

BOOKMOBILE SERVICE REEXAMINED

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Library literature in the past few years has reflected a negative attitude towards bookmobile service on a national level. It appears that the gasoline issue has generated wide-ranging soul-searching as to the viability of such service. However, it is my observation that the gasoline crisis, first its nonavailability and then its rising cost, incited "doubters" to become full-blown critics of a specialized library service which was never fully acceptable to the profession. One is almost tempted to say that the gasoline crisis was a welcome tool to justify long-term reservations about the value of the service. Some of the concerns were, and continue to be, justifiable; a significant number of persons involved in bookmobile service underrated the potential of the service, compromised its quality, and unwittingly assisted the prophetic statements of its demise to come true.

The Rural Scene

It is useful to study the phenomenon of "rurality" as a way to understand the structure of bookmobile service in Ohio because this is the setting in which the service has had its greatest use and success. The publication of the journal, RURAL LIBRARIES, has provided much useful information for this study; several articles in the first issue, Volume I, Number

1, Winter 1980, provided social, political, and educational insights into the rural community. For example, the suggestions for serious community analysis and user statistics in the Curran and Barron article are pertinent for most rural areas; these authors observed that rural residents respond to personalized service and are wary of institutions. This finding corroborates the intuition of most bookmobile staffs. Other authors cited the important role public libraries should play in fulfilling information needs of rural citizens; I believe well-designed bookmobile service can enhance this role. Hershey, Heasley and Norris direct rural librarians toward professionalism in the social context. Lois Albrecht's comments on adult learning correlate with some of the observations bookmobile staff have been making for years regarding the educational potential of bookmobile service.

These references to articles in the first issue of RURAL LIBRARIES are relevant to this discussion because the bookmobile is the library for many of the rural clients served by the State Library of Ohio. Either the bookmobile will provide these services or the needs will not be met.

The Ohio State Library Bookmobile Service

As part of the soul-searching activity in Ohio, the State Library examined its extensive bookmobile program during 1980-81. The State Library was the major provider of bookmobile service in the state, second in circulation to only one metropolitan school system. The analysis included total bookmobile service throughout Ohio.

For twenty years the State Library has provided bookmobile service to portions of twenty counties by means of contract agreements, a program

which continues to be popular. In 1980, 597,559 books were circulated from four headquarter offices located strategically in four rural areas of the state where no other source of library service is available. To deliver this product, 113,000 miles were driven to 309 communities and 49 schools; 150,000 people used the service during 1980; 73,485 information questions were asked of staff; full interlibrary loan and reserve services were provided through OCLC and local systems. This service was provided in 1980 at a cost of \$.84 per circulation. We do not have figures for other bookmobile programs, but the cost per circulation for all materials in Ohio was \$1.59 in 1980, calculated broadly on total budgets of public libraries divided into total circulation. This admittedly is a flawed method of comparison but has at least minimal relevance.

Other Ohio Bookmobile Service

Bookmobile service in other library systems in Ohio also shows continued strength. Based on comments/discussions among librarians in Ohio and nationally, analysis was expected to show significant decrease but relatively little change was found. Only eleven rural libraries have dropped bookmobile service since 1973. Metropolitan libraries changed focus, and schools experienced a significant reduction in bookmobile service. Books-by-mail was introduced into a number of service areas. The Ohio Valley Area Libraries (OVAL), the state's newest regional system, adopted both bookmobile service and mail-a-book service as a two-pronged outreach effort. Forty-eight public libraries in forty-four counties in addition to the State Library and OVAL operate bookmobiles. These vary greatly in size. Twenty-one programs

circulate 90,000 to 600,000 volumes per year; twenty operate at a 30,000 to 80,000 rate; five circulate 17,000 to 20,000. School service as noted above is still at a significant if sometimes reduced level in thirty-six libraries. The degree of commitment to school service varies from lows of 25% to highs of 90% of the total program. Ten libraries serve only local communities. The number of vehicles has gone from 83 to 73, and the number of stop locations from 2,901 to 2,701. In 1980, 4,854,000 books were circulated from Ohio bookmobiles as compared with over 6,000,000 in 1973.

The eleven libraries which ceased bookmobile service cite various replacement service programs. Three chose to replace bookmobiles by mail-a-book. One, a metropolitan county, opened mini-branches and an outreach service. Two others facing fiscal crises had no alternative but to eliminate successful bookmobile programs. In two cases costly repairs combined with tight finances and reduced usage led to cancellation of service. In four cases no system for cheaper or reduced service was available. In three other cases overtures have been made to the State Library so the decision to end bookmobile service might be reversed in the future.

In metropolitan counties, the nature of bookmobile service changed: reduction in general bookmobile service to concentrate on special service to targeted communities, elimination of schools, and more strict criteria for stops were typical. In 1975, OVAL took over administration of a four-county State Library Program; today it serves five counties. Some serious consideration was given to eliminating bookmobile service in favor of mail-a-book, but a comprehensive survey and analysis by staff indicated that such a plan not be

implemented. Although still facing financial problems, OVAL remains committed to bookmobile service.

School Service

Today two hundred fifteen fewer schools receive bookmobile service than in 1973, mostly in metropolitan areas. The issue of school bookmobile service in Ohio is volatile. An Ohio Supreme Court ruling requires that public schools pay for public library bookmobile service on a cost basis. This ruling has not been universally followed as some schools could not afford the cost of bookmobile visits and others opted for no service.

Books By Mail

Books-by-mail library service has grown in Ohio as it has nationally. OVAL is the nation's largest such program. As noted above, two rural libraries which are members of OVAL have replaced bookmobile service with mail service. Only one library chose it in place of the bookmobile as a management decision, contrary to the expectations of some. The two services have proved compatible and serve different people for different purposes within the same system.

Summary

It should be clear from the above comments that the status of bookmobile service in Ohio is healthy. Commitments persist even while service statistics in some cases are down, and some libraries have discontinued the service. Comments from authors in RURAL LIBRARIES and LIBRARY TRENDS (Spring 1980) tend not only to reinforce convictions and intuitions of bookmobile

staff about the nature and needs of rural people, but also to suggest that even more work needs to be done in meeting the recreational and informational needs of rural residents through bookmobile programming.

To address the latter need, one State Library of Ohio bookmobile unit will seek to reach non-users by expanding the concept of bookmobile routing. Some "roving" between currently active stops will be designed to ferret out reluctant residents. When located, these residents will be offered the same full services available at local libraries. In this way, we expect to lower the percentage of persons who choose not to test bookmobile service. The logic is simple: up to 90% of the residents of some communities are rejecting institutional libraries; only a small percent choose bookmobiles; we will test whether a mix of the two types of service might have some positive effect. This test points to one of the unanswered questions above, i.e., why library service is rejected by people without physical barriers to that service and why some choose the bookmobile despite barriers.