

Rustic Roving: An “Alternate Lifestyle” Bookmobile

By Susan M. Rawlins

You can't call it a bookmobile. You can't even call it a book bus. It is small, blends in with the countryside, and provides endless challenges to the mental stability and manual dexterity of its driver and translator. The people respond to it, and the communities support it. It is the Tailgate Library.

If your library can't afford a bookmobile, or even the upkeep of a bookmobile, but you still want to go mobile, you might want to try out the Tailgate Library concept. It requires a fun-loving, people-loving driver, and if you plan to serve a multi-lingual customer base, an outgoing translator. It takes a sense of humor to manage a tailgate library, as well as a touch of the pioneer spirit.

Faced with the need to serve the eastern part of rural Glenn County, California, and with an extremely limited budget, a 2 a.m. brainstorm yielded the concept for the project. “What else rolls and is big enough to house a few hundred books, but doesn't cost the annual budget to operate?” The mental light clicked on: a pickup with a shell and our big, blue shipment boxes. A phone call to the county yard disclosed that the county did own a pickup with a camper shell, and the county would charge only mileage for its use. Our city helped with the cost of a new windshield and a paint job for the shell. A couple of magnetic signs in Spanish and English advertised that this was a library service vehicle.

Planning with people from the towns produced a schedule and route. The Tailgate Library would visit four towns and run twice a month. (We eventually narrowed it down to three towns, based on usage.) With ample cooperation from the country storeowners in the communities we wanted to visit, we launched the service. Each store provided parking space to set up the library. The truck was equipped with a tent shelter for protection from rain and summer sun, and a camp lantern for after dark visits.

The beginning was slow. Stopping at the local store, the driver and translator advertised by signage and word of mouth, and displayed books, videos and cassettes. People began to come. Visits to the larger towns were coordinated with the afternoon arrivals of the school buses. (None of the communities had more than about 500 people.) Parents would come to pick up their children and visit the Tailgate Library. The Tailgate lingered late enough to allow field workers to stop by on their way home. (The schedule was adjusted in summer.) Soon people came on a regular basis, bringing their families. Often children brought their parents.

One of the surprises was that some of the migrant workers thought this was a service for which they would have to pay. They stayed away until they understood it was a free library. We eventually reached our goal of 200 items circulated per trip (including renewals), and people began to request special items. We brought them on the next run.

The eventual success of the project was not without mishaps, including the flight of the tent in one of our strong north winds. Before Ron Anderson, the driver, could secure it, the tent inflated and took off, sailed over the state highway, cleared the power lines, then settled on the bank of the canal. (Ron now believes in tent pegs.) We decided the tent was very likely the largest kite ever flown in our county, perhaps in the state as well.

The field workers helped Ron and Rosa, our translator, to outwit the hungry mosquitoes. Some baby oil judiciously applied would keep the ravenous hordes at bay for some time. We purchased *large* quantities of baby oil.

Rainy days created more of a problem. The tent provided about a five-foot square dry area. People came, rain or shine, so they took turns running to the dry center of the tent for shelter and a few good books and videos. Towels, the camp lantern and an enduring sense of humor turned it into an adventure. Winter floods were an occasional challenge, but after mosquitoes and flying tents, what were a few detours down the levee?

The joy of the project was seeing the delight of the people when we brought them library materials. We used a grant from the State Library to get the project going. The original grant was just under \$8,000, including extra books, videos, staff, signs, mileage, tent, etc. After the first year, we could run the service each year for about \$2,500-\$3,500. This amount covered salaries for two people for two days per month, mileage on the truck and as many additional bilingual and Spanish items as we could afford. The driver and translator were excellent, and their own enthusiasm carried over into the public. Without them, the project would have been in jeopardy.

Lessons learned:

- It is possible to provide limited mobile library service without the cost of a bookmobile.
- The personalities of the driver and assistant are critical in building relationships with the people being served.
- Flexibility in scheduling is essential.
- Some hours were needed in the library getting ready and unloading after a run. We hadn't planned for enough.
- Kite flying ability is optional, but useful.
- It takes a sense of humor to survive a Tailgate Library.
- Don't forget the baby oil.

We discovered that we had created the *poor man's bookmobile*, and a lot of fun as well.