

## **Pennsylvania Bookmobile Survey**

By Liam Kennedy

It is possible, I suppose, that there are as many opinions about the roles bookmobiles play in the dissemination of information as there are bookmobiles. Additionally, there are many, even some among the ranks of professional librarians, that question the value of bookmobile services. One thing is certain, however, that bookmobiles reach individuals that otherwise would not have the access that many library mission statements claim to provide. Surely many patrons not as limited as others take advantage of the convenience offered by bookmobiles when they could almost as easily use established "permanent" sites of the library. This use of the bookmobile should in no way diminish the usefulness or devalue the service as a whole. As this survey and many others before it have demonstrated, bookmobiles reach certain segments of the population that otherwise would largely go without books or similar sources of information. In this circumstance the question is not the relative value of the services provided, but whether service to some potential customers will be provided at all.

This former statement is largely idealistic, for it fails to weigh the many different factors that must be considered when the crucial decisions to deliver library services are made. For some library administrators a powerfully influential factor affecting bookmobile services is the financial state of affairs.

At these times the neck of the bookmobile sometimes stretches a little further across the proverbial chopping block than other programs. Still other administrators recognize the inherent value of bookmobiles and may go to lengths to protect them. It is surely no easy task to characterize the status of bookmobiles nationwide. Perhaps librarians would have greater success if nationwide surveys and studies were avoided altogether and regional and/state surveys received their focus. Several things that can safely be said about bookmobiles nationwide are that they serve the young alongside the elderly, the challenged right beside the fully able, and this is done so in both rural and urban settings as well as every place in between. Notably, it is quite possible that there may be no group of library customers more devoted to the services of libraries than those that frequent the bookmobile.

The nation has Mary Lemist Titcomb to thank for introducing the concept of bookmobiles to U.S. libraries. Borrowing on an idea practiced by the English and Australians, Titcomb, a New Englander, conspired with wagon builders to create the forerunner of the large trucks, vans, and buses that deliver books to library customers today. She tested this idea in Washington County, Maryland, in 1905 where she had moved four years earlier to open the county's public library.

After a trial period of sorts, wherein Titcomb's book wagon distributed over 1,000 volumes over 6 months, she deemed the effort a success. From there bookmobile programs spread slowly throughout the country until the 1970's when the trend turned away from bookmobiles.

### **Bookmobiles in America**

Priceless! Precious! Indispensable! Superb! These are all adjectives used to describe bookmobiles in Pennsylvania. Yes, of course they are the selected comments of individuals recently surveyed to gauge the present state of bookmobile users in the Keystone state. During the month of April 1997 twenty-three bookmobile programs throughout Pennsylvania received 100 surveys each to be distributed to bookmobile users. The survey, sponsored by Clarion's Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, was designed to better determine who it is that uses the bookmobiles of Pennsylvania.

### **Average Bookmobile User**

The average adult bookmobile users in Pennsylvania are females fifty years of age. They use the bookmobile to borrow material for themselves. Slightly more than one-third request specific materials for use at a later date.

One-third is likely to bring children along to partake of the bookmobile programs or borrow books and /or other materials. For more than one-third of these patrons the bookmobile is their library of choice.

Nearly three of five bookmobile users finds the bookmobile to be a good source for general knowledge. Overwhelmingly, though, it is a source of pleasure and relaxation. Nine in ten users indicated that is why they frequent the bookmobile. With testimony like that, the power of the written word and value of the bookmobile become self-evident. Roughly one of every eight users visits the bookmobile to gain knowledge for their work or career, or meet some educational requirement. Additionally, one in ten finds something seemingly intangible about bookmobile services; they visit for spiritual reasons.

What do these patrons do for a living you ask? Good question! This survey was not specific enough to precisely determine source of income, but occupations were drawn from those surveyed. One in five claimed to be some sort of educator, mostly teachers or teacher's assistants. Another fifth is retired. Nearly one-third described themselves as housewives or homemakers. An additional third or more cover the employment spectrum from labor to clerical, and industrial to professional. Clearly the bookmobile attracts and reaches many different people across the social sphere.

As many have determined before, the bookmobile has a largely positive impact on its constituency. It has made life better for two thirds of those who use it. And well over one-third feel it has improved their children's learning and provided opportunities they otherwise would not have had. That's the bookmobile—opportunity maker! (Interestingly, though, one in twenty indicated that it had little effect on them. Something convinced them to stop what they were doing and climb those few small steps.

How far from the bookmobile stop do most users live? More than four out of every five users lives three miles or closer to their stop. Furthermore, one of every additional ten users lives within five miles of their stop. Nine of every ten bookmobile users lives within five miles of their bookmobile stop.

Since these users access the bookmobile, many others believe that they do not use the "town" library, or they live too far away from the library to use it. Slightly more than half of all bookmobile users indicated that they have used the "town" library to obtain books and/or other materials or other services within the last year. Additionally, two of three users lives within 10 miles of the library, yet they still use the bookmobile.

The constant advance of technology, particularly in the field of computers and information, is highly relevant to bookmobiles and their users.

In Pennsylvania, slightly more than one in five users acknowledged having a computer and modem at home that they used to find information online. Nearly three out of every four indicated they had no online capability at home. This latter is definitely decreasing. Perhaps this is a strong indicator of one direction bookmobiles should be heading, or at least making plans to do so.

One time honored method of placing a literal or monetary value on bookmobile services is to ask users to gauge the worth of the services

received. Accordingly, Pennsylvania's users consider bookmobiles to be rather valuable. Just about two of every three users felt the services received from the bookmobile during their most recent visit was worth \$20.00 or more. Another third valued these services at between \$5.00 and \$20.00. Clearly, bookmobiles are an important service to Pennsylvanians.

### **Problems Encountered—Problems to Watch For**

Naturally, there is a host of things to be aware of when creating, distributing, and analyzing a survey. Following are a few examples of problems encountered during the process this survey. Hopefully they will provide a better understanding of the process, the intent of the survey, and results received.

A great deal of time can easily be spent writing or drawing up a survey. It seems to a degree that there must be a correlation between time spent creating and the results drawn. Unfortunately, there are many other factors involved, and the amount of time spent creating a survey really has little effect on the results. This is not to say that sincere thought and effort are not required. They are necessary.

The point here is that one can easily fall into a trap of second, triple, and quadruple guessing themselves on the wording of survey questions. For instance, Question 5 reads "How far do you live from the bookmobile stop?". It seemed that this was good, clear question. No problems. As things turn out, there were more than a few respondents that used the bookmobile when it came to their place of work, but answered with the distance from their residence. This is by no means an insurmountable obstacle, but it can prove time consuming and frustrating to the researcher.

In an effort to identify the truth and capture the real flavor of bookmobile users and what the bookmobile means to them, a category of "other" was often used. Included was a blank space for the respondent to include an answer that may not have been provided. While this leads to some rather frank and valuable answers, this approach lends itself to imprecise answers and can require additional judgments on the part of the researcher(s).

Again, additional time and energy are expended. Most important, though, is that judgments can be erroneous, thus the validity of the survey can be diluted.

An example of this can be found in Question 10, "What would be the

consequence to you if this bookmobile were not available?" The range of answers is unlimited. For a question like this, the researcher must identify beforehand a sufficient number of categories into which to group the responses when they come flowing in. This is not only a decent way to organize the results, but it will serve as a barometer of what was expected by the researcher(s) from those surveyed.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion it seems fair to reiterate that bookmobile programs in Pennsylvania are alive and well for the most part. Naturally, this is an inclusive statement that may seem to brush over any blemishes or problematic areas of state library services. However, bookmobiles in Pennsylvania are reaching significant numbers of people, many of whom would otherwise have no access to a varied selection of information. The state, for geographical and topographical reasons, tends to predispose it to the need for outreach services like bookmobiles. Studies similar to this, analyzed in greater detail, may offer a more effective method of studying the health and effectiveness of bookmobiles.

Perhaps these regional studies, conducted in a uniform, organized way, can be grouped and compared to create a truer mosaic of national bookmobile services.

## **Survey Results—Brief**

There were 884 total survey respondents.

Question 1 asked the respondents to indicate the reasons they used the bookmobile on that particular day. Fifteen reasons lettered a through o were available for selection. Selection "o" was "other," thus allowing respondents to fill in appropriate answers that may not have been provided.

Survey respondents were asked to circle all answers that applied.

- 8% indicated they have no transportation to get to the town library.
- 87% indicated the bookmobile is convenient for them.
- 38% indicated the bookmobile is the library of choice.
- 12% indicated that they are able to meet friends at the bookmobile.

- 7% visited the bookmobile to complete a school assignment.
- 9% used the bookmobile to find a book or other materials to fix or repair something.
- 57% indicated they went to borrow books and/or other materials for themselves.
- 11% indicated that they were unemployed and had the time to use the bookmobile.
- 22% went to the bookmobile to brush up on their reading.
- 1% visited the bookmobile to look for new job possibilities.
- 38% indicated visiting the bookmobile to obtain materials which they requested.
- 6% went to specifically borrow videos.
- 33% brought children for programs or to have them borrow books and/or other materials.
- 12% went to borrow books and/or other materials for someone else.
- 8% indicated "other."

Question 2 asked respondents to identify the reasons they borrow books from the bookmobile.

Six answers lettered "a" through "f" were available. Option "f" was "other." Respondents were asked to circle all answers that applied.

- 57% borrowed material for general knowledge.
- 90% borrowed for pleasure/relaxation.
- 14% borrowed to gain specific knowledge for work or career.
- 12% borrowed to meet education requirements.
- 10% borrowed for spiritual reasons.
- 7% borrowed for "other" reasons.

Question 3 asked respondents to indicate how often they used the bookmobile at this stop, that is, the stop where the survey was obtained. Three options lettered "a" through "c" were available.

- 55% use the bookmobile every time it makes that stop.
- 35% use it most times it makes that stop.
- 8% use the bookmobile only occasionally.

Question 4 asked respondents to indicate whether they had borrowed books and/or other materials or used other services at the town library within the last year. Naturally, three answers were available.

- 51% indicated "yes."

- 44% indicated "no."
- 2% indicated that this question did not apply to them.

Question 5 asked respondents to specify in miles how far from the bookmobile stop they live.

- 43% indicated they live less than 1 mile from the stop.
- 38% indicated they live from 1 to 3 miles from the stop.
- 10% indicated they live more than 3 but less than 5 miles from the stop.
- 8% indicated they live more than 5 miles from the stop.

Question 6 asked respondents to specify in miles how far from the town library they live.

- 34% live 5 miles away or closer.
- 25% live more than 5 but no more than 10 miles from the town library.
- 12% live 11 to 15 miles from the town library.
- 9% live from 16 to 20 miles from the town library.
- 4% live 21 to 25 miles from the town library.
- 6% live 26 miles or more from the town library.

Question 7 asked respondents how access to the bookmobile affects their lives or the lives of those in their households. Six responses lettered "a" through "f" were available. Response "f" was "other," allowing those surveyed to specify a different answer. Respondents were asked to circle all answers that apply.

- 6% indicated the access had little impact on their lives.
- 66% indicated it has made their lives better.
- 3% indicated it had improved their job possibilities.
- 38% indicated it had improved the learning of their child(ren).
- 38% indicated that it provided opportunities they otherwise would not have had.
- 9% indicated "other."

Question 8 asked respondents to translate into a dollar amount the service(s) they received on the bookmobile. A range of five answers was available.

- 2% valued the services at less than \$5.00
- 9% valued the services at \$5.00 to \$9.99

- 9% valued the services at \$10.00 to \$14.99
- 9% valued the services at \$15.00 to \$19.99
- 65% valued the services at \$20.00 or more

Question 9 asked respondents if they had a computer and modem at home that they used to find information online.

- 22% indicated "yes."
- 74% indicated "no."

Question 10 asked respondents what the consequence to them would be if the bookmobile were not available.

- 14% indicated it would, in effect, be very bad.
- 48% indicated it would be bad.
- 17% indicated it would be inconvenient.
- 6% indicated it would have no real effect.
- 4% indicated they would have to buy books instead.

Question 11 asked respondents to identify their occupation.

- 17% identified being an educator of some sort.
- 27% identified being a housewife or homemaker.
- 18% identified having retired
- 2% identified being students
- 36% identified some other occupation.

Question 12 asked the respondents to indicate their age.

-the average age of bookmobile users is 50 years.

Question 13 asked respondents to indicate their gender.

- 16% was male.
- 83% was female.