to rotate among the five parishes. Thus, with this decision, the shadow of what was to come crept into our midst.

For the next year or two, the six of us traveled around from parish to parish visiting with each other and seeing how the others lived. (Howard Coy, the Chevy Chase of Vernon Parish, had been gathered into our fold).

For these meetings there were only 2 rules which even today remain ironclad and enforced with a rigidity that makes Chairman Mao look like a laid back guy.

Rule #1 - our meetings are to be informal, unorganized and with no agenda.

I myself found out just how rigidly this rule is enforced when I foolishly showed up at a meeting with a To Do List written in pencil on a p-slip. I escaped permanent banishment only by pleading for forgiveness and promising to never, never, never do it again. It was not exoneration; it was strictly a pardon. (Actually, I think the only reason I escaped exile was because I, as treasurer of the organization, had possession of the checkbook and was the only one who knew in which bank the association's coffers are kept.)

And Rule #2? Rule #2 is - there are no other rules.

Rule #2 has been applied with such happy abandon that some critical outsiders have been known to brand us as unconventional, unpredictable, nee out-of-control even. Jealousy, pure jealousy!

In addition to meeting quarterly, we six were also responsible for planning the yearly trustees function. This annual gathering of southwest trustees for dinner and a guest speaker had been going on long before our tenure. Responsibility for the event rotated among the parishes more or less alphabetically depending upon our vague memory of whose time it was.

Some dissatisfaction with this meeting began to be expressed by some trustees. Some felt it was too much a "social" and gave the impression of cavalier expenditure of taxpayers dollars. The legality of such was never questioned; just the impression of injudicious spending of public funds was enough.

Aware of these rumblings of discontent, we did what all good librarians do in such a circumstance - we conducted a survey.

Survey results were very conclusive!

a. 1/3 wanted morning meetings; 1/3 luncheon; 1/3 evening.

b. 1/2 wanted quality programs that educated; 1/2 felt that the real trustee education came from talking with other trustees from other parishes in a relaxed, social setting.

c. Spring, Fall, Summer and Winter were all picked as the best time to meet.

d. However, all agreed that the annual regional trustee meeting was a worthwhile activity and should be continued.

A major problem in planning these trustees meetings (other than remembering whose time it was to serve as host) was the limited resources with which to work. Programs were limited to speakers within driving distance who were willing to figuratively "sing for their supper." The host parish picked up the tab for the guest speaker's dinner since the regional group had no funds. While the speakers who did come were excellent, they were in short supply, and invitations to address the Southwest Trustees, yet another time, grew tiresome, I'm sure.

At the next parish librarians' meeting, one among us

(whose identity has been lost to memory and the culprit has yet to confess) suggested that we formalize the regional trustees group by forming a regional association to which each library could pay dues, thus creating a treasury with which to fund future trustee education programs. Of course, this association would have to be incorporated to keep such dues legal and keep us out of the poky. And in order to incorporate, we would have to have some articles of incorporation, by-laws, a board of directors, even (gasp) annual membership meetings; all those ticky details required by state law and legislative auditors.

In the flush of our own creativity, we rashly agreed that this was a capital idea. Better yet, why limit it to trustees? Why not have a regional library association open to all -libraries, trustees, librarians, staff, friends, anyone interested in libraries (or in discount fees for Library Southwest workshops)?

Assignments were given and soon articles, by-laws, rules and regs were duly formulated.

Within these articles, laws, rules and regs were hidden the tentacles of bureaucracy which have permanently wrapped around our frivolities and damped our naivete, if not our enthusiasm.

Properly sobered, we are now ever vigil, fighting off all attempts to further formalize and standardize Libraries Southwest so we don't drown in red tape and subcommittees.

Once Libraries Southwest became a reality and began to sponsor or co-sponsor various library activities, membership grew to include area academic librarians, school librarians and others. The Calcasieu Parish Librarian's Association (a rather loose knit organization itself) voted to dissolve into Libraries Southwest and to transfer the treasury of over \$100 as a donation.

So, what is Libraries Southwest, Incorporated today?

It is a legally constituted non-profit corporation, whose purpose is to promote libraries and library issues. You have a copy of the Articles and By-Laws that explain its structure and organizations if you are interested in the details.

It is supported by the nominal dues of the 100 plus or minus individual members and the rather hefty dues of the institutional members.

It is governed by an elected 6 member Board composed of 2 members from public libraries, 2 trustees and 2 from academic and school libraries.

It is not the 6 southwest parish libraries. Although we may discuss Libraries Southwest business at our quarterly/by-monthly meetings, we are not Libraries Southwest, and must constantly remind others and ourselves of this.

Since formation, the activities of Libraries Southwest have multiplied.

A trustee function is held annually varying in format, content and seriousness. To date this has included a luncheon with the Lt. Governor, an all-day workshop on the personal and corporate liability of trustees, and an evening dinner with book review by Minnie Lou Lynch.

With Calcasieu Parish, Libraries Southwest co-sponsors an all-day staff workshop designed to appeal to both professional and non-professional staff.

The first program was on Young Adults and featured two YA authors and a super good storyteller.

The second was on building an effective team and involved identifying personality types (including your own) and learning how to work with other types.

The 1990 workshop will have 3 concurrent programs - one on services to children with Dr. Joy Lowe; one on basic legal references and resources for public libraries, and a third to be planned.

Because school libraries often cannot get release time to attend workshops during the school year, Libraries Southwest sponsors a summer workshop designed to appeal to school librarians as well as others.

The first was a grant writing workshop with speakers from the LA Division of the Arts, LA Endowment for the Humanities, the Calcasieu Arts and Humanities Council and a professional grant writer.

This summer, the one-day DOS workshop was so popular that it turned into two days for beginning DOS and one day for advanced DOS. (You see why some wags call Libraries Southwest a monster).

Libraries Southwest also sponsors an annual author's dinner.

Designed as a fund raiser and promoted among the general public, it has grown steadily in the three years it's been held, but it hasn't become a money-maker yet, although this year it did break even.

Authors have included John McGinnis, Shirley Ann Grau and

Christine Word, author of Ghosts Along the Bayous.

Other services of Libraries Southwest include:

1. a reciprocal borrowers agreement among the six parish libraries
2. a quarterly (more or less) newsletter
3. a union list of periodicals
4. and a proposed grant for FAX machines for all public library branches, academic libraries, and high school libraries in the 6 parish area.

Now let's talk reality. How does it really work?

The reality is - the 6 southwest parish libraries^{on} do most of the work.

We are the most flexible, have the secretarial and other resources available, get together frequently and have definite ideas on the needs of both staff and trustees.

Although the Board of Directors adopts the annual budget, we plan the yearly programs and prepare a proposed budget for them.

We do all the work involved in conducting a program, dividing the work among us and involving our staffs as needed.

Of course, our reaction to a loss of control should leadership arise in other quarters is yet to be determined.

And I won't mislead you, it is work to keep this association going. Just setting up and coordinating the DOS workshops took days of work for the Calcasieu staff member in charge. Howard spends hours on writing and distributing the newsletters. And being in charge of registration for anything is no piece of cake, as Ada can tell you.

We decided it's best to have an appointed Treasurer, who happens to be me, so the records (and funds) stay in one place from year to year.

I keep a set of books for the association's funds, with documentation for all receipts and disbursements. Although we have not been audited or had an audit done, the financial records are kept in accordance with generally accepted accounting procedures so that we won't get into trouble down the line.

We do not yet have a 501 c 3 designation, although we have the form and will apply one of these days when someone gets the time.

In the meantime, if and when we get grants, one of the parish libraries can serve as fiscal agent for the administration of the funds.

However, we have found out that in paying for workshop speakers we are now obligated to issue a 1099 tax form to each as well as to the feds. And to do this, we'll have to get a federal employer I.D. number from Internal Revenue. The IRS office assures me this is not difficult and have sent the appropriate forms, but I confess that I have filed these away in my To Do file to tackle another day. (See what I mean about creeping bureaucracy; it's insidious!)

The benefits include:

The quality and quantity of programming that is local and therefore available to a greater portion of our staff. Many of these workshops could not be sponsored by any one library alone.

The interaction, cooperation and camaraderie among all types of librarians, not just public librarians. We have never had a formal, multi-type system in this area and therefore have had no other opportunity for interaction.

And as for the liabilities . . .

Someone, or ones, have to work to keep it going. And as with most organizations, it is a dedicated few who do most of the work even if they don't directly benefit.

Second, the more it grows, the more formal and organized it becomes. I think this is an infallible law of nature to which you must be reconciled.

Now, for the advice. Ada, Cheryl, Howard, Lily and Trudy join me in urging you as parish librarians to get together as a region if you are not already doing so.

Forget about incorporating, at least for a while. And even then, think long and hard before committing.

Just visit without an agenda, without a formal program.

Consider this your support group, your network, group therapy.

The benefits are tremendous!